

Love Me, Love My Defilements

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A concept that many modern people find very hard to accept is that their minds have defilements. They think that their minds are perfectly fine, with nothing dirty or defiling in them. People can be especially sensitive about this issue because they grew up with the idea of original sin, that they were somehow inherently bad through no fault of their own, and now they've heard that Buddhism teaches that we're inherently good, that we all have Buddha nature. This is why they come to Buddhism, so they don't want to hear about defilement. They want to hear about their inherently pure Buddha nature.

Well, one, even though there are types of Buddhism that teach about Buddha nature, the Buddha himself never said anything about it. In fact, he never talked about the innate nature of the mind at all. And two, the fact that the mind has defilements doesn't mean that we're necessarily good or bad or anything. It's just a recognition that some states of mind obscure our awareness. They obscure the clarity, the brightness that can be found in the mind.

The problem is that we tend to identify with a lot of them. We identify ourselves with our greed, our aversion, our delusions. We identify with our defilements, but we don't like to recognize them as such. We speak of them in other ways. "This is my identity," we say. "This is my inner nature, my background; this is the way I've been brought up; this is how I've learned how to function in the world." These are the attitudes people have. There's a passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks where he's saying to the monks, "Suppose the Buddha were able to see your defilements. Don't you think he'd be disgusted?" I've heard people react to that, saying that the Buddha wouldn't be disgusted with us. The Buddha would love us; he would be compassionate toward us. To say that is really to define yourself very intensely with your defilements. Our attitude is, "Love me, love my defilements."

But it's because the Buddha has compassion for us that he points out that the mind has defilements and that they can be removed. That's the important point: The fact that there's a defilement doesn't mean there's a permanent stain on the mind. It's not like grape juice or blood stains you can't wash out. But always recognize that these things do cause suffering, and they certainly do obscure the mind. If we want real peace and happiness, we really have to let them go.

It's useful to see these things not as *things* in the mind but as *actions*, as habits. Greed is an habitual action. So is anger; so is delusion. These are the ways we deal with the world, react to the world, shape the world. And we've gotten some results through them, which is why we tend to hold onto them, to keep falling back on them. These are part of our repertoire of tools. But they're pretty shoddy tools and they do a very crude and clumsy job.

I mean, you read about human history and you see in each generation that there were so many good things that could have been done that weren't done because of people's greed, anger, and delusion. It's amazing that the human race has gotten as far as it has. Some people think that it's because of greed that we have progress. But you see what happens when greed gets unbridled. The economy turns into a huge casino, and the things that could be done with the wealth of the country just get frittered away.

The same with anger. Think of all the money that's spent for armies, munitions; all the intelligence devoted to creating weapons to kill instead of being devoted to solve the genuine problems in life. It's all a waste. Again, it's amazing that the human race has gotten as far as it has.

Delusion is even worse. It prevents us from seeing the harm caused by these qualities in the mind. A case in point is when we look back at our upbringing. We come to Buddhism from other traditions—

Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism—and a lot of attitudes get buried deep in the mind from these traditions. Or we may be coming from a modern, Western, scientific attitude, a materialist attitude. And something deep down inside us insists that Buddhism bend itself in order to meet what we think is right or wrong. Or we feel that we're abandoning our identity, we're abandoning our background, our family, if we adopt Buddhist beliefs.

All of that is thinking of our identity as a thing that can't really be changed. And this is precisely where the Buddha says No. Your identity is made up of clinging-aggregates. The clinging itself is an action. The aggregates are actions. Each of the aggregates is defined by an activity. Form de-forms—in other words it keeps changing. Feelings feel, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate the other aggregates into actual aggregates, and consciousness cognizes. These things are defined by their activity. And these activities are the raw materials from which we create our sense of self.

In our delusion we tend to think of "self" as a thing we're stuck with, either for metaphysical reasons or for social reasons. But that's not the case. Selfing is something we *do*. We pick up habits from our environment. We pick up ideas from our environment, largely in the course of our quest for happiness, our quest for pleasure. We find that certain things are under our control and there are certain things that we want, and we define ourselves around the "we" that controls and the "we" that wants or wants to experience certain things. These are called self as producer and self as consumer. And each of us, even though we may have been brought up in the same environment as our siblings, find that we have very different senses of who we are, who they are. So it's not the case that we're irrevocably formed by our environment. It's through our interaction with our environment that we create our sense of what's possible, what we can do, what we want, what's worth wanting. Some of that's picked up willy-nilly from the outside but a lot of it's there because we let our greed, aversion, and delusion do the choosing.

If you've ever been a parent, you realize that there's only so much you can force on your child. And yet when we look at ourselves, we feel that our parents had a huge influence this way or that, but actually we were the ones doing a lot of the choosing. So the question is, did we make good choices? If we didn't, we can always change them. When you see the act of identification simply as that, as an act, and your many different identities are different patterns of actions, different strategies, then you can begin to ask yourself: Which of these strategies provide good results and which ones muddy things up? Which of the motivations behind these strategies are clear and clean in the sense that they harm nobody? They don't harm you; they don't harm anybody else. And what kind of pleasures are clear and clean in the sense that they don't get you intoxicated and blinded? If you have a pleasure that you really enjoy and yet it causes harm to other people, you tend to deny the fact that it causes harm. You blind yourself.

This is why it's important to adopt the Buddha's point of view of looking at the mind as a bundle of actions. It's not a thing. It's just lots of different actions, lots of different strategies. Some of them keep the mind obscured, darkened from what it could be. When the Buddha points this out to us, it's not because he wants to criticize us. If he's disgusted with our defilements, it's because he learned how to be disgusted with his own, having a very strong sense of how long he'd been under their power and giving into them. He had identified himself with them and then came to realize all the damage that was done. So he'd had enough.

You know the word *nibbida*, which we translate as disenchantment. It can also mean disgust. You've been feeding on these things for who knows how long and now you realize that it's just been causing a lot of damage. You thought you were getting good nourishment but that was not the case. So you lose your desire to eat these things any more. The Buddha, in his compassion, sees other people suffering from the same misunderstandings he used to have, and so he shows us that these *are* defilements. They *do* obscure what we could actually see in the mind if we'd only let ourselves let go of them, create better strategies, better habits in the mind so that we wouldn't have to depend on these old clumsy ones. We can fashion better tools so we can throw the old shoddy ones away.

This is an important step in the practice. And an important understanding. We really do benefit when we see our defilements as defilements. They really do defile the mind. But as I said, they don't put a permanent

stain on the mind. The Buddha's image is of clouds in front of the sun: They darken it, but the clouds don't have to be there and when they do leave, they don't leave a stain on the sun. It's because he wanted us to see the brightness that's possible when the mind is cleansed of these defilements: That was his compassion.

So learn how to see these things his way. Look at aspects of what you may think of as your self, your identity, the beliefs and other things you picked up from your environment, and ask yourself which ones are obscuring your awareness. You may have a sentimental attachment to some of them, a sense of nostalgia, but you can't let that get in the way of letting them go. You have to realize that they really do a lot of harm in the mind. Only when you recognize that fact can you be free from them, free from that harm. And the fact that some of the defilements are ones that you identify with more than others, that you really hold on tight, doesn't mean that they really are genuinely you or yours. They're simply habits that are more deeply entrenched. They're going to take a longer time to dig up. But the first step is learning how to see them as a problem—that you really would be better off without them. Learn to see your denial of defilement as the primary defilement you've got to let go.