

Where the Brightness Is

September 5, 2005

The mind, the Buddha once said, is bright, but it's darkened by passing defilements. If the mind were by nature dark, there'd be no way you could develop it, he said: no way you could develop it, no way you could train it. But it's because it is bright, that's why you can train it. The question is, where are you going to see the brightness of the mind? For the most part, our minds seem to be perpetually overcast. There's a certain amount of brightness, but it's a brightness like the light of the Sun coming through clouds. We don't get to see the Sun.

The fortunate thing is that we're not totally in the dark, so we can start looking around to see where this brightness lies.

I was once leading retreat where 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, say, and think. In other words, you look at your actions and see where they cause harm, realizing 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, it's a burden to the mind, you don't have to do it.

One of the people on the retreat had been spending too much time in a Zen center. He said, "All this focusing on your actions is distracting us 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, "is actually getting in the way." His girlfriend happened to be on the retreat. I saw the way they interacted, and 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 there begins to be an inkling of the brightness we're looking for. It's in the 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 a minute and look at our choices, to 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 thought is going, where the words would be taking you: That moment of

awareness gives you a better sense of where that 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 to look at things you have and asking yourself: What would be good to share? That reminds you that you do have the choice. You don't have to keep trying to hang on to things or grab things or trying to take things away from people. You also have the choice of sharing.

As you choose to share, you find the parts of the mind that are going to resist. So you get to look at them and see if they really are voices you would like to sing along with, voices that you would like to identify with. You realize that up to that point, the reason you didn't share was because you believed the voices that were saying, "You can't do that. You're going to lack this, 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. When you actually share and see what happens as a result, you realize that many of those voices are totally misguided. 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 used to break a precept, you'll find there is a part of the mind that has turned it into a compulsion. "You've got to. There are times you've got to," they say. "When the misery in the mind is so great, the only thing you can do is take a drink." 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 won't damage you—or that staying sober will not be miserable: That's when you see you've got a choice. You see the choices. That moment when the mind sees the choices is a moment of clarity, brightness, a moment of more awareness.

Even more so when you come to meditate: When you can get the mind to stay with the breath, you'll be finding that throughout the hour there will be distracting thoughts, saying that 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. These old thoughts are simply your old ways of doing things. They're like your old friends, but as we recited in that chant just now, not all friends are real friends. When you can step back and ask, "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 them. As you develop that awareness even further, you realize, "These are taking me 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 that we want to push it away, get rid of it, or at least cut it off, so that 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 voices that complain 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 last. If you can just drop those two voices—the one that complains about past pain, the one that's worried about future pain—you find that the pain in the present moment is a lot more manageable.

Then you can step back and look at the other voices surrounding the pain and making it worse in the present moment. Such as 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, has it really? Is it one big solid thing, or is there lots of little tiny sensations that come and go, come and go, come and go? And 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 that allows us to look at our thoughts and perceptions. You find that there is 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. That clarity, even though it's dependent on conditions, is getting you closer and closer to where you want to be in terms of seeing why there is this ability to make a choice, and what is the aspect of the mind that allows you to step back and have that clarity.

The more you see these choices, and the more you make a practice of choosing the wise or the skillful course of action, speech, or thought, then the greater that sense of clarity becomes. The more clarity there is in the mind, the wider range of choices you realize you have. When 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 your range of choices. All of this is getting you closer and closer to that aspect of the mind that's not conditioned at all.

So as we focus on the issue 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 the 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, to look 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 awareness that can cut through unawareness. That's the part of the mind that forms the path.