Luminous

May 15, 2023

There’s a passage where the Buddha says that the reason why we can train the mind is because it’s luminous. Now, luminous here doesn’t mean that it’s pure. If it were already pure, there’d be no need to train it. We can train it because it can observe itself. It can see what it’s doing, reflect on what it’s doing. This is an important principle. This is how we develop our discernment, by acting and then reflecting on what we’ve done. This is how skills are developed in the world outside, and this is how the skill of working with the mind is developed inside. Notice that the Buddha doesn’t say, “The mind can be developed because we know how to obey or do as we’re told. It can be developed because it can observe itself.” So the Buddha recommends that you give it tasks to do, but he doesn’t give you all the answers. In his Four Steps at the Beginning of Breath Meditation, he says, “You start out discerning when the breath is long, discerning when it’s short, training yourself to breathe in and out, sensitive to the whole body, and then to breathe in and out, calming bodily fabrication.” The term “bodily fabrication” there is a technical term, basically a technical term for the breath itself. And he notes that bodily fabrication is fully calmed with the breath. The fourth jhana, that’s the point where the breath stops. Why he calls it bodily fabrication, he doesn’t explain. And when you’re focusing on short breathing and long breathing, he doesn’t explain, “Well, is one better than the other? Aren’t the only alternatives for breathing are short or long?” In other words, there are a lot of questions he doesn’t answer. He gives you the framework and he gives you an area in which to explore. Because this is how you learn. You explore. You try things out. You can try long breathing for a while, see how that goes. Try short breathing for a while. Then you can play with it. Long in, out short. Short in, long out. Heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. When he says to be aware of the whole body, there’s another passage where he says that once there’s a sense of ease that comes with the breath, then you allow that to spread through the body. How you do that, he doesn’t say, but it makes it obvious. So when he says “whole body,” that’s what he means. The entire physical body. So you work with this, explore, and then observe. You know that the purpose of this is to get the mind to settle down into concentration. There are some people who don’t like the word “concentration” for samadhi. I don’t understand why. Because when the mind settles down properly, it’s not just calm, it’s centered. Everything gathers around one object. Even though your awareness spreads out to fill the whole body, there is a point where you’re gathered around. That’s the direction in which you’re headed. And the Buddha says that as you breathe in and breathe out, there is the potential for pleasure in the breath. There’s the potential for rapture or refreshment in the breath. How do you find those while you experiment? Just keep in mind the fact that these things are possible. And it’s okay to experiment. If the meditation were all laid out with minute steps all explained that you had to follow, there wouldn’t be much discernment developed. You’d simply do what you’re told. But as the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nourished by committing yourself to it as if it were an object and then reflecting. This luminous quality of the mind is what allows you to reflect. That’s another passage that’s kind of controversial. It turns out that that passage is found only in the Pali Canon. None of the other early versions of the Canon have it. And some people say that for that reason that must not be an original statement by the Buddha. But that doesn’t necessarily follow. It may have been that the Pali Canon was the only one that recorded it. And we’re glad that it was recorded, that it wasn’t homogenized out. Because it reminds us that we do have this potential in the mind. We think about all the ways in which the mind is trapped by its preconceived notions. And if it didn’t have this luminous quality, it wouldn’t be able to get out of its preconceived notions. But there’s this ability in the mind to stand back and watch. When I think in these ways, where does it go? Could I possibly think in other ways? Where would that go? There are potentials here. There are opportunities here. And we have the ability to choose. Some people see the ability to choose as a burden. It doesn’t mean that you have to be responsible. But the fact that we can choose is what allows us to learn. We can choose to follow one course of action and then observe the results, just like scientists can choose to take a hypothesis and figure out how to test it and see the results. And then if that doesn’t work out, they say, “Well, what other hypotheses could work?” There is a range of possibilities, and the Buddha wants us to explore them. We have potentials in the present moment. The present moment is not just a given. There are some constraints that come in from our past actions. But there are also opportunities. We learn what to do within those constraints. We learn how to work around those constraints. And why are we able to do this? It’s that luminous quality of the mind. It can think a thought and can observe itself thinking the thought and see the process of thinking as a process, not necessarily get sucked into the thought world. So even though we have a lot of old patterns of behavior that we picked up from way back, we’re not necessarily trapped in them, especially as we have the opportunity to meditate. It’s worth opening things up in the mind. I was talking to a Chinese astrologer one time, and he was saying how he didn’t like to do the charts for people who meditated. He didn’t necessarily follow the charts, which tells you something about meditation. It’s exploring opportunities that you might otherwise not have thought of and might not have had the opportunity to do. Think outside the box, act outside the box, speak outside the box. As you get outside the box, you become more aware of what’s going on. Your old patterns don’t necessarily have to box you in. So realize that you have this freedom from the luminous quality of the mind, its ability to observe itself, to act and see itself in action, and to see the results. Now, this quality is developed by those three basic qualities that the Buddha said get applied in mindfulness practice. You’re alert to what you’re doing. You’re alert to the results of what you’ve done. Or you’re alert to the results of what you’re doing while you’re doing them. Whatever lessons you’ve learned that are going to be useful, you keep in mind. And you try to do your best. It’s when we try our best that we actually learn. We just go through the motions. We know that we’re not just trying our best. We’re not going to learn anything. Nothing gets expanded, nothing gets opened up inside. But when you do your best and it turns out that it’s not really all that good, rather than just getting upset about that, tell yourself, “Here’s your opportunity to learn. There must be a better way of doing this.” Here again, there are people who don’t like that kind of challenge. They feel that it’s a burden. But why are we burdened by choices? Why are we burdened by new opportunities? Because it requires extra effort. But when there are those opportunities, why worry about the effort? You have to learn how to see yourself as stuck in a situation that you think is not ideal. But you’re not stuck. You’ve made yourself stuck. Remember that image that the Buddha gives of the fire. In those days, they believed that fire burned because it grabbed onto its fuel. And the fact that it grabbed onto its fuel meant that it was trapped. But the fuel didn’t drop the fire. It was up to the fire to let go. In the same way, there’s something in our old ways of behavior, in our old ways of thinking, that we’re grabbed hold to. And that’s why we’re trapped in those old ways. So we have to figure out what it is we’re holding onto and how it’s possible to let go. This is an aspect of the mind that you have to deal with again and again and again, the part that’s afraid to let go, thinking, “Well, if I let go of this, I won’t have anything.” This is why the Buddha had to say again and again that in letting go, there’s freedom. There’s not annihilation. There’s freedom. So learn to make the most of the opportunities that you have, the potentials that are here. Even just breathing in and breathing out, there are a lot of potentials. There’s a potential for rapture. There’s a potential for ease. There’s a potential for getting a strong sense of how the energy flows in the body and the different levels in which it flows. And how it can use those different ways of flowing to deal with diseases, to deal with pains in the body, to soothe the mind, to energize the mind. And that’s just the breath. There are even more potentials in the mind itself. And we learn about them. We learn about them by exploring, by experimenting, seeing that the fact that we have choices is what allows us to know anything at all. If we had no choices, we’d just be watching the passing show and have no idea what caused what, what could be changed, what couldn’t be changed. The fact that we have choices means that we can play around with things. We learn cause and effect. We learn how to use those principles of cause and effect to our advantage. And then we realize that our advantage also involves thinking about the well-being of others as well. So it’s not a selfish project. This is how we learn. This is how we grow. Because we can observe ourselves, because of that luminous quality of the mind. There’s a lot that the Buddha doesn’t explain. In some cases, it’s because he doesn’t need to explain. He just takes advantage of the fact that we have these choices, we have this luminous quality. The present moment is not totally shaped by the past. It has its aspect that comes from the present itself. How that happens, he doesn’t explain. You just take advantage of it. There are other things that he doesn’t explain, but he wants you to find out for yourself. For example, how to breathe in a way that feels good. You observe what’s actually happening. How to take advantage of that good feeling. How you can learn about the mind’s relationship to feelings as you do this. Those are questions he does want you to answer. And as you answer them, you develop your discernment. And as your discernment develops, you see things that are more and more subtle, that go deeper, and can make more radical changes in the mind. So be happy that you have the capacity for choice, the ability to observe. Don’t see it as a burden or an imposition. It’s because you have these potentials inside that you have the opportunity to put an end to suffering, that you can find a happiness that has no drawbacks whatsoever. There’s a responsibility that comes with freedom. But there’s also the possibility of being totally unlimited. So try to explore that possibility as much as you can.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230515_Luminous.mp3>