

talks - IMCC 3/22

title: How Our Stories Can Take on a Life of Their Own.

We are not simply observers of what we see and hear in the world around us. We are all wonderful storytellers in an effort to make sense of what is occurring and how it impacts us. We enjoy stories; and sometimes our stories impact us in unintended ways. The Buddha offered guidelines, which we'll work with, to assist us in evaluating whether our stories lead to skillful or unskillful thinking and outcomes.

Resources: The Honeyball Sutta: Majjhima Nikaya #18. Girimananda Sutta (AN 10.60). Christina Feldman, Gaia House lecture on papañca.

INTRODUCE - TI - my name - pleasure - for those who don't know me, I was one of the founding teachers of TI & 3 1/2 yrs. ago moved back to C-ville, VA. & teach with IMCC. For those of you I do know, its excellent to see you. NEW?

LIGHT CANDLE - both to light the way forward & to bring with us what we want to remember - pay attention to - always in a pivot position (gesture - past - present - future)

Bring with us - Acknowledgement for these teachings that have been so generously passed along to us - our ancestors - facing the hardships that brought them to this new country - whenever they came.

The indigenous people who lived on this land - in Durham its the Eno and Occaneechi, among others, and here in Charlottesville

its the Monacan Nation. Tonight we acknowledge the millions of humans in all walks of life, animals, livestock, plants & trees suffering because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

We have no idea what life can be like living in a land deprived of the blessing of peace. Maureen Dowd continues.... an empire can't be glued back with the blood of innocents.

moment of silence.

Schedule for tonight: sit - a little guidance at the beginning - Break (paper & pen) - dharma talk - short whole group discussion & end with some heart practice.

MEDITATION

BREAK - paper & pen

Before we start, please take some time to think about & write down: something that keeps coming up that you keep thinking about - that's not too helpful to think about. You know, something you tend to dwell on.

When I lit the candle & acknowledged the teachings, ancestors, native people & those suffering; this is all information we are bringing into our present -we're **pivoting**- & choosing to bring forward with us into the future. At this point its helpful to employ DISCERNMENT: what do we want to bring forward with us - no extra baggage.

Current news with the Monacan Nation (2600 members) here is that the James River Water Authority will not build a water pump station & pipeline on the Monacan sacred site, Rassawek.

The Water Authority had other alternatives, but purchased this land, for cheap, without informing the Monacan Nation they had done so - for about a year. It took 12,000 individuals & organizations to win this lawsuit for the Monacans.

The Tribal chief said sacred land- burial grounds & sacred stories needed to be preserved to make a strong society - & their lawyer said that “citizen volunteers proved indispensable” - efforts in positive directions pay off.

For the last few months, both TI & IMCC have been working with the discernment of stories - trying to make sense of how so many people (nationally & locally) can have so many different perspectives about the same stories.

We'd also like to know what stories are helpful, as we constantly pivot, to bring forward. Its really a matter of PERCEPTION. Of how we perceive the story.

We can imagine its pretty straightforward: we take in information through our sense gates - our eyes, ears, touch, smell, body sensations & our mind. Our mind is designed to discern what information - what stories - are important - to help us navigate in the world & also to make meaning. Like simply & basically - who & what can I trust & not trust. Am I secure. What brings me comfort or suffering.

As our brains evolved & got larger, it seems this “making meaning” function got larger & more elaborate - & so our perceptions more complicated. Into our perception of something we fold in whether its pleasant/unpleasant/or neutral, our memories, associations, our past experiences, our learning - & pretty soon as we dwell on things they become the shape of our

mind & the shape of our world. Its very complicated - & different for each of us.

It starts out as... our eyes see an object moving in the air. That's the information - the sensory input - but we don't stop there. Next we perceive: its a bird . We don't stop there. We continue its—a starling - unpleasant. They eat all our crops - gluttons at the bird feeder - songbirds won't have food - when our thoughts keep continuing like this, we say our thoughts are proliferating. And we happen to like it. In Pali, the word for proliferations is papanca.

Our perception leads to our thinking. The trouble is that our perceptions can be incorrect: we can make incorrect meanings (note: this happens frequently). An important factor in incorrect meaning is that there might be greed, ill-will, fear, or delusion involved. On top of that, because we like our proliferations, they can run in many directions.

Here's a example of a great papanca opportunity:

A man had a peacock, says playwright Tom Stoppard, & the man was shaving one morning & in the mirror he sees the peacock on top of the garden wall about to jump to the other side - the man drops his razor & races out just as the bird reaches the highway & starts running. The man does eventually catch it, puts it under his arm & starts walking home.

In the meantime....many cars have passed - seeing a man dressed only in pajama bottoms, bare feet, foam on his face, carrying a peacock under his arm. The scene is ripe for papancha: just pause for a minute & let yourself be amused by what stories come up - maybe.... he lost a bet, his girlfriend threw him out, he's a pilgrim -

Lets be kind to ourselves for all the misperceptions we have - especially when we're kids - we were all just trying to make meaning & only had a child's mind to work with.

Because of our unique past experiences, associations, and memories, our perceptions & their proliferations can be VERY different from each other: one person looks at a crowded room & sees many opportunities for connection - another looks at the same crowded room & is overwhelmed with social anxiety.

The Buddha says (Honeyball sutta MN 18): "what one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about - that one mentally proliferates."

The territory from sensory input to perception to proliferation - is what we want to tease apart. We can see the crowded room - but then there's the decision whether we enter it or not -

Mindfulness can help us sever the links between perception and past emotional/psychological baggage that have led to patterns of distress. This is the moment of discerning whether our perceptions - our pleasant/unpleasant - past memories - associations - experiences - are really true or not necessarily true. The first question to ask ourselves, as we trace back our perceptions, is... is there greed involved? ill-will, hatred or fear? & was I or anyone else deluded or ignorant? The 3 poisons.

We pause at the doorway of the crowded room. We are very clear that our thinking is going to influence our behavior. Are we going into the room or not.

I love the questions around discernment: is it true? is it **really** true? what if the opposite were true? how do I know what's true right now in this moment? do I want to risk an experiment with my thinking?

The B suggested that one way to evaluate perceptions is to discern whether it leads to skillful or unskillful qualities in your mind. What patterns does it set up. We can set up wholesome upward spirals, or unwholesome downward ones.

Our patterns of thinking can trap us. We can easily be the victim of these patterns. They can be our prison. The patterns can easily lead to distress and distortion - OR we can choose to discern the perception. William Blake said: If the doors of perception are cleansed, the world appears as it is: infinite.

A good question is - are we afraid of the infinite? Are we attached to our fixed-ness? An example of how a pattern can trap us is that as we stand in the doorway, our papancha might be - saying to myself: if I go in, there's bound to be another woman wearing the same dress I am - and I'll be embarrassed. Or... there's Sally - she never talked to me in high school and I'm sure she won't now. These are not helpful thoughts. Papancha can be like our home entertainment center - what quality do you want your programs to be?

The meditation teacher Christina Feldman (whose lecture on papancha was very helpful to me) says that:

Whenever perception is distorted, papancha will be generated.

example: The person standing in the doorway overcome by anxiety is likely to have a distorted perception. Some past experience or association probably happened.

Whenever perception is NOT distorted, papancha will NOT be generated.

Whenever perception is not aligned with the way things actually are, stories are fueled.

example: The stories about the man with the peacock got fueled because it was out of context - not aligned.

Papancha also fuels distorted perception in closed feedback loops.

An example of this was the self-talk about someone wearing the same dress. Its repeated reactivity - from a long time ago.

And what distorts perception? When there isn't alignment with the way things actually are.

Different threads of papanca are:

- (1) the craving-based ones. Desire for the perfect vacation, the perfect meal, pleasant memories, having fun. You might say - what's wrong with this, it seems harmless. The problem is we can easily also get lost in our bad stories -
- (2) Fear or anxiety-based papanca. Anxiety about our health, being out of control, illness, making mistakes.
- (3) View-based papanca. The views we hold about life - political/ social/ race/ class/ opinions/ beliefs - clinging tightly to these views creates a strong sense of Self and Other.
- (4) The 4th is Manna, or the Story of Me. The narratives we tell about who we are, our ambitions, our hopes, our sense of I. This one, of course, really underlies all the others.

Lets go back to read what you wrote down. something that keeps coming up that you keep thinking about - that's not too helpful to think about - something you tend to dwell on. The first question: is there any level of greed involved? ill-will, hatred or fear? & was or am I or anyone else deluded or ignorant?

Do you think what you wrote about is proliferation? And if so - is it (1) about craving, (2) fear or anxiety? (3) View-based or (4) based around yourself?

Its helpful to see what it is, because then we have the opportunity to reduce both the distress & distortion. We have the capacity to CHANGE the perceptions that aren't working so well. We can RETRAIN our perceptions - we might as well use them in the service of our freedom. We are always standing in the doorway. We can remember William Blake. Or maybe this is the real meaning of Rumi's poem:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth
across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.

Metta:

May I stay awake to my perceptions

May I be kind, compassionate & generous

May I treasure my life

May I and all beings live in safety

May all have ease, happiness, health & justice

And may there be peace.....

May the merit of our practice be for all Beings.

Announcements: