

When Things Seem Dark

December 5, 2014

It's good to think about the elements, the properties, to remind yourself that your mind can be like them as well.

When the Buddha was giving his introductory instructions on meditation to Rahula, he told Rahula to make his mind like earth. Notice: That's something you can do. It may not feel like that right away, but you can do it. People throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn't recoil. You can take that further. They can pour perfume on the earth, and the earth doesn't rise up and greet it. It's simply there. And the same with all the other elements: Water doesn't recoil at washing away dirty things. Fire doesn't recoil at burning up dirty things. The wind doesn't recoil at blowing dirty things around.

You want to be able to develop that quality in your mind. The Buddha says that it's something you can do at the beginning of the meditation. Just remind yourself: It can be done. And often just holding that image in mind helps a lot.

It's the same with the image of space. You can take chalk, you can take paint and try to write on space, and it doesn't stick. Or you can make your mind like the Sun. There's that image where the Buddha says your mind is luminous and it's visited by defilements, in the same way that clouds can come and cover the Sun.

You can think about it: In the Buddha's time, clouds were the biggest things they could imagine. After all, you could have a single cloud cover the whole sky. The Sun can't cover the sky; the Moon can't cover the sky; but a cloud can cover the sky. But even though clouds are large, they don't make any stains on the Sun—when they pass away, the Sun is just as bright as it was before. You want to hold that image in mind.

Because when greed and anger and frustration and fear and other defilements come, we tend to treat them as if they're stains that won't leave the mind. We tend to treat our minds as if they're toilet paper—you wipe yourself once and that's it. The stain is on the toilet paper forever. You might as well throw it away. Now, do you want to treat your mind like toilet paper or do you want to treat your mind like the Sun? That's what it comes down to.

You have to realize that greed may be there, anger, lust—all these things have been there for a long time. But that doesn't mean that they're firmly fixed in the mind. They've come like clouds. Whereas in Ajaan Suwat's example, it's like darkness that has filled a room, and you bring a light in. The darkness can't say, "Hey, we've been here ever since this room was built; you can't bring in a light." It doesn't have any right to say that. Once the light comes in, the darkness has to leave.

So you want to bring the light of your attention to what's going on.

They talk about practicing bare attention, but there is no such thing. What there is, is what the Buddha calls *household equanimity*—the ability to maintain equanimity in the face of sights, sounds, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. That last one is probably the hardest.

Things come into the mind and they seem to possess the mind. But you learn how to just be aware of them. If you can't get rid of them yet, just know that "They're there but they don't have to be there forever, and I don't have to give in to them." Even though they make big, scary faces at you, that's pretty much all they can do. Sometimes all you need to do is challenge them a little bit, and you discover that they're not nearly as strong as they seemed at first impression. So stand your ground.

And remember that you've got a mind that can be made like space. Lust can draw all sorts of pictures on it but they don't have to stick. You can make your mind like the Sun. A really bad mood can cloud over the sky but there's part of the mind that's still bright, still alert, still aware. Hold that perception in mind, because it gives you strength when things look dark. This is one of the ways you can develop patience and equanimity.

These are two of the virtues that tend to be most lacking in our culture, because our culture, unlike most other cultures in the past, tends to foster impatience, even in little tiny kids—especially in little tiny kids, as if kids weren't impatient enough as it was. They want us to want this and want that, to have negative feelings about this, and positive feelings about that. And if you have a neutral feeling, you're not playing along with the game. So, being raised in a culture like this, we have to unlearn a lot of the habits that were inculcated in us.

In the Buddha's time and in most traditional cultures, they spent a lot of time teaching kids to be patient, teaching kids to develop equanimity, because they knew that kids would need those virtues to get them through the hardships of life. But most of our education now is done by the media who don't really care about whether you're going to make it through life or not. They just want something out of you.

So you have to have some compassion for yourself and develop these qualities, stick-to-it-iveness kind of qualities. And the best way to develop those qualities is to focus not on how difficult things are, but on where your strengths are. And to look at things in a way that allows you to maintain your hope.

So take an inventory of your strengths. That'll differ for each of us. But then look at the images you hold in mind. There's a common one that says, when a feeling of lust comes in or a feeling of anger comes in, if you don't express it somehow, it's going to build and build and build, and then it's going to explode. And you're going to crash. That's a perception that the defilement wants you to adopt. But is it in your best interest? Can't you think of another image?

See these things as being like clouds—they come and they go. They're like paint painted in the space. They're there but if you don't give them something to hold on to, they don't have anything to keep them there, so they'll have to disappear. You have to play along with them for them to have any power over the mind. And *that* is the most liberating perception you could hold in mind—that you don't have to play along. They can yell and scream and—as I said—make faces as much as they want, but if you don't play along with their games, after a while they leave.

If you can keep up this determination long enough, you find that you start seeing through them. You see, when they come, *why* they come, and the very subtle, underground ways in which you've been still playing along with them. Because this tendency goes deep. But not so deep that you can't dig it out.

The image that you see many times in the Canon is of a stone pillar—sixteen spans tall, eight of the spans buried in the ground. Winds can come from any direction, but because the pillar is so thoroughly buried in the ground, it doesn't shake.

The winds can stand for all kinds of things—winds from the outside, winds from the inside—but remind yourself that there’s a part of your mind that’s more deeply rooted than these other things. There’s part of your awareness that’s even more deeply rooted than ignorance, which is—as Ajaan Lee said—the mother of all the unskillful qualities.

So you’ve got this mind that can be like space, that can be like the Sun. It can be huge. It can be deeply rooted. Don’t let it give in to the winds and the clouds. When things seem dark, try to keep that perception in mind, because it’ll help see you through.