Where Brightness Is

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“The mind,” the Buddha once said, “is bright, and it’s darkened only by passing defilements.” “If the mind were by nature dark, there’d be no way you could develop it,” he said. But it’s because it is bright, that’s why you can train it. The question is where you’re going to see the brightness of the mind. For the most part, our minds tend to be perpetually overcast. There’s a certain amount of brightness, but it’s the kind of brightness where the light of the sun comes through the clouds. So we don’t get to see the sun. The fortunate thing is that we’re not totally in the dark. We can start looking around to see where this brightness lies. Leading a retreat, one of the main themes of the retreat was focusing on the issue of what you’re doing that’s skillful and what you’re doing that’s unskillful in terms of what you do, what you say, what you think. In other words, you look at your actions and see where they cause harm and realize that you have a choice. You don’t have to do that harm. The same with your speech, the same with your thoughts. It’s important that you realize you have a choice. If you find that a particular way of speaking or thinking has been causing suffering, causing stress, if it’s a burden to the mind, you don’t have to do it. One of the people in the retreat who had been spending too much time around his Zen center focusing on your actions as distracting yourself from opening to the unconditioned, which is right there all the time, cluttering up the mind with these questions of skillfulness and lack of skillfulness, he said, was actually getting in the way. His girlfriend happened to be on the retreat, and I saw the way they interacted. If there was anyone on the retreat who really needed some lessons in being skillful, he was the one. You don’t see the unconditioned just by relaxing or just opening to the present moment. There are only specific areas in the mind where you can get an inkling of the brightness that we’re looking for. And that’s in those moments when you realize you have a choice. So, as we focus on these issues of our thoughts and our words and our deeds and realize that we have choices that we didn’t realize before, we’re getting more and more sensitive to the part of the mind that’s bright. In other words, instead of just acting under compulsion, we can step back and focus on the moment and look at our choices and see that some choices are more skillful than others. It’s that moment of awareness where you can see the choice and you have a sense of where the action is going, where the thought is going, where the words would be taking you. That moment of awareness gives you a better sense of where the brightness is in the mind. It’s right around there. So, one of the important elements of our practice is to see our choices. The Buddha starts you off with generosity, asking you to look at the things you have and what would be good to share, reminding us that we have choices. You do have that choice. You don’t have to keep trying to hang onto things or grab things or take things away from people. You also have the choice of sharing. And as you choose to share, you’ll find there will be parts of the mind that you’re going to resist. And so you get to look at them and see if they really are voices that you would like to sing along with. Voices that you would like to identify with. And you realize up to that point, the reason you didn’t share was because you believed these voices, saying, “You can’t do that. You’re going to lack this and lack that, and you’ll be in trouble. Someday down the line you’re going to regret having given it away.” Well, you don’t have to listen to those voices. And when you actually share and see what happens as a result, you realize a lot of those voices are totally misguided, and that way you help to weaken their power over the mind. You can step back from them a bit. You don’t have to identify with them. And in the act of not identifying, you sense more of the brightness of the mind. The same goes for the precepts. If you’re used to breaking the precepts, you’ll find there’s a part of the mind that has turned it into a compulsion. You’ve got to. There are times when you’ve got to lie, it’ll say. There are times when misery in the mind is so great that the only thing you can do is drink. And if you believe those voices, the mind just keeps staying in the dark. It’s when you step back and realize that you can still be happy and not damage yourself by telling the truth. In other words, telling the truth will not damage you. Realizing that staying sober will not be miserable, you’ve got a choice. You see the choices. That moment when the mind sees the choices, that’s a moment of clarity, a moment of more awareness, even more so when you come to meditate. When you get the mind to stay with the breath, you’ll be finding that throughout the hour there will be distracting thoughts saying, “You’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to think about that.” You have the choice either to go with those thoughts or to stay with the breath. And you find that the old thoughts are simply your old ways of doing things. They’re like your old friends, but we had that chant just now, just not all friends or real friends. When you can step back and ask, “Well, where are you going? Where are you taking me?” Just the fact that you can step back means that you realize you have a choice. You don’t have to go with it. Then you develop that awareness even further as you realize that these are taking me in places I don’t want to go. I’d rather stay with the breath, give it a try. Or as the mind begins to settle down, you run into pain. Again, you’ve got lots of choices. For the most part, we don’t realize we have those choices. Our immediate reaction to pain is we want to push it away, get rid of it, or at least cut it off. So it doesn’t spread any further. We’ve developed a lot of subconscious attitudes toward the pain that we’re hardly aware of. They seem to be a part of the pain or a natural extension of the pain, but actually they’re not necessary. The voice that complains about how much it hurts, how much it has hurt for who knows how long and how much further it’s going to hurt us in the future, you don’t really have to listen to those voices. Past pain is gone. You don’t have to think about past pain. Future pain hasn’t come yet. You don’t know how long it’s going to be. If you can just simply drop those two voices, the one that complains about past pain and the one that’s worried about future pain, you’ll find that the pain in the present moment is a lot more manageable. Then you can step back and look at the other voices. The voices that surround the pain that make it worse in the present moment. The perception that says there’s a pain right there and it has this shape and it’s taken over this part of the body. Well, is it really? Is it one big solid thing or is it lots of little tiny sensations that come and go, come and go, come and go? How are those sensations affected by the way you think about them? Step back for a moment and look. This is why we try to get the breath as a foundation, because it gives us a place where we can step back and take a stance and look. Then you find that there’s a sense of brightness that comes with getting the mind to settle down. Some people actually experience it as a light. Other people experience it more as a sense of clarity. Well, that clarity, even though it’s dependent on conditions, is getting you closer and closer to where you want to be. In terms of finding out why is there this ability to make a choice, what is the aspect of the mind that allows you to step back and have that clarity? The more you see these choices, the more you make a practice of choosing the wise or the skillful course of action, the course of speech, the course of thought, the greater that sense of clarity becomes. The more clarity there is in the mind, the wider range of choices you realize you have. Many times, the skillful thing, if the mind isn’t really clear, you can’t even think of what the skillful thing would be. But if the mind is clear, you see it. The more clarity, the wider the range of choices. And all this is getting you closer and closer to that aspect of the mind that’s allowing you to be not conditioned at all. So as we focus on the issue of what your choices are, what’s the skillful, what’s the unskillful choice, we’re not distracting ourselves from the whole point of the practice. We’re actually clarifying it, getting a better and better sense of which direction in which it lies. So learn to have a strong sense of the value of this practice, of stepping back from your thoughts, words, and deeds and looking at them as a pattern of cause and effect. Value the part of the mind that sees your choices. Value the part of the mind that makes the skillful choice. Because that’s the part of the mind that becomes the knowledge, that becomes the awareness, that can cut through unawareness. That’s the part of the mind that forms the path.

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