

On Denying Defilement

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When you listen to Dhamma talks in Thailand, it's rare to hear one in which there's no mention of defilements. The fact that greed, aversion, delusion defile the mind is a constant theme, as is the fact that the practice is all about cleansing the mind of those defilements, doing battle with the defilements, finding ways to not fall for their tricks. As Ajaan Lee says, "To study is to know the texts, but to practice is to know your defilements," the purpose of which is to know them and let them go and, eventually, go beyond them.

But if you listen to Dhamma talks in the West, you never hear about this. The word *defilement* is never mentioned. It's interesting. There are some aspects of the traditional teachings that modern Western teachers like to brag about, saying that they're going to drop this or drop that teaching from the tradition— they're going to drop kamma, they're going to drop rebirth—but they don't even mention the word *defilement*. You would never know that it was ever a part of the Buddha's teachings. There's a passage they like to quote saying that the mind is luminous, and they stop there, to give the impression that your mind is basically pure and clean and there's no real problem with it: Just realize that you're already pure and clean, and that's it.

But the passage as a whole says a lot more. It says that the mind is luminous, but that it's defiled by visiting defilements. Further, it says that if you don't realize this fact, there's no training of the mind. Then you look at the rest of the Buddha's teachings, and one of the basic analogies that he uses is that the practice is a kind of cleansing, a kind of purification. If you don't appreciate the importance of the defilements and the need to clean them away from the mind, you can't really train the mind.

So exactly what is defilement and what's defiled? And how do you cleanse it? One of the Buddha's most basic teachings on cleansing is the one he gave to Rahula when Rahula was just seven years old: You look at your actions in terms of your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. Before you do anything, ask yourself, "Is this going to cause any affliction, either to me or to anyone else?" If you see that it would, you

don't do it. If you don't expect any affliction, you can go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, you watch to see what the actual results of that action may be as they show up in the present. If you run across any affliction, you stop. If not, you carry on. And finally when the action is done, you look at the long-term consequences. If you realize you caused any affliction to yourself or others, you resolve not to repeat it.

If it was something you said or did, you go and you talk it over with someone you trust in the path—first, so that you develop the ability to admit your mistakes; you don't try to hide them. And then second, so that you can benefit from the other person's knowledge.

If it was just a thought that caused affliction, you simply develop a sense of shame around it, and tell yourself not to do it again, because it's beneath you.

If you see that the action didn't cause any long-term affliction, then you take joy in the fact and carry on in the practice.

And as the Buddha said to Rahula, everyone in the past who has cleansed his or her thoughts, words, and deeds has done it this way. Everyone in the future who's going to cleanse his or her thoughts, words, and deeds will do it in this way. And in the present, anyone who is cleansing his or her thoughts, words, and deeds is doing it in this way.

There's another passage where the Buddha talks about cleansing, and basically it's concerned with following the ten guidelines: In terms of your actions, you don't kill, steal, or have illicit sex. In terms of your speech, you don't lie, you don't speak divisively, you don't speak harshly, you don't engage in idle chatter. And finally in terms of the mind, you try to abandon any overweening greed, any ill-will, any wrong views.

So when you look at the way the Buddha talks about cleansing, he's not saying that the mind is basically defiled in its nature. He's saying that its *actions* are defiled. And what's defilement? It's the ability to cause affliction. Even though you should be acting for the purposes of happiness, you turn around and act for the affliction of yourself or others or both. That's the defilement.

As for the luminosity of the mind, that's your ability to see that you've caused affliction and you can do something about it. It's not that there's an innate bad nature to the mind or an innate good nature. As the Buddha said, to think, "I am bad" or "I am good": Either one of those assumptions is simply an expression of craving or clinging. You want to look, not at what you *are*, but at what you *do*. And he's right. If

your actions are causing any kind of affliction, the actions are dark and they darken the mind. They make it more difficult to see what you're doing, and if you do see what you're doing and yet you try to pretend that you didn't cause any affliction, that's darkness as well. It's denial.

When you think about the reasons why people in the West don't like to hear about defilement, it may involve a lot of things, but one of them is certainly that we're told by Western psychologists that if you have low self-esteem, if you think you're basically bad, it's unhealthy. At the same time, of course, our economy depends on greed, aversion, and delusion to keep going, and so the media keep encouraging those states of mind, saying that you should be proud of your greed, proud of your anger and delusion—basically, proud of your defilements. Of course, that means not seeing them as defilements, but if you don't want to admit that they're defilements, what is that but another big defilement? After all, when the Buddha's talking about defilement, he's talking about this ability we have to cause suffering.

The teaching on defilement is really basic. In terms of the Buddha's most basic teaching, the four noble truths: When he talks about the fact that the defilement is a matter of action rather than of the innate nature of your mind, this relates to the second noble truth. The fact that defilement is affliction relates to the first noble truth. The luminosity of the mind is that you're able to see that there's affliction and that it's related to your actions. That's what enables you to follow the path, the fourth noble truth, leading ultimately to freedom from defilement: the third noble truth. If you can't admit the affliction you're causing to yourself and others, it's not healthy. It's narcissism and repression. And it gets in the way of seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

So it's important that you learn to keep this concept in mind and realize that what we are doing as we practice is a type of cleansing. There is this darkness in the mind. Fortunately, it's not innate to the mind. It can be cleansed away. And we can cleanse it away ourselves. That's what the luminosity is all about.

There is one faction in the mind that doesn't like the teaching on defilement because it suggests that we need somebody else's help to cleanse ourselves, but that's not what the Buddha was saying. You do have this luminosity—in other words, this ability to see what's going on. If the mind were totally dark, it wouldn't even recognize suffering as such, or recognize its connection to your actions. It wouldn't realize that

suffering is optional, or that something should be done about it. That would be total darkness. You wouldn't be able to see that what you were doing to cause the suffering. But you do have this ability to cleanse your own mind.

Now it works best if you're around people who are cleansing their minds as well, who have had some success in the process so that you can learn from their example and get their advice. But at the same time, you also have this potential within you that you can do the work yourself—and it's work worth doing. So it's helpful to think about this concept of defilement and where the defilement in your mind is coming from—and to know that it's coming from what you're doing, saying, and thinking. It's a darkness in the mind that's caused by your actions, and it doesn't have to be there. Your actions can change. As the Buddha said, if people couldn't change their actions, if they couldn't abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities, there'd be no point in his teaching. But it's something we can do.

So it's healthy to resist the teaching that says you need self-esteem above all else. If you're going to have genuine self-esteem, your pride should be based on the fact that you've learned how to recognize your mistakes and you want to do something about them: That's something genuinely to be proud of. The idea that "I never make a mistake" or "I'm always good": If your pride is based on those ideas, it's going to be very shaky. You'd have to deny what you're doing, you'd have to deny the results of what you're doing, and it would just pile on more and more darkness in the mind.

So take this to heart: The mind is luminous, but it's defiled by its actions. It's darkened, and we're trying to work our way out the darkness. When greed comes into the mind, or aversion comes, or when you recognize that there's some delusion, you just can't sit there and watch it come and go. You have to do something about it. You've got to figure out, "Why am I acting in this way? I would normally expect that I'd want to act for the purposes of happiness, so why am I doing something that's causing affliction?" You want to look into that. What is it that you like about the affliction? That's more darkness. Why would you want to pretend that it's not darkness? That's even more darkness on top of darkness.

What we're doing here is trying to cleanse the mind of that darkness. And the result is not that we go around calling ourselves pure. The

purity is there when it's there, and that's enough. At that point, it's just the quality of the mind and there's no issue of whether the mind would be proud or not proud. It's just the way things are—but it's a much better state to be in than the defiled state it was in before. You're not cleansing the mind to impress anyone else. You're cleansing the mind of its darkness to stop the suffering it's causing itself. Because that sort of thing really is dark.

This is the big irony of life: that we all want happiness and yet we turn around and do things that cause affliction. When you begin to recognize that, that's when there's some light in the mind. That's the light you want to encourage, because it's the only way you can work yourself free.