

GATSAL

TEACHING

Thoughts and the Environment

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The opening line of the Dhammapada states that everything is preceded by the mind, made up of mind. We live in a world of thought – everything which we perceive within and without depends on our awareness. Without that we are like a corpse. Thought is not restricted to just inside our bodies but radiates out in all directions, permeating and influencing our environment, everyone we meet and the very air we breath.

Some years ago I lived in the hills near to the medieval town of Assisi where, in the sacred sites long associated with St. Francis, despite the blatant commercialism and hordes of tourists, there is an almost palpable aura of spirituality which affects even casual visitors. On several occasions I have met with people who relate how, as simple travellers visiting Assisi on the way between Rome and Florence, quite unexpectedly they experienced intense feelings of peace, ecstasy or spiritual insight. These experiences sometimes altered the course of their lives.

Likewise many seek the sanctuary of certain churches or temples which seem to radiate peace and holiness. Throughout the ages in all countries people have sought the company of saints and sages, because just to be in their presence brings blessings and a sense of peace, even if they never say a word. The grace is beyond our conceptual mind to grasp and is something experienced on a much deeper level of our being which can be known but not expressed.

In contrast when one visits Auschwitz it is not necessary to know its dreadful history in order to feel overwhelmed by the heaviness and despair that permeate the atmosphere. Who has not experienced walking into a room where there has been great sorrow and being swept by a sense of oppression.

Since the time of the Buddha it has been a traditional practice to send thoughts of loving kindness (maitri) throughout the universe to all sentient beings wishing that they may be well and happy. “Sentient beings”

means any creature with consciousness whether visible or unseen. Visible creatures includes not just humans but all types of animals that live on or under the earth, in the sky or in the oceans and rivers. It also includes the insect kingdom. Unseen creatures means inhabitants of the various heavenly realms, hell realms, ghost realms and nature spirits and so forth.

So when we send out thoughts of loving kindness we are including all the beings on this planet and then outwards to encompass all the inhabitants of other planets and other realms of existence. In this classification plant life is not included although nature spirits are. This is because traditionally plants were not considered to have consciousness. However it seems that plants do respond to thoughts and words. Plants flourish under loving care in an environment where thoughts of love and nurturing are directed to them or one speaks to them nicely, and in the same fashion they will wither or grow in a sickly manner where they receive angry thoughts or harsh words. However whether this is the plant itself reacting or the spirit attendant on it, would be difficult to say.

From a Mahayana Buddhist perspective ultimately everything which we experience both within us and outside, is an expression of our mind. This means that we can know nothing except through the mind. Everything which we perceive through our senses – eyes, nose, ears, tongue, body and mind itself – depends on consciousness. For example the eye organ perceives an object which is received through the eye consciousness and interpreted through the mind. Where there is no consciousness there is no perception. This includes the sixth sense of mind itself with its thoughts, memories, concepts, emotions and the endless play of our inner world.

Apart from this interaction of senses, their object and consciousness nothing can be known, so we see how very subjective our relationship with the exterior universe actually is. In addition everyone has experienced how mood swings seem to alter the world around us. We are feeling depressed and everything seems grey and heavy. We fall in love and the gloomiest day is bathed in sunshine.

If we are in fact swimming in a world of mental energy, then it makes sense to see that this energy is as positive as possible. Negative thought forms will evoke a negative response both within us and without. This has practical repercussions as we can see in our world today which is so dedicated to the cultivation of the three poisonous attitudes of greed, ill will and confusion. Since our intentions are at the root of our actions, an action motivated by greed and selfishness is not likely to bring about peace and harmony. Man's greed and rapaciousness, conjoined with a basic lack of foresight or responsibility, has resulted in the tragic plight of our constant wars and conflicts, devastated environment and the wild imbalances in weather conditions and so forth. These disasters originated in our untamed minds. According to ancient Indian thought, the natural world, including crops, weather, livestock etc., flourish when the people live in harmony and keep basic ethical conduct. Diseases, droughts, floods and other disasters will increase where the morality of the inhabitants has broken down and natural laws are no longer respected.

Sometimes the present world seems drenched in darkness and ignorance, given over to self-gratification and self-absorption (even in the so-called "spiritual" circles) and never was the need for genuine wisdom and what His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls Universal Responsibility more urgent. In this darkness even a small light can shine a long way. Our thoughts do influence the environment for good or ill. Therefore it is up to us to see that at least our contribution is positive. One person can affect so many and accomplish so much. Each of us in our own way has the responsibility to uplift our surroundings and whomsoever we have contact with. No one can do it for us. If we each try to sincerely develop a good heart then everything partakes of the benefit.

Therefore, since we live within the kingdom of the mind, it makes sense to create therein a peaceful and harmonious realm. If we want to bring happiness to ourselves and others we must start from where we are. A well-tamed mind brings happiness and an untamed mind brings sorrow and chaos. It is as simple as that. Ultimately the choice is our own.