

The Brightness of Life

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When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he made a comment one night that really struck me. He was talking about his debt to Ajaan Lee, saying that it was because of Ajaan Lee that he came to see the brightness of life. This struck me, because I had heard so often that the Buddha taught that life is suffering, that that that was the first noble truth—but it turns out it's not *anybody's* noble truth at all. After all, there are four noble truths about life, and one of them is that there is the cessation to suffering, and another is that there's something you can do to get there: That's where the brightness lies.

The Buddha talks about people being born in darkness going in light, born in light and going in light, born in darkness and going in darkness, born in light and going in darkness. And it doesn't matter how you come, what matters is how you go. And going in light, going in brightness, means that you practice.

So the light is not the fact that we can live in comfortable surroundings, or be powerful, or beautiful, or wealthy, or whatever. The light comes from the good qualities we build into the mind. That's very liberating because there are a lot of people who, as they're born into this lifetime, will never gain much wealth, never have much power, but they can still go in light. They can still practice.

The choices we make as we practice are things we're free to make regardless of our surroundings. Like right now: You're sitting here quietly. You're focusing on your breath. The surroundings are nice, in the sense that it's quiet. And we live here at a monastery where there's a value placed on the practice. Yet even if you were placed somewhere where people didn't have those values, but you still wanted to practice, you could find a way to practice so that they wouldn't notice. They wouldn't even know, but you could still work on skillful qualities in the mind: patience, endurance, goodwill, equanimity. These are all things that we're free to develop.

So the path is wide open. It's simply that a lot of people resist: They want to look for light in other things. They're perfectly happy where they are—and they don't want to be told that they're living in darkness.

It's like people living in a cave illuminated by a little flickering fire, so they can see some of the features of the walls of the cave. If someone comes in and says, "There's a lot more light outside, a lot more openness outside," they'd be foolish to want to stay on in the cave, but there are a lot of people who are like that. They want to find their meaning in having an influence on day-to-day life, influence on other people.

But a large part of accepting right view is realizing that you are in darkness. The Buddha talks about the mass of darkness that's formed by ignorance—and we're here to pierce that mass.

Now, to do that requires that we develop our concentration, we develop our discernment—all the qualities of the noble eightfold path, but particularly the discernment. You engage in the path and then you reflect on it. The Buddha said this is how the Dhamma is found—by *committing* to the path, and particularly committing to what he calls the heightened mind: getting the mind in concentration, getting in *right* concentration—which implies all of the factors of the path—and then watching what you're doing.

It's in this ability to watch ourselves in action that we begin to see where the ignorance has been, and where we've been acting in a lot of ignorance. When we can *see* that, it changes the nature of our actions.

When the Buddha said that the mind is naturally luminous, he didn't mean that it's naturally pure, or that it's already awakened, simply that it can observe itself. That luminosity of the mind, he said, is the prerequisite for the fact that we can develop good qualities in the mind. We follow the path that the Buddha himself followed: We act and then we reflect on our actions. We focus on the breath and then we reflect on the way we're focusing.

What's involved in the focusing? Dōgen the Zen master talks about just sitting, but his version of just sitting isn't that you just sit there. You ask questions about what's happening while you're sitting. Is the mind sitting in the body? Is the body sitting in the mind? What's going on?

In the same way, from the Buddha's point of view, he says that concentration is a *perception attainment*. So, what perception are you bringing to the breath?

One of the things that I found especially illuminating in Ajaan Lee's teachings was his take on what it means to focus on the breath, and what kind of breath you're focusing on. In the ancient texts, the in-and-out breathing is just one part of the wind element. There's also the wind that goes throughout the entire body.

Ajaan Lee's insight was to see that you can connect those two concepts: When you're breathing in and out, aware of the whole body, you're aware of the whole wind element in the body and how it relates to the breath. In other words, you're focusing on the energy. Just changing that perception changes breath meditation immensely.

After all, the Buddha says you're going to be trying to get the mind so that it can settle down with a sense of pleasure, refreshment, and then you spread that pleasure and refreshment throughout the body, so that there's no part of the body that's not saturated or suffused with the pleasure and rapture. And when you think of the whole body breathing, it's a lot easier for those feelings and sensations to flow.

This is where you bring the luminosity of the mind to bear: You watch what you're doing and you figure out what's skillful and what's not, what's getting good results and what's not.

You want to bring that light, that luminosity of the mind, to bear on the areas where it is really ignorant, where there's darkness, because there are clouds on that luminosity.

The Buddha compares the mind to the sun, with clouds coming and going. There's a big maelstrom of clouds that swirls around ignorance, and then the fabrications we make based on the ignorance. And the way we look at things, the way we deal with things, our intentions: For most of us, that's all in the dark.

As we meditate, we're trying to bring some light to that, by the way we reflect on our actions. So even though the world may seem dark at times, we don't have to allow that darkness to effect the light of the mind, the *potential* for light in the mind.

The potential is there, it's simply a matter of learning how to develop it. Once we start shining a light in the mind, then the darkness doesn't have the right to stay. Ajaan Suwat made this comment one time: "When the light of awareness, the light of discernment comes in, even though there are areas of the mind that have been dark for eons, they can't say, 'Well, we've been here first. You have no right to come in.'" You bring the light in and the darkness has to go. We do have that power to bring light to what we're doing. It's in this way that we discover the brightness of life: that through our actions we can put an end to suffering. Because it turns out the suffering that weighs down the mind is the suffering that we're creating for ourselves.

The suffering that comes from outside—all the problems of human society, the problems of living in a level of being where there's a lot of aging, illness, and death, a lot of conflict—doesn't have to weigh the mind down.

So if you're looking for meaning in life, the meaning comes with the light that you bring to what you're doing. Because the world is going to stay on in its world ways. Even though we've had a Buddha, and we've had many enlightened disciples, people are still fighting, still very ignorant.

If we had to wait for everybody to gain awakening before we could gain awakening, it would never happen. Fortunately, we can light our path. And in lighting our own path, we can provide some light for others, so that those who want to light their own path can see this example—that it is possible. After all, as the Buddha said, the whole of the holy life is having admirable friends, because they're the ones who show us that it is possible. That's the light that they leave behind when they go.

So look for what brightness you have in your mind: your ability to observe yourself, to observe your own action. The Buddha stressed this point from the very beginning, from his instructions to his seven-year-old son, all the way to his instructions on how to bring the mind to ultimate emptiness: It's all about reflecting—reflecting that light back on your actions and deciding that you're going to try to be as skillful as you can. That's how you pierce the darkness and find how bright life can actually be.

