Human Potentials

November 25, 2023

The mind is radiant, but it’s darkened by passing defilements. When you realize that, the Buddha said, you realize that the mind can be trained. Nanasi is not saying the mind is pure innately. Radiance means the ability of the mind to observe itself. To see what’s going on inside. We have an awful lot of visiting defilements. The common image here in Thailand is of the sun being bright, but it’s darkened by clouds. We tend to welcome the clouds in as our visitors. That seems to be the normal state of the mind. We accept the fact that greed, aversion, and delusion are the normal human condition. But the question is, do we want to be normal human beings? Or do we want to be something better? Because the human mind is capable of all kinds of things. We can act like hell beings. We can act like common animals. We can act like hungry ghosts. We can act like devas, like brahmas, like noble ones. So we have that choice. And it’s good not to keep our sights low. As they say in marksmanship, you never hit higher than you aim. So aim high. Of course, part of the mind will complain, “So I’m only human.” But human beings have, as I said, these capabilities. In fact, one of the qualities that made us human beings to begin with is that we had some experience with the precepts, abstaining from killing and stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. Without that in our background, we wouldn’t be here. We’d be someplace further down. So we have what the commentaries call the human treasure. And we can trade it in for a higher treasure. Or we can just spend it and fall down. There’s that passage in where the Buddha is with the monks. He takes a little dirt from the ground under his fingernail. He says, “See this dirt under my fingernail? Which is greater, the dirt in the earth or the dirt here under my fingernail?” And the monks say, “Well, of course, that dirt in the earth is a lot bigger, a lot greater.” The Buddha said it in the same way. Human beings who get reborn as human beings or as devas are like the dirt under his fingernail. Human beings can die and go to the lower realms, like the dirt of the earth. So which kind of dirt do you want to be? If we just say, “Well, I’ll go with the normal, run-of-the-mill things,” we go down. That phrase “only human” pulls us down. If you look at the example of the Buddha and the Noble Ones, they show that human beings can do it all. They can train their minds. Whether they have greed, they can get rid of the greed. Whether they have anger, they can get rid of the anger. Whether they have delusion, they can get rid of the delusion. This is something we can do, as the Buddha once said. If we couldn’t do these things, he wouldn’t have taught them. So as human beings, we do have this capability to train ourselves to get higher. It’s a common image in the Canon that as you practice, you’re getting a larger and higher point of view. Think of the image of the person going up into a tower and looking at the people down below, or the person sitting looking at someone who’s lying down, or the person standing looking at someone who’s sitting. Lift yourself up so you can see more clearly. The defilements do obscure our vision. They do darken the brightness of the mind. But they don’t have to. That’s the meaning of that image. So we practice meditation to give ourselves a higher perspective. In Thailand, they actually like to say this, that when you’re engaging in direct thought and evaluation, you’re lifting your mind. The mind’s ordinary level is sensuality. We think about pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, the ones you get obsessed with. Here the Buddha is saying there’s a higher pleasure. There’s a pleasure of form in the body as you experience it from within. And for those of us who tend to be on bad terms with our bodies, it’s good to develop a friendship inside. Breathe in a way that feels really good, that gives you confidence to say, “Yes, you can inhabit the body, and it’s a good place to be.” Because it gives you a grounding. You want to watch things happening in the present moment. If you’re just staying in the mind, you’re going to sense the present, past, future gets kind of blurry. See what the breath does as you’re grounding. There’s no past breath you can watch, no future breath you can watch. Just the present breath right here. So learn to relate to it in a friendly way. And then try to expand your awareness as much as you can. I encountered Ajahn Lee’s instructions in meditation. This was the point that attracted me the most. I didn’t have to narrow my attention just to one point on the nose when I was doing concentration. Instead, I could develop a full body awareness. My mind could expand and not be constricted. Later on, as I began to read the Canon, I began to realize that’s what the Buddha was talking about as well. Think of those images he gives, the similes he gives for the jhanas. The bathmen working the water through the pile of soap powder to make a dough so the entire ball of dough is moistened. The water of the spring welling up from the lake, sending cool water throughout the entire lake. The lotuses in a pond of still water, saturated with water from their roots to their tips. The person sitting with a white cloth covering his whole body. The same way you allow the pleasure and rapture and clarity of awareness to fill your whole body. That way the mind gets unrestricted. When the mind is larger like this, it doesn’t tend to narrow down in the way it does when the defilement takes over. The defilement tends to focus on a very narrow range of things. It tends to block out lots of other things, especially with lust and anger. With lust, there are certain details about the body that you get worked up about. There are other details in the body that you don’t want to think about at all. People complain when they’re asked to think about the 32 parts of the body. Why is the Buddha bad-mouthing the body? He’s just pointing out what’s there. He’s not saying your body is worse than anybody else’s body. We’re all equal in terms of these parts of the body. The purpose of this is to get you to think a little more clearly about what lust may do to the mind. Or some people are proud of their bodies. They think they’re better than other people because of the color of their skin or what their body looks like. But then you strip off the skin and there’s nothing worth looking at there. Everybody would run away. The Buddha’s not slandering the body, telling you lies about the body. He’s just pointing out these things that we tend to like to ignore, that we tend to pretend are not there. For the whole purpose of the meditation is to expand your range of awareness so that lust doesn’t take over. The same with anger. You can get upset about things that people say. We had a good case this last week. Someone who seemed to be rehearsing nasty things to say to everybody she met. But you have to ask yourself, if you focus just on that, you don’t think about what kind of suffering causes a person to act in that way. Or maybe this person has some good that we don’t know about. And if she’s that way with everybody, then you don’t take it personally. It’s when you focus on, “Why did she say that to me?” That’s when the anger flares up. But if you take the “me” out and look at the larger picture, you’ll see there’s really nothing worth getting angry about. Then it’s a lot more possible to come up with the right thing to say, the right thing to do. The Buddha doesn’t have us just roll over when people are up doing horrible things. But we’re going to think more clearly about what should be done, what would be the most skillful thing to do. If we look at the larger picture, if we narrow our awareness down, our sense of shame or our sense of compunction just go out the window. They get blocked off. That’s what our blindness does. It makes us blind to the things that shame and compunction would tell us. “Hey, you don’t say these kinds of things.” We’re talking about healthy shame here. The shame where you’re acting the opposite of shamelessness. When you have a sense of what’s the appropriate thing to say, what’s the honorable thing to say, and you restrict your imagination to those things to let your anger narrow it down or block those things out, then you can deal with the situation a lot more skillfully. So we’re trying to get a larger perspective here, see the larger picture, and expand our awareness. So we don’t get taken in by the little details that would loom large if our awareness were small. It’s like the difference between having a little tiny eye that a dust mote can blind or a much larger eye that may be irritated a little bit by the dust mote but is not blind but can still see. So this larger perspective is what we human beings can do. This is one of the ways in which we’re different from common animals, different from hungry ghosts. I knew someone who was able to talk to hungry ghosts, and she said, “All they can think about is their misery. Just me, me, me, me, me.” As human beings, we can take a larger perspective. That’s the good part of being human. That’s the part that lifts us up. So at the very least, we maintain our human treasure. This may lift us up above the ordinary run-of-the-mill people, not in the sense of priding ourselves on being better, but just having a sense of worth inside. Regardless of what other people may do, you want to make sure that you maintain the higher level of being a human—the part that can be reflective. Common animals don’t reflect on their actions that much, but this is part of our human capabilities. We can reflect on what we’re doing, and we can change what we’re doing if we see that it’s not getting the right results. That’s what that luminosity or radiance of the mind means. So take advantage of that. Clear away, as much as you can, the clouds that get in the way of the light of the mind so that it can see itself. Lift its level. As a result, you’re not the only person who is going to benefit. Everybody around you benefits as well. Like that image of the moon at night, when it’s hidden by clouds, the whole landscape is dark. When the clouds part, everything gets bright.

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