

The Lotus in the Mud

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One of the traditional images of the mind in concentration or of the awakened mind is of a lotus growing out of the mud. In the tropics the mud is pretty rank. And yet out of the mud you get this lovely flower with a very gentle smell and leaves that repel the water, flowers that repel the water, so that they can grow up in muddy water and yet when the flower opens, it's very white and pure.

The same with the mind. As it gets past its greed, anger, passion, aversion, and delusion, it can blossom. Or you can compare the lotus in the mud to the mind living in this body, which, as the chants said, is full of all kinds of unclean things, and yet the mind can be clean. The mind can be pure. In fact you can use the contemplation of the body as a means of purifying the mind—because the more you see that the body isn't yours, the more the mind stands out on its own.

So it's useful to contemplate the body. Sometimes it's forced on us like today: all that stuff that came out of the sewage pipe, where did that come from? Human bodies. Ajaan Fuang once had a pair of students—a husband and wife—who were interesting, in that they would tend to have very similar experiences in their meditation at the same time. And there was one period when they both got really disgusted with food. The wife had to work in the kitchen to feed the rest of the family, and so one day she was fixing a piece of liver, and a dog came into the kitchen and so she threw a little piece of liver to it. And the dog was so eager to get it. She watched the dog devour the liver, and she felt disgusted both by the liver and by the dog's eagerness to eat it. How could you take such disgusting stuff inside you? And it turns out that the husband was beginning to feel the same way about food.

So they came to a point where they really couldn't eat. They mentioned this to Ajaan Fuang, and he said, "Well, being unable to eat is not the purpose of the contemplation. After all, what do you have in your body? You've got a liver too. You've got a stomach too. You've got this stuff in your intestines. Your body's no different from the food. So in what way is the body too pure to eat this kind of thing?" When he said this, both of them were able to overcome their sense of disgust.

The purpose of the contemplation is not to get you so that you can't eat. But it is to get you to the point where you have a sense of dispassion. This body you've been carrying around and been so proud of and so protective of, and the mind has so much invested in it: You've got to get to a point where you can step back from it, and say, "Oh, that's just the way the body is. It's not really worth holding onto." You use it as a tool. And the best use of the body is to use it in the practice. But beyond that you've got to question the mind's eager holding onto it. This way you can learn to let go of those concerns about the survival of the body. That lightens the mind a great deal.

But as Ajaan Lee was fond of pointing out, the filthiness of the body is nothing compared with the filthiness of the mind when it's not trained. The body's filth is just the nature of the body. It's not pretending to be anything that it isn't. But the mind filled with passion, aversion and delusion: that's really what you've got to

cleanse away. Defilements, hindrances, all these forms of ignorance, and all the manifestations of ignorance in all of its different ways: Those are the things that really prevent the mind from being luminous, from being pure. So you've really got to work on those things. You've got to learn how to question whichever defilements you tend to invest in. Look at all the harm that they cause.

We don't like to look at this. As Upasika Kee often comments, these things we prefer not to see. We'd rather focus on how good and pure we are. But if we don't look at the other side, we're won't be able to cleanse it away. Like that pipe today, if we had just let it happen, let it stay the way it was, it'd continue to fester, and just get worse and worse and worse. So it's good to dig out those roots of unskillful behavior: greed, aversion, delusion. Try to get the mind as still and independent as you can in the present moment, so you can look back on the times when you've given in to these roots of unskillful behavior. Reflect on how much harm you've done to yourself, how much harm you've done to other people. That way you can value the opportunity to say No to those defilements, to call them into question, and see where you can uproot them. You can't just simply let go of these things by hiding the mind away in concentration. They will be quiet for a while, but they're still there, just like the roots in the septic system.

There's a tendency sometimes, when the mind does get quiet, that you just don't want to look at these things. You'd rather pretend that they're not there, that they're gone. And that attitude, of course, just allows them to fester. So when the mind does settle down and is still, learn to look at it and see where the seeds are that would make you still want to go after greed, aversion, or delusion. What kind of attitudes does the mind have that fosters these things, that likes to stay invested, likes to keep them around as pets?

This ability to question your old allegiances is an important part of the meditation, an important part of training the mind. This is why they say the lotus grows in the mud. You have to learn to look at your own defilements. You have to learn how to look at your own weak points—not so that you get down on yourself, but so that you learn how not to identify with those things. You say, "Okay, they've been there in the mind, but they don't have to be. I've sided with those things in the past, but I don't have to in the future. I don't have to right now."

You have to understand their allure. We had a discussion awhile back in which someone was saying that the only pure Buddhist practice is just watching things arise and pass away. If you do any more analysis than that, you're mixing in Western psychoanalysis, and that sullies the practice. But that was not what the Buddha said. He said that watching things arise and pass away was only part of liberating insight. You watch to see when there's greed or no greed, aversion or no aversion, delusion and no delusion. You do this not as an end in and of itself, but so that you can notice what comes and goes along with them. You realize that they're not necessarily part of the innate nature of the mind. They're just events that come and go—but they come and go in patterns. The reason we latch onto them is because they have a certain allure. And as we all know, much of that allure is something we give to them. We paint them in nice colors. We like the way they look once they have been painted up to our taste.

As long as we keep painting them, we're not going to let them go. So you have to see that the paint is illusory. It's hiding what these things actually do to the mind. What this means is that you've got to see the drawbacks. These things

really do cause harm. They wreak havoc in the mind. They wreak havoc in relations with other people. You can begin to compare the allure with the drawbacks, seeing that the gain is nowhere compensating for the cost, so that the mind gets more motivated to see the escape from these things.

That's the mud that you have to go through. But by going through that mud and analyzing these things and understanding them is what gives rise to the discernment that can cleanse the mind. As the Buddha said, the mind is cleansed through discernment. It's not cleansed through concentration. Concentration allows the discernment to do its work, gives it a place to stand, but the discernment is what makes all the difference.

There's a tendency, however, to try to avoid this mud. As we get into concentration we want just to hang out in the concentration, thinking that we've found something pure. But the Buddha compares that attachment to concentration to a cesspool outside of a village of paupers. It's just allowed to grow and grow and grow, all that stagnant water. It doesn't get to flow away until you make a breakthrough through ignorance. Only when you've made that breakthrough can it all flow away.

The concentrated mind that just allows the defilements to stay there—it doesn't want to touch them, it doesn't want to deal with them: That's the cesspool. For discernment to grow, it has to grow out of all that mud. Only that can purify the mind and lead to awakening.

So use the concentration to get the mind in a position where it's willing to look at its own drawbacks, instead of focusing on things outside. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a comment about how we have a tendency, if there's mud in our minds, to sling it around on other people: "There's something wrong with this person or that person, the teacher is no good, my fellow Dharma practitioners are no good." The mud gets slung around. But you have to see, where does it come from? It actually comes from inside. Learn how to turn around and look at it, and see what's really there. It really is mud. But as you learn how to analyze it and see it for what it is, the mind gets clearer and clearer. This is the nourishment for the lotus.

Concentration is here as a tool. It's not an end in and of itself. This can be discouraging when you're having trouble getting into concentration, but it's good to be forewarned anyhow. When the concentration comes after a lot of difficulty, you tend to really hang onto it. And as long as you're hanging on for the purpose of developing it as a tool, that's perfectly fine. There will come the point, though, where you have to start turning around and doing more work. The concentration isn't the lotus. It's food for the lotus. It's there to give you the energy, the solid foundation needed to get the work done, so that the actual lotus can bloom.