The Politics of Defilement

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Our minds have defilements. We don’t like to talk about that and we don’t even like to think about that, which is part of the campaign that the defilements wage on us. They’re not defilements. They’re us. They’re what we really want, what we really like, what we really don’t like. They’ve wormed their way into our minds so thoroughly that we just assume that they’re ours, that they are what we think. And so what’s wrong with them? Well, what’s wrong is that they cause suffering. They cause stress. And if things had to be that way, there wouldn’t be much issue around them. But the thing is that things don’t have to be that way. It is possible to find happiness without them. That’s something they deny. We talk about a state without any passion. And there’s part of the mind that says, “Gee, what would that be like? Being without passion sounds like you’re dead. We need passion to get moving.” What that really indicates, of course, is that our minds have a lot of inertia. We carry a lot of baggage. There’s a Pali word, upati. The technical translation is acquisitions. But it’s basically any baggage that weighs the mind down. And to get it to move in any direction, you’ve got to have passion to overcome the inertia. And so passion seems to be a good thing. And it’s one of the things we actually have to harness for the sake of the path. But most passion doesn’t go in that direction. It goes off towards sensuality, it goes off towards anger. And those things can really do a lot of damage. Again, we don’t like to think about the damage. We think about all the good things that are out there, which is why they’re so dressed up in advertising. In fact, if you want to learn about the defilements’ tricks, all you have to do is look at advertising and look at politics. Then you have to realize that these machinations are going on in your mind all the time. And so you’ve got to learn how to see through them. One of the reasons we work with the breath is to give you an immediate sense of pleasure, to counteract the defilements saying, “Look, if you want a quick fix, just follow us,” and say, “No, I’ve got an alternative.” The other reason we work with the breath, of course, is because when anger comes in, it hijacks the breath, messes around with our breath energy, so that the only alternative seems to be to get the anger out of your system by doing something really stupid. At the time, though, it seems like perfectly the best thing to do. And as they say in Thai, it squeezes your nerves. So you have a very narrow picture of what the range of possibilities are and what would really be the best thing to do or say at that particular time. And oftentimes you’re not thinking about consequences, you’re thinking about what would feel good right now. So you’ve got to train the mind to think in terms of consequences. Where is this going to lead down the line? And also don’t believe it when the anger or the passion or whatever says, “Look, the only alternative is dead or dull.” One of the easiest ways of skewing any view of reality is to limit the options. Pretend that there are only one or two options, and so obviously the option that you’re offering is going to be the better one. It’s like the time one of the members of the monastery was called up by one of those polling companies and asked him about social security. Should social security be ended or reformed? And he said, “Well, no, I actually like it the way it is.” So that’s not an option. And so what results that poll was going to give? Of course, we’re totally skewed. This is the way our mind works. We deny certain options. One of the purposes of the Dhamma is to expand our range of understanding. Why do we deny certain options? As the Buddha said, there really is a deathless happiness, an unconditioned happiness. It takes work to get there, which is why the inertia of the defilements gets in the way. And so you need a certain amount of passion. This is why we have to harness some of the defilements to make progress on the path. So take passion and try to bring it to the breath. Try to be really good at this. For many of us, working with breath energy in the body is something foreign. It’s a whole series of concepts we’re not used to. But think of it like the way they train tasters. They have to teach you a huge vocabulary of all the different kinds of possible tastes out there. And when you have a vocabulary, then you begin to see, “Oh yeah, there is that distinction.” The words actually help you see subtleties that you didn’t sense before. And it’s the same with the Buddhist teachings on the properties of the body, and John Lee’s descriptions of the different types of breath energy flowing in the body, the different ways they can flow. They’re meant to expand your idea of possibilities. So, for instance, when anger comes up and starts squeezing your nerves and says, “The only way we’re going to get rid of the squeeze is if you give in and say something really stupid. Otherwise, if you don’t say it, you’re going to get bottled up.” The anger is going to go underground, turn into the thing, and who knows where it’s going to come up. So we work with the breath. Here’s an alternative, that sense of being squeezed. You can use your skill, the breath energy, and learn how to un-squeeze things. Start with relaxing your hands, going up the back of your hands, all the parts of the body that tend to tense up when you’re angry. Think of the breath energy coming in and nourishing them and loosening them up. And you’ve leveled the playing field. Because there’s strength, the strength of the defilements. A lot of it comes from the fact that they get into the body. And how do they get into the body? They get into it through the breath. So you work with the breath. You take the breath back. And then when the actual thought comes up, the thought of anger or whatever, you’re on a more even playing field. And you can see, okay, there may be some truth to it, but there’s an awful lot of falseness and an awful lot of stupidity. So simply by giving you this option, the Dhamma changes the equation. And as for that teaching on an unconditioned happiness, it may be just a concept. But it’s a good one to think about. It’s actually one of the recollections that the Buddha taught, recollecting peace, recollecting calmness. Not in the sense of being dull, but in the sense of being where there’s finally true happiness, where there’s finally a true sense of well-being. It’s a good thing to keep in mind. As the Buddha once said, if you see the end of greed, aversion, and delusion as something negative, it’s going to be impossible to practice. So you have to do a little advertising work yourself. Don’t let the defilements be the only ones who know how to use all the tricks of advertisers and politicians. Let the Dhamma have some of those tricks as well. And as Ajahn Lee would say, you have to learn how to convert some of your defilements so that your conceit, your sense of who you are, can start getting built around mastering the path. There are a lot of passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about different analogies of skills. Just as a master craftsman can do something really, really well, or a master warrior can fire arrows and hit very small targets, you want to have the same sense of the craftsman’s pride about what you’re doing here. And although pride may be one of those things you’ve got to give up at some point, you don’t give it up at the beginning. You bring it over and you apply it to learning how to be really harmless. There’s another sutta where the Buddha makes comparisons between monks and soldiers. Other soldiers here, even though all they have to do is hear that there’s an army approaching and they run away. Others see the dust and they run away. Others hear the clamor of the coming army and they run away. Others manage to stand their ground until they’re actually face-to-face and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. But then they get defeated. The good soldier is the one who doesn’t run away and doesn’t get defeated. The Buddha makes the same comparison with sensual desire, just hearing that there’s somebody beautiful out there. Some people just faint, as he says. Some monks give up. And so on, to where it gets closer and closer. So the whole point of that is learning how to say no to your defilements. Some people would say that you’re a wimp, or that you’re weak, or that you’re not getting out there and making a place for yourself in the world. You need an alternative story that says, “Look, this is what the really great masters do. They learn how to overcome their sensual desire. They learn how to overcome their anger.” So when your defilements say, “Well, everybody else is doing it. Why don’t you do it with us?” You say, “No, not everybody does that. The people who are really admirable in the world are the ones who don’t.” One of the arguments that was used with a young prince in Ashvagosha’s poem about the Buddha was that he was planning to leave the palace and go off in quest of the deadless. One of his friends said, “Well, all the great people in the past have contended themselves with what you’ve got.” And he said, “In that case, they’re not great. There must be something better than this.” So when you’re dealing with the defilements, in some cases you have to convert them. Convert your pride so that it’s useful. Convert your craving so that it wants peace. And get yourself wise to some of their tricks. It’s just like the bankers who do things to take money away from people, and then if you point it out and they say, “You’re conducting class warfare.” Well, wait a minute, it’s the ones who were taking the money to begin with. That was the class warfare. It’s the same with the defilements. They say, “Here you are sitting meditating and sticking with the Dharma and obeying all these rules, and it’s making you miserable.” And if you turn around and say, “Look, you’re the ones who are making me miserable,” they accuse you of being nasty. So we work with the breath to put ourselves in a better position to see their tricks, to be able to withstand them, and to learn how to convert them. And it starts by taking back the breath. Don’t let them have the breath. Make sure that this is your territory and it’s on the side of the Dhamma. And that changes the balance of power right there.

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