

The Practice of Acceptance

by Philip L. Jones

Like most meditators, I've often had the experience of noticing that I've become lost in thoughts about some incident in my life. It often involves a desire for something or anger over what has happened. When I get caught in these stories, the mind, heart and body become more tense and cramped. There is suffering. How can we relate to these experiences so that we allow more freedom into our lives rather than creating more suffering?

When we get caught in these thoughts we are usually wishing that things would be other than the way they are. We think that if we could just get things adjusted right, then everything would be perfect. If we pay close attention, though, we will see that no matter how much we fiddle with things, we can never make them perfect. So our practice is not about attaining some kind of perfection or about abolishing what seems imperfect. A cornerstone of practice is acceptance that this is what is present in this moment. We cannot clearly see what we are experiencing, whether sense desire, pain, or joy, if we are unwilling to accept it as it is, if we are always trying to push it away or to hold it tightly in our fists. So we have to begin with some acceptance. This is often a very big step as most of our life conditioning is screaming at us to hang onto the pleasant and to not let the unpleasant in. It takes quite a bit of courage, trust, wisdom, and maybe a bit of desperation, to let go and to meet this moment of life with acceptance. But if we pay attention, we'll find that acceptance creates spaciousness. From this space we can explore or investigate the unskillful, the ways that suffering is created, and the skillful, the ways that peacefulness and freedom from suffering arise.

The tools that we use to investigate the skillful and the unskillful are, along with this spacious acceptance, mindfulness and compassion. We look at things without judgment or making decisions based on them or getting caught in stories about them and with kindness. As a result of this we develop trust in the power of mindfulness, because we see that when we allow things to come fully into awareness and meet them with mindfulness, acceptance and compassion, rather than trying to hold on or to push away, then they also pass away. We are, in effect, abandoning them by allowing them to be what they are: impermanent and impersonal thoughts and sensations. This is how we can relate to our experiences without creating suffering. Through acceptance, mindfulness and compassion we learn that we can simply rest in awareness and let things be.

This isn't a matter of belief. Look for yourselves. Does striving to be pure and perfect lead to a peaceful, contented life? Or is it a way to create suffering? Does acceptance, mindfulness and compassion lead to suffering? Or is it the way to contentment? Look for yourselves and see.

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