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Coming to Terms With One's Shadow

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Coming To Terms With One's Shadow

Let us start from the very beginning. What exactly do I mean by the *shadow*?

Though, to some extent, the psychological and the Buddhist way of looking at the shadow is similar, the Buddhist way of *seeing*, rather than *investigating*, is far deeper and more penetrating. For if you wash your dirty linen yourself instead of sending it to the laundry, you yourself discover the stains. But unlike with the washing, there is no need to scrub them, it is just the act of seeing which cleanses them. As if by the strength of the light of *prajña* all the linen were bleached white...

In order to explain the shadow, we must first turn the spotlight onto the discrimination of *good* and *bad* which starts off our suffering, followed by *craving*—the second Noble Truth—which in its turn is brought about by our erroneous *I-am-I* consciousness. *I want!—I don't want! I want the good!—I don't want the bad!* This is outward-bound but exactly the same applies to our

emotions too.

As we grow up in a man-created pattern of ethical conduct, we almost automatically show off the so-called good in us, while we repress the so-called bad. Some of us, naturally, would be more skilled in doing this than others—but we all seem to have the same tendencies in this direction. Now this repressed bad in us constitutes what we generally call the shadow. I just call it *the bad*, because if I were to call it our *bad character* or our *bad personality*, I would go counter to our Buddhist belief in *anicca* and *anatta*; in impermanence and non-self. And perhaps as a Buddhist I had better replace the word *good* by *skilled* and the word *bad* by *unskilled* and talk about our skilled and unskilled reactions to the past and present.

Now, as mentioned before, the trouble starts with our discrimination of what is skilled and what is unskilled; of what is good and what is bad. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that the basis for this discrimination—our ethical code—is essential. For the Buddhist this ethical code is made up by the five precepts. Through lives and lives of self-discipline coupled with true understanding, most of us will find it easy not to kill—at least in the wider sense of the word—or not to steal. With regard to the other three Buddhist precepts, we find it already much more difficult not to take alcohol or indulge in sensuality.

But the last one, wrong speech, beats all of us, I'm quite sure.

So if we have to come to some terms individually even with these five Buddhist precepts, how much more so with all our unskilled habits in thinking, emoting, as well as acting!

There is one thing in particular we must try and understand, before we can even start to come to terms with our shadow: unskilled habits, as such, don't constitute our shadow. Only when they are repressed—that is to say, when we are attached to them in our unconscious. It is then, owing to our underlying fear of them, that they form a relationship with us: a habit-pattern. And it is mainly through this habit-pattern that the ego rules and plagues us.

We Buddhists believe that all our habit patterns are the result of our previous karma—i.e., *karma vipāka*—for which, of course, we are wholly responsible. These, however, we cannot change as such. But what we *can* do in the present moment is to change our reaction towards it by the practice of mindfulness. In time this can result in a complete break-through. And, of course, we also have the power to stop forming any new habits. But all this is a long and arduous task, which needs a lot of insight into the true nature of things. The remedy is to accept instead of repressing,

detachment instead of attachment. And the first step is to have a better understanding of the ego's general feeling of insecurity which is causing our karmic makeup, rather than our constant emotional judgment.

"But surely", some people might say, "we must never accept our faults! Instead, we must try all we can to improve ourselves!"

To this the Buddhist answer is: "yes *and* no!" The fact that it is necessary to improve ourselves is certainly right. Only it can never be done by us—by our ego! The ego stands for total ignorance. How can ignorance, therefore, improve ignorance?!

I think it might be as well to differentiate here between the every-day mode of awareness, when the ego is in full swing and the intellect decides our actions, and a deeper mode of awareness, when there is a *seeing*—a true understanding. The depth depends on how much the ego is out of the way. Now when I say, we have to accept our weaknesses—our unskilled reactions—this acceptance is not done by the ego, instead, it is an acceptance of the ego.

If, for example, I accept my laziness, it will get worse instead of better: "O.K., I'm lazy—so what?!" This, everyone will agree, is certainly the wrong attitude. But, on the other hand, if I—and the accent is

on the I—try to put a stop to my laziness, this—though a definite improvement—is still not the right solution. For what will happen? As my habit-pattern is laziness, the ego's only way out of it is to repress this habit as much as possible in order to super-impose a new habit. But this will always be comparatively weak, because so much of my energy is spent on repression. In one word, my industry is to a great extent forced, unnatural—unless I happen to be doing something I am interested in. So when the I is trying to improve the I, this might make my shadow even more involved. For, if my repression gets so strong that in time it becomes a serious frustration, it could play me up in all sorts of strange ways.

Here is an example: a woman who wants to be less selfish and makes herself do social welfare-work. She might even succeed to a certain extent: she disciplines herself to get up early in the morning, she faces a long bus journey on a cold winter-day until she reaches the East-End of London. Used to a comfortable home in a nice clean district, the smell and dirt of the East-End and the poverty of the people depress her. But her ego is ambitious: it wants to be better. It wants to show other egos how charitable it is. So she drives herself on until she reaches the slummy house of a poor woman, whose husband had left her destitute with four young children. She was to enquire into the needs of the

woman for the National Assistance Board. But before our good lady had a chance to start on her enquiries, she was so appalled by all the filth and neglect she found, that she gave the East-End woman a good telling off. This ended with a flaming row, some juicy curses and the front-door being slammed behind our charitable lady. Even in the case of a genuinely good and kind-hearted woman, it is always a mistake to drive herself too hard. I know a woman who, as I should put it, is too much of a perfectionist in being virtuous. Consequently, there is a bit of false holiness about her, which manifests itself through a touch of narrow-mindedness and a lack of sense of humour. In one word, she is not emotionally balanced—she has not come to terms with her shadow. There is still quite a bit of ego in her which wants to be virtuous. And now we come to the danger of not wanting to face one's shadow—to face one's ego. If—as I have pointed out just now—you are at least partially aware of your faults and weaknesses, this is already a great help; even if you go about the wrong way to improve them. For there won't be a total repression as a result. But, on the other hand, if a person completely represses one or the other weakness in him, this might have quite serious consequences.

To quote another example of a very light case in this direction. I knew a man who was one of the world's

greatest fussers. Always agitated, always nervous. But he would never admit it—not even to himself. So he projected his weakness onto his wife. At the slightest trouble, he used to say to her: “For goodness sake, woman, don’t fuss so much! Keep your hat on!” Until she herself and all their friends really believed that she was the culprit. Only after the husband’s death did we all discover, somewhat to our surprise, that the woman wasn’t really a nervous type at all.

Before we deal with the Buddhist way of coming to terms with one’s shadow—or rather of transcending it by true acceptance—let us have a quick look at the psychiatrist’s treatment. It will be interesting to try and find out how much these two ways have in common, but also where and how they differ.

As I already pointed out at the beginning, it is the psychiatrist—a doctor—who gives the patient a helping hand throughout the treatment, while the Buddhist has to do the job entirely on his own. The psychiatrist’s function as a doctor might increase the patient’s repressed fear—for this doctor-patient relationship brings it more clearly to his mind that he is mentally ill. Thus this relationship has its very foundation in discrimination: well and ill; giving and taking. So however skilled the psychiatrist is, there always must be a certain barrier of fear and shame and all sorts of emotions between him and the patient. On

the other hand, the psychiatrist is also often used by the patient to project his own emotions onto, which is an escape, rather than an acceptance of the true situation.

Where, however, psychology and Buddhism go, to quite an extent, hand in hand, is the mutual discovery that all the various repressed emotions constitute the shadow, and therefore have to be dug out and brought up into day-light in order that the patient may be freed from suffering. The ways and means adopted by the psychiatrist to achieve this, however, are not our concern here.

Now such a psychological treatment can never be a 100% success, for it can never go deep enough to accept and thus transcend the whole of the patient's shadow. As it is only partly direct and partly on an intellectual level, the repressed emotions of the past cannot wholly come up and thus be wholly accepted in the here-and-now.

Before I try and explain this more fully, let us go right back to our various discriminations, because it is already here that one of the fundamental differences between psychology and Buddhism lies. For Buddhism teaches us the way to transcend the I-am-I consciousness, which constitutes the ego, until that which lies beyond is realised. This is *Nirvana*,

Enlightenment. For me to write about this, would mean an inflated ego-article—so I shall not even try to lose myself here. But what I do want to point out is that Buddhism regards our everyday consciousness as only one mode of awareness, and a completely ignorant one at that. It is—like everything else in the mundane world—impermanent and completely bare of any self: *anicca, anattā*. Therefore to pretend I *am I* and a permanent entity on top of that, means constant friction: *dukkha*.

Thus the ego equals ignorance; we should never forget this. On the other hand, our ego-consciousness is part and parcel of our manifestation. Now, this ignorance conditions our habit-patterns or karmic tendencies. What we Buddhists usually forget in everyday life is the fact that fundamentally we are all equally handicapped all the time by this universal law of ignorance. We might say it forms a huge universal pattern—that of the wheel of birth and death—dependent origination—whose barriers we normally cannot break through.

Now within this huge universal pattern of ignorance each individual has his own private pattern of ignorance through which the ego manifests itself. And this private pattern of ignorance is, in turn, conditioned by the past and again conditions the future.

When we understand this a little, we will not fall into the error of condemning our ego so much, which only results in our various guilt complexes. On the other hand, we should not be proud of our ego either, for even in our very best moments in life we usually still act out of ignorance. That is why mindful watching should be practised without attraction or repulsion—without praise or condemnation.

This is why the shadow should be regarded as something very subjective and relative. Surely what I call *good* and *bad* are not absolute categories, but rather flexible concepts. If I constantly act in ignorance, even the so-called good is only relatively good. By the way, it always helps me to examine whether by my thoughts and acts I harm other people and myself—for I always harm myself when I harm someone else—or whether I don't cause any harm. This is, I believe, the surest way of finding out whether my acts are good or bad on the every-day level of consciousness.

Because of my I-am-I consciousness, I am constantly in a whirlpool of emotions, since I crave for and cling to all the many objects I discriminate. But usually I am not fully aware of these emotions, as some are already repressed before they reach full consciousness. Others are repressed at a later stage and thus the most intricate and complicated pattern of the shadow is formed. Repression is, after all, nothing else but a

continuation of my attachment in the sub- or unconscious level of the mind.

Underlying all my personal emotions is my constant feeling of insecurity, which produces anxiety in general. And this general anxiety springs directly from the force of attachment. Through discrimination we get attachment—attachment to that which by its very law of nature cannot be attached to.

This is important to remember because it goes so much deeper than the psychologist's death-fear, which is considered to be one of the main root-causes for all the patient's trouble. But in Buddhism death-fear is only one of the many fears caused by attachment: attachment to this life, or we may say: negative attachment to death which, because of its very unknown nature, we fear. The root-cause for all our suffering in Buddhism, however, is the force of attachment caused through our discrimination, which in its turn is caused by our wrong mode of awareness: I-am-I.

So far, I have explained that all our discrimination of objects and emotions are relative, because they are made in complete ignorance of the nature of things as they really are. When I put my imaginary precious little self in the centre of the Universe and look at anything and everything from the point-of-view of: I

want or I *don't want*, how can there ever be a realisation of *what is*? But before we can ever hope to have a major break-through to *what is*, we must first learn how to come to terms with our shadow. And the best way to do this is through the practice of mindfulness: *Satipaṭṭhāna*. It is the act of watching what is going on inside me, which makes *the inner* fade more and more into the background. I don't *speculate* what's going on inside me, for I can never transcend the I. There is a watching—or rather in the beginning there is a watching of *I watch*. But the effort and concentration I put into the watching makes the act stronger and stronger and thus reduces the watcher in the centre more and more.

When I first started the practice of mindfulness, there was still a big part of me, which violently revolted against this practice. I didn't want to be mindful. But then the I can never be mindful. If the I watches, there is no act of mindfulness. There is just a chitchat of the mind, the lower mind, on the intellectual level. The I always thinks in terms of results: good and bad. "I really can't be mindful today; I'm not in the right mood!"

All this, I found out later, was just a channel for the ego to come through, because it smelled danger, the danger of being slain—of being eliminated; even at a very long range. And yet in the midst of the most

impenetrable fog of ignorance there seemed to be the dawning light of insight. This discovery raised my faith and I started opening up to my teacher: the *Buddha*, and to the teaching: the *Dhamma*. This gave me strength until one day I made several more discoveries: first, that this was not a case of results, but that anything and everything can be watched. Then, that there was neither action nor non-action on my part necessary, but just the act of watching. Four words appeared very strongly to my mind again and again: “Not volition—only *prajñā!*” Not *I want* or *I don't want*; only *seeing—understanding—knowing!*

The main thing about mindfulness is to catch the present moment—the here-and-now; for only this way can the ego be caught red-handed. Then any emotion, however unpleasant, can be completely transcended. On the other hand, if the watching is concentrated on the past moment, however recently past, then the I is the watcher and the act is no longer direct, but an intellectual re-collection of what had happened. It is, however, the middle-way that usually happens when I apply mindfulness. There is just a part of the here-and-now being caught in the watching. But this is enough to up-root thoughts, emotions and sense-impressions which are streaming in all the time, until they all become disconnected and somehow dreamlike. This is quite a calming and soothing

experience, for the ego is no longer being taken seriously by the ego. It is when the ego is a little out of the way, when the time has come to link up with the Buddha, which results in understanding more and more the working of the Dhamma. This might, perhaps, be called the first step towards abandoning the ego. If, on the other hand, the ego is in complete charge, no abandonment is possible. While the true act of abandonment is a complete giving up of one's will in all humility, knowing that the ego is nothing else but ignorance and the only bar towards the realisation of what is.

Let us now come back to mindfulness and to our shadow. The greatest wonder about this Buddhist practice of mindfulness to me is the realisation that *the mere seeing*, as a result of the watching, is the cure of any suffering. We are so ego-ridden that we always think in terms of: I *must do this* or I *must not do* that. But as long as we think and act this way, we can never realise what is. For the *what is* is complete harmony and can only be *directly experienced*. Through the ego being dropped for a moment by the act of watching, there is a flash of insight into the true nature of things. As a result, disharmony gives way to harmony; Samsara—our vale of tears—to Nirvana. What was in the shade up to now is suddenly flooded with light. How deep this flash of insight is, depends on the

strength of the concentration—the pure attentiveness. How far the ego can be dropped.

Speaking about myself, the ego is never completely discarded—but readjusts itself in all sorts of subtle disguises soon enough. But, all the same, through these flashes of seeing—deeper or shallower as they may be—several of my habit-patterns are brought up into consciousness, though never completely, because the experience is not deep enough. Also, as my acceptance of these habit-patterns is not complete either, some parts of these habits are quickly repressed again. They are, of course, so ingrained through lives and lives of my own karmic pattern of ignorance, that they plague me again and again. I just have to accept this intellectually.

One discovery I made through watching is that the make-up of one habit-pattern is exactly the same as another. Let me quote an example:

I am ambitious. Say, I am ambitious to get a certain job. The evening before my interview with the boss, I suffer agonies. In the end, out of sheer desperation, I practise mindfulness. The concentration of the watching is focussed on my desire to get the job: my ambition. Suddenly there is a flash of seeing. I realise that I actually fear my ambition, for something in me knows that it makes me suffer terribly sometimes.

And, on the other hand, I realise too that at the same time I hang my security onto this very ambition. In the moment of seeing—in the moment of detachment—I actually felt these two conflicting emotions within myself. And I also knew that the friction went deeper than just with regard to my ambition. My fear was also the fear of the ego—my security, the security I endowed the ego with. And so we go on all the time. Something in us knows better—but our constant feeling of insecurity drives us always on to believe desperately in our own ignorance!

Fear is always at the bottom of everything. As long as we are steeped in ignorance and experience constant friction within us, we can't help being afraid. One day I also found out that my habit-patterns were, to a great extent, made up by my very fear of them, my repressed fear of many, many lives. And I saw that through my ignorance I only react to what I think is life—instead of living it directly. Perhaps it is now a little clearer, why the ego doesn't really exist. And yet it does exist in the form of a powerful force, which I might call *the ego-force* or *the force of attachment*.

We can therefore say that attachment is suffering, while detachment is the cure, the healing of suffering. That is the reason why the psychiatrist helps us to bring some of our repressions into consciousness, which means acceptance. But this acceptance can only

be partial, as long as the ego is still in the act of accepting through the every-day mode of awareness. Through the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, however, not only more expressions—and some of very long standing—are constantly popping up into consciousness, but the acceptance of these repressed emotions is on a much deeper level too. Sometimes the results of this practice come to fruition at a later time, when the circumstances I find myself in are favourable.

So, for instance, when I coughed up a little mucus one day, a sudden pang of death-fear came up quite unmistakably. Through my constant practice, this death-fear was getting nearer and nearer the level of consciousness and any slight indisposition was bound to bring some of it up.

Another day I sat in the dental chair. The dentist, who is excellent and in whom I have perfect trust, was just filling my teeth, when suddenly a terrific wave of fear came up. I knew instantly what it was: Many, many years ago back in Vienna, when my sister and I were teenagers, our dentist one day cut my sister's tongue with a similar instrument and so badly, that he had to stitch it up. I happened to be in the same room when the accident occurred. The odd thing was that even when the same Viennese dentist used this instrument on me after he had injured my sister, I

never experienced any fear like that. I managed to repress it somehow. But now, this repressed fear had come out, I shouldn't think it will plague me any more.

Though, no doubt, this experience was useful, it only constituted one of my particular repressed fears. But I must go deeper and deeper to get at the root-cause of my suffering: attachment to all the things which can't be attached to. I can't afford to stop at any obvious success—I must go on watching relentlessly, however hard the ego kicks within me. The labels are only slapped on by the ego itself. It is its own private manifestation within the huge universal pattern of ignorance. And this private manifestation is our shadow. Let the ego reveal it to us more and more. We will find that we will no longer take the ego so seriously as before—because we are already somewhat detached from our emotions—and there will be some feeling of curiosity too as to which part of our shadow is popping up next. Shame and guilt-complexes are being replaced by much healthier states: curiosity and humour. For sometimes we can't help laughing at our own folly!

As I pointed out before, it is the full power of concentration in the act of mindfulness which brings about the momentary disappearance of the ego. If the present moment is completely filled by the watching,

without a watcher or any objects to be watched, then and only then, will the emotion we have just experienced the previous moment, be completely transcended. Then and only then, will there be a realisation of what is.

Of course, the same emotion is bound to come up again later, for the habit-pattern is too strong to be broken by single moments of transcendence. But our shadow will be weakened and in time it may be replaced by healthier habits, as our insight into the true nature of things and our compassion towards all suffering of mankind grow. Insight and compassion always go together, they continuously complement each other. And thus treading the Path, the day will come when, instead of just coming to terms with our shadow, our whole separate individuality will be transcended altogether. Then the goal will be realised: Enlightenment—Nirvana!

Finally, let us remember one more thing: It is never we, who experience any realisation—who gain any insight or feel any compassion! Let us accept this in all humility!

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