



## RECOGNIZING MENTAL STATES

*From a transcript of questions and answers recorded during the fall, 1997, three-month vipassana retreat at Barre, Massachusetts. Retreatants asked questions of Steve Armstrong, one of the teachers who guided that retreat.*

### Question

Please talk about the "texture" of a mind state, especially the "wanting" mind state.

### Steve Armstrong

We can tune into a mental state by noticing the content of a thought or thoughts; thus we can get a clue about what the mental state is. Particularly with the wanting mind, often we'll be focusing on what we want: we see a person, a car, an image in our mind of a future that we want to exist in. And we persevere on that; the mind goes back to it again and again.

Once you identify that the mind is kind of obsessed, the way to tune into feeling it is to not focus on what you're obsessing about (the object of desire, or the object of aversion, or object of depression, for example), but rather to turn your attention around to what it *feels* like in the body, what it *feels* like in the mind. You turn your attention from outer to inner—knowing that, for example, "this is the mental state of wanting," then noticing what it feels like in the body. There may be sensations in the body that reflect a mental state, in this case, of desire.

But there's also a certain texture to the mind, where, sometimes with the obsessing of wanting, the mind is on fire. It's just really sticky; you can't control it; it's restless; it keeps going to the object of desire again and again. That's a very different quality to the mind than depression.

When you're depressed, you fall into a mood. It's not so much that we have thoughts of depression, at least initially (unlike desire, which manifests lots of thoughts and imagery). Depression is a mental state where the mind feels very bleak, barren, empty, dry. We feel aloof, out of touch, disconnected in some way. And we don't like it. Then we can spin out thoughts about that—why we're depressed, reaffirming that being depressed is definitely going to last forever, and it should last forever because we're such a depressed person, and on in a spiral. Depression is a very different feeling in the mind, in the body and in content of thought than desire.

Thus, when we become aware of a pervasive mental state, also notice the content of thought, the feeling in the body, and the energy or texture or flavor of the mind. And just notice that; be with it.

Mostly all the mental states are really unpleasant, and it's hard to *want* to be aware of them because they are unpleasant. With the mental state of desire, we like the image of what we're desiring. We love to play with that fantasy; you can imagine this future or this person, and you get kind of entranced. That's great, that's fun, that's a lot of pleasure.

But when you turn your attention around to the feeling

of desire itself, it's not pleasant. Unfulfilled desire is terrible, really, you don't want to experience that. So we either get caught in a fantasy or we act out our desire. But what we're doing at this retreat is turning our attention around to the actual mental state, that condition, instead of getting caught in the object, no matter what the mental state is, and not getting so restless that we act it out.

You'll turn your attention inward and take a look. You'll see that all these mental states are really unpleasant, and the body is really unpleasant when the mind is filled with these mental states. A large part of the mindfulness practice is recognizing the mood, the mental state, the flavor, the emotional tone of the mind. It's noting the kinds of thought, the quantity, the quality, the content of the thoughts. And then when you get in touch with the body, it's often very subtle, very unpleasant. It's a type of energy, or a certain pattern of energy in the body that we haven't yet learned to open to successfully every time. And we get caught, and that's when we spin out into thought.

And if we practice again and again and again coming back to recognizing, coming back to the body, opening to that kind of energy in the body and in the mind, then we learn to tolerate that kind of energy, for example, where you can tolerate the energy of frustration and just say, "OK, this is frustration," or "This is depression," or "This is anxiety (or restlessness, or desire, or loneliness)."

*(continued on the next page)*

## TCVC AND COMMON GROUND MEDITATION CENTER COSPONSOR A PUBLIC TALK BY KAMALA MASTERS

Sunday, June 24  
Doors open: 6:30 P.M.  
Talk: 7:00 P.M.

at Common Ground Meditation Center  
3400 E. 26th Street  
Minneapolis, MN

The topic will be mindfulness meditation.

This talk is offered in the spirit of generosity. Donations are gratefully accepted, but not expected.

For more information about this talk, leave a message at 952-253-5228, the voice mail box for Merra Young.

On page 5 of this newsletter, see Kamala Master's biography and description of a vipassana retreat that she and Steve Armstrong will lead June 15-24.

(Recognizing mental states, continued from page 1)

Question

Give an example of an action that's born out of ignorance.

Steve Armstrong

It's ubiquitous. It's happening all the time. For example, the bell rings for lunch during a retreat. If you aren't hungry, why do you go eat? Or, when the bell rings for lunch, do you know whether you're hungry? The bell rings, it's lunch time; monitor whether you're hungry, then either go or not. In the lunch room, monitor your response when you see chocolate chip cookies. We take the limit of two cookies and, then, look around and wonder if we can take more. We see cookies and think, "My afternoon is going to be great!" We eat the two cookies and get a rush of sugar and chocolate for an hour then crash for the next three hours. And we realize, that's not what I expected. But out of ignorance we ate the cookies (or whatever action we took in a situation), thinking that the action was something that it really wasn't. That's an example of not seeing clearly what's going on.

Sometimes during your meditation practice, the body is painful, the mind is restless and it feels unpleasant, and you'd rather be doing something else. Yet, you continue the practice. Why continue? Well, there's the understanding that the meditation period hasn't ended yet. However, there's also the understanding that we've cultivated some understanding of clarity, of the power of presence of mind, of the benefit of opening to and letting go of mental states and conditions in the body and not being so locked up in them.

We're developing another understanding of how to act in response to difficulty in our life, for example, pain in the body, frustration in the mind. It's learning to not get caught by the difficulty, not get entwined in it or entranced by it so that we then act it out and live our life from a very frustrated, unfulfilled, depressed and unhappy place or whatever other mental state we might be cultivating.

[Vera Matich provided text of questions and answers, above. Text is published here with permission of Steve Armstrong.]

**ATTENDANCE AT MARCH, 2001 WEEKEND RETREAT, LED BY MATTHEW FLICKSTEIN**

For readers interested in news about past retreats...

- 46 retreatants attended. 43 were from MN; three were from WI.
- 12 retreatants attended their first TCVC retreat.
- Of those 12, five heard about the retreat from friends; three read about it on the TCVC web site; two heard about it at Matt Flickstein's January public talk in St. Paul; and two heard announcements at Common Ground Meditation Center.

**NEXT TCVC BUSINESS MEETING IS MAY 16, 2001**

If you've attended at least one TCVC-sponsored retreat (residential or non-residential), the TCVC coordinating committee members invite you to attend a business meeting. We socialize from 7 to 7:30 P.M. then conduct TCVC business from 7:30-9:00 P.M. We're eager to have your input and participation.

On Wednesday, May 16 we'll meet at Merra Young's home. The agenda will include planning the June, 2001 retreat and future retreats and finalizing a change to the TCVC mission statement. To ask about the location and driving directions, leave a message for Merra at 952-253-5228.



**HIGHLIGHTS OF TCVC ANNUAL MEETING**

Joey Lee's call for volunteers and Merra Young's description of future-retreat ideas and of a change to the TCVC mission statement generated long discussions at the annual meeting held April 22, 2001.

- Regarding volunteers, see the summary on page 3 of this newsletter about names of people who volunteered to fill past-year and current-year positions.
- Regarding future-retreat ideas, you'll see the results in upcoming issues of *GrassRoots Dhamma*.
- Regarding a change to the TCVC mission statement, we'll discuss at the May 16 TCVC business meeting a statement wordsmithed by Wendy Morris. We'll publish the revised mission statement in a future issue of the *GrassRoots Dhamma*.

Joanne Skarjune, TCVC Treasurer, described the state of the TCVC treasury from January, 2000 through end of February, 2001. (As of now, the end-of-year period will occur after the first retreat of the year so that retreat expenses and income are not spread between two reporting periods.) Ending with February 28, 2001 and including income/expenses from the January, 2001 retreat, the TCVC Treasurer's Report is as follows:

Operating fund:	\$1,500.02
Retreat fund:	1,848.74
Scholarship fund:	1,504.50
Backup fund:	<u>1,500.00</u>
Balance:	\$6,353.26