

To Slay the Dragons of Our Core Beliefs

Written by Nirmala

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Q: I've been inquiring into beliefs. Is it helpful to uncover the core beliefs that are the source of more superficial thoughts and ideas and then to do inquiry to address those core beliefs?

It's like there is a big forest on fire. There are five or six dragons standing in the middle of the forest. They light the forest on fire by breathing out fire everywhere. If we put the fire out, the dragons will start the forest burning again. But if we kill the dragons, the fire will stop. The fire is the outer layers of conditioning, and the dragons are the core beliefs, or the inner layers. Would you keep your main attention on the core beliefs, or give the same amount of attention to everything?

A: You are definitely correct that core beliefs are often the source of our more superficial thoughts. Practically speaking, it is helpful to address these core beliefs with inquiry, as you've been doing. I would also suggest that you don't have to actually kill the dragons, as they are, after all, just made of thoughts. Instead, I invite you to become very curious about your thoughts: How do you know what you think? How do you know that something is a belief and not just an idle thought? How do you sometimes know what you "unconsciously" believe? What are thoughts and beliefs made of? How important are they really? If they are just thought dragons, maybe you can turn them into pets!

Underneath the dragons are even more fundamental beliefs that we often aren't aware of and don't stop to question because they seem so obviously and undeniably true. These are core assumptions, such as, "I am a person" or "I am this body." One very deep assumption is the idea that some experiences are better than others. When you combine this belief with the belief that you are a separate somebody, then it seems true to work hard to get a better experience for this separate me. But if you see that no experience is any better than any other (they are just different), or that there is only one awareness that is having all experiences, you can hold this whole journey of life lightly, including all the endless ways you can inquire and question.

Since no experience is better than any other, the point of the inquiry is not to get rid of or get more of anything, but simply to discover what is happening. In the case of your deepest assumptions about life, you can be curious about the beliefs that it doesn't even enter your mind to question. How do I hold a deep belief or assumption so that it doesn't seem possible for it to not be true? And in the exploration of all of your beliefs, you can ask not only what you believe, but also what the nature of belief itself is. And what is the nature of the awareness that experiences even the deepest beliefs? Does awareness need to be changed or fixed in any way?