

Delusive thoughts & feelings

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On an old Zen phrase about delusive thoughts and feelings being hidden in lotus threads.

What does this mean for our practice?

Undoing these delusions is the point of genuine Buddhist practice.

1st dharma talk at a retreat at Domicilium, Germany, 27 February 2022.

[1. Delusive thoughts and feelings](#)

[bell chimes three times]

Good evening. It's wonderful to be back. Thank you to the organizers for their wonderful preparations and to all of you for being here.

Quote: *Delusive thoughts and feelings hidden in lotus threads.* Again, delusive thoughts – delusive, discursive, defiling thoughts – and feelings, hidden – we can't see them – hidden in lotus threads.

This is a quote from the buddhist sutras that has been taken up in zen. The lotus flower is a symbol of buddhism, of awakening. But this statement speaks of delusive thoughts and feelings hidden in the lotus threads, like in a very thin string.

The lotus plant (not the lotus root) contains these threads. There is a long stem and then the flower blooms. In that long stem, if you break it open, there are long, thin threads. They're used to make lotus silk.

But here the simple metaphor reveals the delusions hidden in these tiny threads inside the lotus. Defiling thoughts and emotions are hidden in lotus threads.

What about this? What does this say about our present practice?

Hakuin, a japanese zen-master who died a little over 250 years ago, speaks of practice in terms of these lotus threads and delusive thoughts. He said he spent years trying to understand what that statement really means. It's also mentioned in the Record of Rinzai [or Linchi/Linji in Chinese] and in Buddhist literature.

Delusions, delusive thoughts and emotions are hidden, they remain hidden, concealed, we cannot see them clearly. What does this really mean for our practice?

Are these delusive thoughts and feelings hidden, for example, in the relative quiet of zazen? In the joy of attainment, the joy of some kind of an insight, so called *kenshō* experiences?

Since I am in Germany let me mention that the great mystic Meister Eckhart in one of his most famous sermons on [blessed are the poor](#), [“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”, Matthew 5.3.] says “If there is a place in your soul where God can enter you are not yet truly poor.” Is he pointing at the same thing?

Again, what does this say for our practice, for us, here and now?

To be truly [*taps on the floor*] settled in practice – real practice – is to truly come home.

In earlier retreats we have gone into detail about the right approach in practice. The importance for example of sustained focus and concentration. That it needs to be constant. We also detailed the importance of a daily lifestyle naturally in accord with this practice. It is what we are now doing together.

Done properly, this practice may at first seem difficult, painful, exhausting, very, very, hard. And yet if we give ourselves to it, practice becomes quite natural, effortless. What seemed impossible from the outside becomes inevitable, it cannot help but happen. This happens when practice is proper, correct, true, genuine, thoroughgoing. We find ourselves at home. This is getting settled in real practice. This is discerning, clearly seeing through, the discursive thoughts and feelings hidden in the lotus threads.

[*silence*]

Otherwise, as you know, it's endless. You solve one problem and another one comes, sometimes two or three come. It is a profound symptom of the dis-ease itself. It must be grasped at the root. It must be undone at the root. This is the basis of Buddhism, otherwise, as you know, you endlessly go round and round in the same old circles. Maybe having interesting ideas, insights, thoughts, feelings. But it is simply a profound symptom of the dis-ease. See this, wake up to it – otherwise you're dreaming.

This is the basis, not just of zen, but of genuine Buddhist practice. Please take it seriously. What is called the one great matter of life and death – or birth and death – is [*taps on the floor*] right underfoot. The way begins and ends right under our feet. Right there. And yet we all know from our experience how easy it is for the discursive, wandering mind to say “Yes! Understood! Got it!” Then five minutes later you're off on a wonderful delusion again, aren't you?

You just end up back here anyway, so don't waste your time and energy. See what is directly underfoot.

The lotus flower is the symbol of Buddhism, of awakening. What Gautama Buddha in the statues is often sitting on. He's sitting on a lotus flower. So are you. And it is essential, to see

into, to discern, to see through, and to undo the delusive thoughts and feelings hidden in those marvelous lotus threads. That is the point of genuine Buddhist practice. And of zen practice.

From tomorrow morning we will have a chance for one-on-one. Anytime I'm sitting here, you're welcome to come and ask, if you feel the need, for one-on-one. Otherwise, each full day we will have one-on-one in order. This is not a time to discuss your practice. Genuine one-on-one, real *dokusan* or *sanzen* is only for this – the one great matter of birth and death.

I'm not a psychologist. Though we do happen to have a bunch of them here practicing. After the retreat, please talk with them. One-on-one is not for psychological issues. I am not a psychologist. It would be irresponsible for me to take on that role.

It's true, the psychological issues and the spiritual issues are not completely separate. They are one, in, and as, each one of us. Yet there is a way to the root of it all. That's spiritual or religious practice. To paraphrase one of your great German protestant theologians Paul Tillich: It is not that the ego *has* a problem or has problems, or some egos have problems and some don't. It's that the ego *is* the problem. And until you get to that, you're whistling dixie as we say. You're wasting your time. Beware of those delusive threads.

But how could there be delusive threads in my marvelous lotus? Have a good look. Don't waste your life in dreams and delusions, even if they are buddhistic or zenistic. They're still delusions.

Let us take these several days to really see what each one of us must see through. This is not someone else's concern, this is not something from a book, or something someone tells you. Including me. It's something you must pull out of the very depths of yourself. There's no other way. No one else can do it for you. No one else needs to do it for you. You, opening up to what is in the depths of your heart – that is getting settled in real practice, seeing through the remaining delusions.

Trying to perfect your zazen posture is good. By all means work on your zazen posture. But endlessly trying to perfect it, endlessly trying to breathe in a certain way, or hold your mind artificially in a certain way, can itself become a hindrance, a delusion.

Of course, practically speaking, discipline is helpful. But that is not zen. You can do that until the cows come home, as we say – until the end of time. And it will make no difference. You'll just become a very good zen zombie.

All you need to do is look and really see what is in the depths of your own heart. Under your own feet. If it's not there, it's not anywhere.