

The Luminous Mind

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There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that the mind is *pabhassaram*: luminous or radiant. He says that when people don't realize this, they can't develop their minds; they can't train the mind. When you realize that the mind is luminous and that its defilements are visitors, then you can train the mind.

In other words, if you believe that greed, anger, and delusion permanently stain the mind, then you believe you can't train yourself. You can't develop the mind. You have to depend on outside forces, outside agents to come and save you. But when you realize that the defilements of greed, anger, and delusion come and visit it—in other words, they don't necessarily own it, they don't leave a permanent stain—then you can train it.

And notice: The Buddha's not saying that the mind is naturally good or that its luminosity is its awakened state. Luminosity here simply means that it knows. Ajaan Maha Boowa has noted that if the Buddha had said the mind is pure by nature, you could argue with him: If it's pure, how can defilements come into it? But the Buddha simply says that it's luminous, which means it can know. Each moment we are able to be aware of things. No matter how many times greed, anger, and delusion have come into the mind, they go. There's always the possibility that you can notice their coming and going, see the effects of their coming and going, and realize that you have the choice of siding with them or not.

That's what enables you to train the mind. No matter how thick the darkness of the mind, it's possible to shine a light in it. And once you shine the light, the darkness can't say, "I've been here for long a time; a tiny little light has no right to drive me away right away." That's not the way light and darkness interact. As soon as light comes, the darkness is gone.

Now you've probably noticed in your practice that there are many times when light comes and then disappears, and the darkness comes back again. That's because your clarity of mind is not yet continuous. But it is something that can be developed. As the Buddha says, we suffer from ignorance partly because of internal causes. In other words, hindrances like sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restless and anxiety, uncertainty obscure the mind. And they keep ignorance going. There's also inappropriate attention. When looking at the hindrances, or looking at the world, we're not really interested in the question of suffering or how to put an end to suffering. We've got other issues, other things we're more interested in. This is related

to the external causes that keep ignorance going. We hang around with the wrong people. We don't listen to the Dhamma. Or even when we do, we don't take it seriously.

So these are the things that keep the darkness going: inappropriate attention and lack of noble friends. Even though the mind has the potential where it can know and be aware, these other factors influence it, which is why we need to train the mind in concentration to overcome the hindrances. To do this, of course, depends on seeing at some point that the reason we're suffering is not because of somebody else somewhere else, or the economic conditions, or the environment or whatever. It's our own ignorance. The moment of clarity that makes us realize we've got to work on ourselves: That's why we look for the right people, want to listen to the Dhamma, want to understand it, and want to practice.

It's during those moments of clarity when you really see the connection between your actions and the suffering you experience—when you recognize your own foolishness: That's when you're less willfully ignorant and can start willing in the other direction. As the description of right effort says, you generate the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities. You generate the desire to develop skillful qualities in their place. These are all activities in the mind. That word "qualities" here, *dhamma*, can also mean actions. Remember that actions are not just things you do with the body, but also things you do with the mind. The path is something you fabricate. It's something you will—a truth of the will. In other words, if you don't will it, it won't become true for you.

So this is what we're working on right now, trying to give the desire for what's skillful more power over the mind, so that there can be more moments of clarity, so that we can begin to weaken the causes of ignorance. And ignorance here is not just a general lack of knowledge. It's very closely connected with inappropriate attention. We're looking at the wrong things. We know the wrong things or we frame the issues of our life in the wrong way. We need to become more and more consistent in looking at things in terms of the principle of skillful action, and then in terms of the principle of where there's suffering, what's causing it, what we can do to put an end to it. We want to make those questions the big questions in life. Ordinarily we miss out on these questions because so many other questions really seem insistent—the things we pick up from our own random ideas or from the general values of society—which is one of the reasons why meditation requires that we learn to question the values we were brought up with, the ideas we picked up in the past, our narratives about the past, the way we cast those narratives.

When you look back on your life, learn to recast the narrative. You can't just drop the old narratives of your life, pretend that they didn't happen, that you've shut the door on them and you're no longer

involved. They'll just keep sloshing around in the mind in the same old terms in which you've been framing them before. So you've got to reframe those narratives. Look at them in terms of where there was suffering, why there was suffering, what activity kept you suffering on and on and on in that particular way, and when you finally began to realize that you had to drop that kind of activity—that you *could* drop that kind of activity. When you can look at your life in that way, it's a lot easier to look at the present moment in the right way as well.

So the process of meditation is not just pinning the mind in the present moment and putting it through the grinder of a particular technique, regardless of how you've been living your life. It's learning to reframe the issues of life, getting a stronger sense of the importance of the questions the Buddha asked, and of the need to develop the path that can put an end to the suffering you've been causing and experiencing. In the process of developing the path, we're going to be developing skillful qualities, learning how to abandon the things that get in the way of knowledge and to encourage qualities like mindfulness and alertness that strengthen your knowledge, strengthen your awareness, strengthen your insight and discernment.

These things, like the defilements, are not part of the nature of the mind. Ajaan Lee has a good passage where he points out that the mind is neither good nor evil, but it's what *knows* good and evil, and it's what *does* good and evil, and ultimately it's what *lets go* of good and evil. That luminosity of the mind is neither good nor evil, but it does allow you to know. It creates the circumstances in which skillful qualities can be brought into being, in which they can do their work to bring the mind to a place where it goes beyond both the good and the evil, beyond that luminosity.

Which means that the path is not inevitable. A brahman once asked the Buddha, "Is everybody going to gain awakening?" And he refused to answer. Ven. Ananda was afraid that the brahman would go away misunderstanding, thinking that the Buddha was stymied by the question, and so he took the brahman aside and said, "Suppose there was a fortress with a wise gatekeeper and only one gate into the fortress. The gatekeeper would walk around the walls of the fortress and wouldn't see any other means of entry into the fortress, not even a hole big enough for cat to slip through. He wouldn't know how many people would eventually come into the fortress, but he would know that everybody who was going to come in and out of the fortress had to come in and out through the gate." In the same way, Ananda said, the Buddha realized that whoever was going to gain awakening would have to come through the path of the noble eightfold path, the seven factors for awakening, and the different sets in the wings to awakening. As for how many people would follow that path, that wasn't his concern.

So it's not inevitable that we're going to gain awakening. In other words, we don't have an awakened nature that forces us to gain awakening at some point. What we do have is a desire for happiness, and a luminous mind that can know. It's capable of knowing that there is suffering and it's capable of watching, developing the qualities that allow you to see where the suffering comes from, and to see that it's not necessary, that you can put an end to it.

This is important—because sometimes when people gain a luminous state of mind, or a wide-open state of mind, they think they've hit their awakened nature. But the luminosity is not part of awakening. It's a condition that allows the mind to see, but the awakening comes from our determination not to keep on suffering. That was Ajaan Mun's last message to his students: You're a warrior doing battle with defilement, with discernment as your prime weapon. And what in the mind is the warrior? The determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements; the determination not to suffer again. Don't let go of that determination, he said, until it has done its job.

So there's a necessary element of willing in the path. Without that willing, it just doesn't happen. The luminosity of the mind is what allows the will to do its work, allows us to straighten out our own minds, to train our own minds. We don't have to go around hoping for some outside power to come and save us. We've got our ability here to see the connection between suffering and its cause, and to find the path to the cessation of suffering, with which you can let go of the defilements. When there are no more defilements, you can let go of the path, which is composed just of activities, because you've found something that's not an activity, something that's not fabricated. That's what we're working on.

But you can't clone the unfabricated. You've got to do the work. You've got to develop the factors that give rise to clarity of mind, clarity of vision that can push away those clouds of defilement. When you get the causes right, the effects will take care of themselves.

So try to be very clear about what you're doing, because that's a huge area where ignorance lies: around what we're doing and the results of what we're doing. We tend to be very willful about not wanting to admit to ourselves what we're doing or what our intentions are. We also tend to be very willful about not wanting to see the unfortunate effects of some of our actions. This is why the Buddha, when he was giving instructions to his son, focused on just this issue, telling him, "Look at what you're going to do, look at what you're doing, and look at what you've done. Try to be very clear about the results of your actions." That reflection is how you begin to see through the clouds of delusion that otherwise keep moving in, moving in, moving in all the time. When you can see through your delusion, you realize that it doesn't have to be there all the time.

This principle is what allows us to practice. This principle is what gives us hope, confidence, that there is an end to suffering. If you act on it, there will come a day when it's not just a hope or confidence; it's actual knowledge that there is a deathless and it's totally free from suffering of every kind.