

Mental Proliferation (Papañca)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
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One of the most common human experiences is, perhaps, the tendency to get lost in our thoughts. We get lost in thoughts about what happened, about how we responded to what happened, about how we wished we had responded to what happened, about how we wished what happened had been different. We get lost in thoughts about what we hope will happen, about how we hope it will play out, about how we hope we will respond. We get lost in thoughts about what we are afraid will happen, about what else might happen if it does occur, about how we are afraid we will respond, about how we hope to respond. And there are, no doubt, further variations on this tendency to get lost in thought.

These are all examples of what in Pāli is known as *papañca*. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator of the Pāli discourses into contemporary English, says

"The Pāli word *papañca* suggests mental fabrication, obsessive mental construction, and deluded conceptualization, which the commentaries say arise from craving, conceit and wrong views (*tanhā, māna, diṭṭhi*)."

(Bhikkhu Bodhi, Note 881, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012, p. 1710)

The words that Bhikkhu Bodhi actually uses for *papañca* in his translations are "mental proliferation."

Another way of expressing this idea of *papañca* might be to say that we are creating a virtual world as our thoughts proliferate in response to something we've had contact with at one of the sense doors. The "something we've had contact with" simply being an experience at one of the six sense doors: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or cognizing. I'm suggesting that the proliferating thoughts are creating a "virtual world," because when we are caught up in the thoughts, they do feel quite real to us, similar to the way a dream feels real while we are dreaming it.

Part of what makes this mental proliferation, this created and virtual world, problematic is that we don't recognize that it is virtual. We get attached to it. We act on the basis of it. And it can lead to a great deal of suffering for ourselves and others. It can lead to inner heartache. And it can lead to wars between and within nations.

I do want to caution that I'm not saying that mean, hateful, hurtful or abominable things that we encounter in the course of living are only made up by the mind. That idea is just another form of delusion. It is an example of getting too far away from what we are actually experiencing. Because the truth is that very unpleasant things do occur in our lives, and sometimes they are very, very, very unpleasant and damaging. But when we get consumed in thoughts about how mean or hurtful or even how wonderful or loving someone is, we are more likely to act on a small part of the picture. This often means we are responding to hatred with

hatred. Or that we are projecting a quality of perfection onto someone who is human, with beautiful qualities and imperfections. Either way often leads to disaster, doesn't it.

In "The Honeyball Sutta" in the Middle Length Discourses (MN 18.8), the Buddha points to our tendency to "delight in" what we encounter as the underlying tendency that leads to all of this mental proliferation and difficulty. So as we bring meditative awareness to our experience, one of the first steps is for us to simply recognize what we are experiencing, to recognize what is occurring right now in this stream of mental and physical events, to recognize "Oh here comes that stream of thought once again, the one that leads me to so much heartache" — or doubt or conflict or addiction or whatever.

This process of recognition is captured by the poem "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters" by Portia Nelson:

Chapter 1

I walk down the street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I fall in.
 I am lost... I am helpless.
 It isn't my fault.
 It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2

I walk down the street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I pretend that I don't see it.
 I fall in again.
 I can't believe I am in this same place.
 But, it isn't my fault.
 It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I see it is there.
 I still fall in ... it's a habit ... but, my eyes are open.
 I know where I am.
 It is my fault.
 I get out immediately.

Chapter 4

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I walk around it.

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

(from: Portia Nelson, There's a Hole in My Sidewalk, <http://www.panhala.net/Archive/Autobiography.html>)

When we recognize we're getting involved in, or to use the Buddha's words, we're beginning to "delight in," some pattern of thought that leads to trouble, then the skillful thing is to let go, to walk around the hole or even better to walk down another street. Sometimes the letting go happens automatically when we see we are headed for trouble. Sometimes when we have sufficient mindfulness, we can just see the thought passing away without doing anything else. But sometimes we have to purposefully shift our attention to something else. All of these are skillful means that allow us to disentangle from the tangle of proliferation that otherwise leads to quarrels and to suffering.