Develop Your Inner Observer

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“The mind is luminous.” That’s what the Buddha said one time. And it’s defiled by incoming defilements, which means the defilements don’t have to stay there. He says it’s because the mind is luminous that it can be developed. That means when he’s talking about the luminous mind, he’s not talking about the awakened mind. He’s not saying that our nature is awakened or already pure. If something is to be developed, it’s part of the path. It’s not the goal. So what the Buddha is talking about is the mind’s ability to observe itself. We want to make use of that as we practice. It’s part of the training from the very beginning. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You do what’s required in the path and then you reflect on how well it’s going. And a large part of what you’re doing is learning how to train that ability to reflect well. The Buddha started with his instructions to a whole of people, basically telling them to act only on skillful intentions. That’s the commitment part. And then as he’s doing his actions and after they’re done, he should reflect on the results. If he sees any harm coming up while he’s doing the action, he should stop. If he sees no harm, he can continue. If after the action is done, then he sees some harm, then he resolves not to repeat the mistake. If he sees no harm, he takes joy in that fact and then he continues training. This is how you perfect your ability to reflect. Most people know their ability to reflect in some pretty unskillful ways. A lot of us have an inner critic who is pretty merciless and pretty dumb. He may be clever in pointing out ways in which you have been deficient, but for what purpose? He picked up the voices of who knows who. People who have criticized you in the past. Parents, teachers, friends. And they all gang up on you. As you’re coming out to meditate, you have to ask yourself, what do they know? So when you’re training the mind through virtue, concentration, and discernment, you’re going into territory that most of them never knew before. You’ve got to train them to actually be helpful. Some people say they just want to get rid of their inner critic. But if you don’t have that ability to reflect, you’re not going to get anywhere on the path. Because it’s through reflection that we notice where we can still improve. We can come up with ideas of how we can improve. So listen to what the Buddha has to say about how to talk to yourself. The more I go through the Canon, the more I see the Buddha says, “Train yourself this way. We should train ourselves that we will do this. We’ll train ourselves that we will do that. Or I will try to do this. I will try to do that.” It’s not just in the beginning stages. The Buddha was asked to ask himself about this action I want to do, this action I am doing, this action I have done. When the Buddha is talking about developing discernment, developing mindfulness as a governing principle, he says, “I will try to develop any discernment that I haven’t developed yet. And when I have developed discernment, I’ll try to maintain it. I, I, I.” You’re responsible for what you’re doing. You’ve been training yourself. “I will try to dwell in the utmost emptiness.” There’s still an “I” in that determination. That’s the “I” of the inner commentator. And as you’re training the inner commentator, you’re also training this ability simply to observe. Because the wise commentator doesn’t just keep jumping to conclusions. The wise commentator will stop and watch for a while. That ability just to watch with a minimum of commentary, that’s a useful skill. It’s a level of consciousness that we’re trying to develop. It plays a really important role in concentration practice. You get the mind still, and then you watch. Because if you start jumping to conclusions, or if you get impatient, you can ruin the concentration. So your ability to get to this “nowhere” inside, what the Thais call “puru,” it’s just awareness itself. That’s an important part of developing a good ability to reflect. But it is conditioned. Some people mistake it. They say, “This must be the unconditioned mind.” Well, anything, any consciousness that has an object is conditioned by the object. And it may seem to be continuous, but that’s because moments of consciousness blend very easily into one another. We tend to glom them together. But each time the object changes, that’s a different moment of consciousness. So we’re developing this quality of the luminosity of the mind, the mind’s ability to observe itself. And then we use that to reflect. When we’re not sure what to think about what’s going on, we just get very quiet. We can get through a lot of the suffering that we’ve caused ourselves simply by learning the skill. Think about the Buddha’s instructions about hard speech coming into the ear. Just tell yourself, “An unpleasant sound has made contact with the ear.” That’s it. Anything beyond that is your elaboration on that sound. And the actual contact with the ear may have ended a long time ago, but it’s going to reverberate in your mind. That’s a sign of an untrained commentator. The trained commentator stops. He says, “Anything beyond that contact, I’m responsible for. Why am I doing this to myself?” This is where we get to that question we had this morning about seeing things in terms of their form. The Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths provide a framework for how to look at things so that we can stop suffering. Now we may have other purposes. We may look at things in terms of how to maintain our self-image, how to maintain our image, or as we see our image in the society we inhabit. How to settle scores. Different frames of reference. Different ways of looking at things with different purposes. Most of the purposes we have are things to keep some suffering going along. The Buddha is offering us another frame, teaching our ability to reflect, to look at things with the purpose of ending suffering. That’s a very different thing. So you have to ask yourself, what is your purpose in talking to yourself? What is your purpose in practicing? Train your commentator in the direction of the Four Noble Truths, seeing the extent to which you are burdening your own mind. And you don’t have to. It’s a luminous mind, this ability to observe. And we try to develop it, both in getting down to the mere act of consciousness, so that we can see the different ways in which we go beyond that mere act of consciousness. And we don’t have to. All this is conditioned. It’s a quality to be developed, which means it’s part of the path, which means it’s conditioned and fabricated. But it’s a really useful thing to fabricate. And the more sensitive you get to how the mind fabricates, even on the bare level of bare awareness, the more likely you are to get the mind inclined to go and find something that goes beyond this, something that’s not fabricated. For the meantime, work on developing this skill. ’Cause it helps you sort out a lot of things in the mind, in terms of comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, developing the path so you can realize the cessation of suffering. All the duties of the Noble Truths are contained right here. Or they should be contained right here. I mean, you can commit and reflect to all kinds of things. But if you can commit and then reflect in terms of the Four Noble Truths, that’s something special.

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