

On Denying Defilement

The concept of defilement (*kilesa*) has a peculiar status in modern Western Buddhism. Like traditional Buddhist concepts such as karma and rebirth, it has been dropped by many Western Buddhist teachers. But unlike those concepts, people rarely mention that it's been dropped. Few Western Buddhists realize that the concept ever played a role in traditional Buddhism at all.

The disappearance of defilement is especially striking when you realize how central it has been to the history of Buddhist practice. One of the Pali Canon's primary images for the path of practice is that of cleansing and purifying the mind of defilements, which MN 14 lists as greed, aversion, and delusion. MN 5 contains a similar list of defilements, replacing greed with the more general defilement of passion. MN 128 contains a long list of derived defilements—such as doubt, fear, inattention, sloth and torpor—that obscure the mind's inner vision and its ability to gain steady concentration. DhP 277-279—along with many other passages in the Canon—describe the path to the end of suffering as the path to purity.

In the centuries since the Buddha's time, teachers who follow the canon have adopted the vision of the path as purification, stressing the need to cleanse the mind of its defilements if awakening is to occur. In the Thai Wilderness tradition, for instance, teachers frequently describe Dhamma practice as an attempt to outwit the defilements so as to end their obscuring influence in the mind. To practice, they say, is to learn how little you can trust the mind's urges and ideas because they're darkened with the defilement of delusion, whose darkness in turn can allow greed, aversion, and all the other derived defilements to grow. Only by questioning the mind's urges and ideas can you free yourself from the influence of these defilements, leaving the mind totally pure.

But many modern Western teachers—anticipating that their listeners would react unfavorably to hearing their minds called defiled—have abandoned the concept entirely. Even when discussing the problems of greed, aversion, and delusion, they tend to avoid describing them as “defilements.” The closest they come is calling them “poisons,” whose source they trace, not to the mind, but to its external conditioning and its mistaken belief that these poisons are real. Awakening, in this view, is a matter not of washing away defilement, but of accepting the mind as it is, realizing that it's already pure.

There are several reasons for why modern teachers are probably correct in anticipating a negative reaction to the idea of the mind as defiled, the primary reason coming from modern Western psychology. Many psychotherapists have identified low self-esteem as a prime cause of mental suffering, and the ability to silence the voice of the inner hypercritic as the prime way to end that suffering. Because the notion of defilement is critical of such normal mind states as greed, aversion, and delusion, they see it as unhealthy: a cause of suffering rather than a tool to bring suffering to an end.

This view is sometimes bolstered by appeals to Western cultural history. People coming to Buddhism are often reacting to the doctrine of original sin, which tells them that the nature of their mind is basically depraved. Many—unaware of the source—have adopted the standard Western counter-arguments

to this doctrine. One is the idea advanced by European Romantics and American Transcendentalists that the urges in the mind are essentially divine in origin and thus basically good. Another is the postmodern idea that any discourse of defilement or depravity is a political attempt to gain power over others by telling them that their minds are so defiled that they can't trust themselves to think straight, and so need outside help.

However, the most powerful support for the idea that there's nothing wrong with greed, aversion, and delusion comes from modern marketing. Advertising, which has become our most pervasive source of cultural norms, trades almost entirely on the notion that people should gratify their greed, aversion, and delusion. So a great deal of money has been spent to turn people into consumers who feel good about cultivating these tendencies. The result is that people are accustomed to having these tendencies indulged, and so would resist hearing that they are in any way defiled.

For these reasons, the resistance to the idea of mental defilement is so pervasive that even when Western Buddhists encounter the Buddha's most emphatic statement on the need to understand the way in which the mind is defiled, they interpret it to say that defilement is basically unreal.

The Buddha's statement is this:

"Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is defiled by incoming defilements. The uninstructed run-of-the-mill person doesn't discern that as it has come to be, which is why I tell you that—for the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—there is no development of the mind."

"Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is freed from incoming defilements. The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones discerns that as it has come to be, which is why I tell you that—for the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—there is development of the mind." — AN 1:51-52

The standard modern approach in interpreting these passages is to focus on the first two sentences in each paragraph. The first sentence is read as implying that the original nature of the mind is basically pure. The second sentence is read as implying that because defilements are incoming visitors (the word *agantuka* means both *incoming* and *visitor*), they are essentially unreal. When you realize the unreality of the defilements, you see that they never really were a problem.

But what these passages actually say is something else entirely: that the mind is *both* luminous *and* defiled. There's nothing about the luminosity being "original" or the defilements being unreal. After all, as the Buddha states in AN 2:30, it's because the mind is defiled that it doesn't gain release. So the defilements are real enough, and the mind defiled enough, to cause genuine trouble. And as the concluding statements in AN 1:51-52 make clear, if you don't understand how the mind is both bright and defiled, you can't effectively train it. From the Buddha's point of view, the idea of defilement has to be taken seriously if you want to train the mind to gain release.

To understand what's defiling about the defilements, and what's bright about the mind, it's instructive to look at the Buddha's most basic instructions in mental training, which he gave to his son, Rahula, when Rahula was only seven. He starts by telling Rahula to inspect his bodily, verbal, and mental actions as he

would inspect his face in a mirror. In other passages in the Canon (such as MN 20), the Buddha uses the simile of a mirror to describe people inspecting their faces to make sure that they're clean and pure. The conclusion of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula indicates that the same message is being conveyed here: What the Buddha is teaching is a method of purification.

Here's how purification is achieved: Instead of simply going with the flow of a desire to act in thought, word, and deed, you stop to ask yourself questions about your action and its consequences. First, before you act, ask yourself what results you anticipate from your action. If you anticipate any affliction for yourself, to others, or to both, don't do it. If you don't anticipate affliction, you can go ahead and do it. But, because your anticipations might be clouded by delusion, you don't stop questioning there. While you're engaged in the action, try to notice if it's causing affliction. If it is, then stop. If it isn't, you can continue with it. Finally, after the action is done, question it again. If you notice that it *did* cause affliction, then if it was a bodily or verbal action, confess it to someone who is more experienced in the practice than you are, both to develop the habit of admitting your mistakes and to gain advice from the other person as to how to avoid that mistake in the future. If the action was mental, there's no need to confess it, but you should develop a healthy sense of shame around mental actions of that sort. In every case, though, you should resolve not to make that mistake again.

If the action didn't cause any immediate or long-term affliction, then you should take joy in that fact and continue your training.

As the Buddha states at the end of these instructions, this is how all people in the past, present, and future have purified, are purifying, and will purify their actions in thought, word, and deed.

These instructions teach three important lessons about the nature of mental defilement. The first is that defilement is a quality, not of the innate nature of the mind, but of its intentions and actions. The Buddha is not addressing the question of whether the mind has an innate nature, or—if it does—whether that nature is basically bright or defiled. He's simply pointing that the *actions* coming from the mind can be defiled but they can be cleansed of that defilement.

The second lesson is that actions are defiled to the extent that they cause affliction. The training recommended by the Buddha deals with the two basic ways in which this affliction can happen: out of outright ignorance, when you don't even know that your actions are afflictive; and out of willed ignorance, when you know but don't care—you simply decide to turn a blind eye to the affliction you cause. In both cases, the ignorance is what darkens and defiles the mind.

The third lesson from the Buddha's instructions relates to the luminosity of the mind mentioned in AN 1:51-52. In the context of the training the Buddha recommends to Rahula, this luminosity refers to the mind's ability to see when its actions are defiled, and to train itself to act in ways that are undefiled and pure. In other words, the image of luminosity is not a statement of the innate goodness or purity of the mind. After all, as the Buddha states in AN 4:199, the idea that "I am good" expresses as much craving for identity as the idea that "I am bad." Instead, the luminosity of the mind is simply its ability to perceive affliction, to see how that affliction is related to its actions, and—when it's

willing—to stop engaging in actions that cause affliction. If the mind were dark, it wouldn't be able to do any of these things.

These three lessons, taken together, show how central the concept of defilement is to the Buddha's teachings, for they relate directly to his most fundamental teaching, the four noble truths. Because defilement is a matter of affliction, and because affliction is a type of suffering and stress, the fact of defilement relates directly to the first noble truth: the fact of suffering. The fact that defilement is caused by actions relates to the second noble truth, that suffering is caused by actions in the mind. The mind's ability to see this happening is what allows for the fourth and the third noble truths: that the mind is able to develop qualities that can abandon any actions that cause suffering, and so bring suffering to an end.

These three facts in turn show why the general Western resistance to the concept of defilement is a serious obstacle to reaching the end of suffering and stress and to reaping the benefits of the practice along the way. In light of the first two facts—that defilement is a quality of actions measured by the extent to which they cause affliction—an unwillingness to accept the idea of defilement translates into an unwillingness to examine your own actions to see if they cause harm. This is a form of narcissism that makes it impossible to see the connection between the second and first noble truths. If you refuse to accept the idea that your thoughts, words, and deeds cause suffering, you won't be able to see the sources of suffering coming from within the mind.

In light of the third fact—that the brightness of the mind is its ability to recognize defilement and do something about it—an unwillingness to accept the idea of defilement translates into a willed ignorance around one's own actions and their effects. This is a form of repression that stands in the way of developing the fourth noble truth. In other words, resistance to the idea of defilement is itself a defilement—delusion—that compounds the darkness of other defilements and protects them so that they can continue to flourish and grow.

The further fact that resistance to the idea of defilement is a form of narcissistic repression turns the tables on the argument drawn from modern Western psychology that the idea of mental defilement is unhealthy, for even in the vocabulary of modern psychology, narcissism and repression are recognized as unhealthy states. Any sense of self-esteem based on narcissism and repression is dangerous and deluded, whereas the Buddha's teaching on defilement offers a way to develop healthy self-esteem. This way is based both on healthy self-criticism—the inner critic isn't always bad—and a habit worthy of esteem: the willingness to learn from your mistakes. To follow the Buddha's way also develops the healthy confidence that comes from seeing your behavior improve as a result. This form of self-esteem and confidence is good not only for you, but also for all people affected by your actions.

As for the Western cultural arguments against the teaching on defilement, the Buddha's instructions to Rahula show that those arguments are all beside the point. Because his teaching on defilement doesn't deal with the innate nature of the mind, it's in no way related to the idea of original sin. Because it points to the fact that greed, passion, aversion, and delusion cause affliction, it calls into question the Romantic/Transcendentalist notion that these natural and normal tendencies can be trusted as divinely inspired. And because it explains why the mind can train itself to end its self-induced afflictions by learning to question

them, the teaching on defilement is not an attempt at gaining control over anyone. It's meant to empower you and give you control over yourself.

In fact, the Buddha's teaching on defilement is one of the most effective strategies for freeing the mind from the influences of mass marketing and other modern methods of thought-control. When you learn to recognize your greed, aversion, and delusion as defilements and are able to free yourself from their influence, no one can pander to them in an attempt to control your thoughts and actions. A mind without defilement is liberated not only from its own unskillful influences, but also from the unskillful agendas—and defilements—of anyone else.

So even though the narcissistic repression of the idea of defilement is a pervasive darkness in modern Western society, it's not inescapable. Because it's a defilement, it's an incoming visitor. As a visitor it's not unreal, but it *is* unnecessary. When you decide that it's overstayed its welcome, you can usher it to the door. You can then begin working on making the mind fully pure.

This is because the mind's potential for brightness—its ability to recognize the harm caused by its actions and to stop causing harm—is always there. Simply apply that brightness to any mental action that attempts to deny the fact of defilement. When you see the harm caused by that action, along with the fact that it's optional, then you're that much closer to being rid of it and all the other defilements it's been protecting. Then keep on following that brightness until it leads you to the even greater clarity that comes with total freedom from suffering and stress. When you've reached the pure clarity of that freedom, you'll see that the greed, aversion, and delusion that obscured it really were defilements, for you're now in a position to know what genuine purity really is.

— *Thanissaro Bhikkhu*