

## *Clear of Defilement*

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“Defilement” is one of those Buddhist concepts that people here in the West tend to resist. There’s nothing defiled, there’s nothing dirty about their minds, they’ll say. And of course, that’s the defilements talking.

Defilements have lots of ways of hiding themselves, covering themselves up, justifying themselves, and one of our duties as meditators is to learn how to see through those justifications. Otherwise, the meditation, the practice, becomes one more way of providing a tool for the defilements.

So you’ve got to learn how to recognize them. You’ve got to learn how to deal with them.

This is where you learn how to use desire to cure desire. In other words, you try to foster skillful desires in the mind. Because the mind isn’t totally defiled. As the Buddha once said, if the mind were totally defiled, there’d be no way you could develop it. But realizing that it does have its brightness, it does have its moments of clarity, you learn how to take advantage of those moments, so that you can compare them with other states of mind. Try to develop a state of clarity in the mind to give yourself a point of comparison.

When things are clear, things are calm, learn to appreciate that, learn to develop it, so that when greed sneaks in or lust or anger or fear, you can recognize them before they become full-blown.

You begin to see, “There’s something not quite right there. The mind that used to be so clear is beginning to get a little murky.”

And try to regard the clear state of mind as normalcy in the mind.

Upasika Kee talks a lot about this: getting the mind into a state of normalcy. Some people misunderstand it. They say, “Oh, she’s talking about just an ordinary old state of mind.” But she wants you to develop a different state of normalcy: the mind when it’s clear, when it’s not involved with greed, anger, or delusion. That’s normalcy for her.

When the mind is simply observant, watching what’s going on, when it can see cause and effect clearly: That’s the state of normalcy you’re trying to move toward. That’s the state of equilibrium you’re trying to establish. Learn to regard that as equilibrium in the mind, so that when the mind goes back to its old ways, you begin to recognize that even though they’re habitual, they’re not normal. They don’t have to be normal.

So develop an appreciation for the still moments in the mind. And learn how

to string them together so that they do feel more and more normal, so that this is the place where the mind really does find equilibrium.

Then, from that point of view, you can look at these other states of mind and realize that they really are defiled. They're like clouds over the sun. But they're not just clouds: They come with voices; they come with arguments. Every desire as it comes into the mind has its ways of justification. After all, lots of different desires are thronging for your attention, and they have their ways of attracting your attention to them. At the same time, they try to disguise the results of where they're going to lead.

Often we're in collusion with them. That's what you've got to watch out for. In fact, a lot of overcoming delusion comes right there: learning to see where you're in collusion with your desires. Learn to recognize that fact and then just drop whatever allegiance to the defilements you have.

We really are devoted to our greed, we really are devoted to our lust and anger, our fears. It's like being in collusion with thieves who want to rob us. We open up the doors of the house, welcome them in, part of us knowing they're going to steal our goods and part of us pretending we don't know.

So you've got to look for the stages by which these attitudes sneak into the mind. The more solid your concentration, the more easily you'll see the incipient stages and the little arguments, the hype that comes along with the defilements.

And realize that they're not always going to come the same way each time they come, so you've got to be prepared with lots of different arguments.

This is where the analytical part of the meditation comes in. Say, when lust comes in, sometimes you're focused on the object of the lust, sometimes you're focused just on the physical feeling of the lust, the sense of excitement, arousal. Many times it's a combination of all these factors. What you've got to learn to do is to take them apart.

One, look at the object, really look at the object, and not just with the eyes of lust but look at it with other eyes, from other points of view as well. This is why we have that chant on the thirty-two parts of the body, to remind us that inside every human body there's all this stuff, all that blood and all these bodily fluids. When we focus on fostering lust, we pretend that these things are not there. We block them out of our minds. So learn to unblock them, to see that the object itself isn't really all that attractive.

But that's just the first line of defense. After all, the object is not the problem. The problem is in the mind, the mind's willingness to deceive itself into thinking that lust is a good thing, something you want to work toward, something you want to encourage.

So when you can peel your attention away from the object and focus it more on the actual feeling of lust in and of itself, that's where you can start looking at the mind's ways of playing along with the lust—for example, showing no concern for future results, saying, "All I care about is what I feel right now or what I want to feel right now." Ask yourself, "If you really love yourself, are you going to let that attitude take over? If you do, you're setting yourself up for all kinds of suffering down the road." Part of the mind will say, "I don't care," and you have to learn how not to identify with the "I don't care" attitude.

It's like people coming and whispering in your ears and telling you to throw a rock in your neighbor's window. Then, when you go ahead and do it, they run off. And you're the one stuck with the problem.

This is just one example. There are lots of different ways that we can justify going for lust or going for anger. We've got to learn how to pull back the curtain that delusion throws up around these attitudes to see what's really going on. What are the arguments that are being presented in the mind? What are the rationales? What lies behind them? And to what extent can you really identify with them?

Many times we identify with things simply because they come so quickly. We believe them because we can't examine them. They just flash through the mind. And those little flashes can be really persuasive—a lot more persuasive than a reasoned argument.

This is why they put all those subliminal messages in TV. Or like that time in *The Exorcist* where there was just a one little flash of something you could hardly see. It happened only once in the movie, and it was the most unnerving part of the whole film.

These things you can barely see, you tend to embroider. And the part of the mind that's already willing to go along with those things takes them as its justification. But you missed or you just barely saw whatever it was, barely heard whatever it was. And it's funny: The less clearly you hear things, the more persuasive they are.

So you've got to learn how to insist, "Okay, if we're going to go for something in the mind, we've got to have good reasons. I want to hear all your reasons." That's what you've got to tell the mind.

When you demand reasons, then the mind will be quiet. Say, "Okay if you're going to be quiet, then we're just going to sit here and meditate." Something in the mind will try to sneak around with something else, but you've got to hold your ground.

And there's no one list that will tell you all the good qualities you've got to bring up or all the strategies you've got to develop. But fortunately, when the

mind is really still and it's alert to the fact that it's got a problem here—there are defilements in the mind, they really should be examined—then the quieter you can make your mind, the more likely it'll be able to think up strategies to counteract these things.

So you don't have to go around with lots of lists or lots of pre-arranged strategies, because the mind is really good at sneaking around things that are pre-arranged. But if you can keep your mind still in the midst of all this movement in the mind, that stillness puts you in a position where you are more likely to see through a particular argument or to catch sight of little subliminal messages that the mind is sending itself—to see them clearly for what they are and to provide the antidote you need.

In other words, you want to put the mind in a position where it can think up new responses that the defilements don't expect. If you've got everything all listed out and prepared, it's like submitting your battle plans to the enemy. After all, they have a few cards up their sleeve, so you've got to have some cards up your sleeve as well. And a good, alert, mindful state of concentration is the best source for all your best cards.

What this boils down to, of course, is the fact that you've got to keep working on your concentration in all situations. At the same time, be willing to use that concentration in all situations as well. In other words, you don't just refuse to think, because a state of concentration that refuses to think is an easy target.

Try to develop the kind of concentration that is willing to think up alternative strategies, willing to think outside the box a bit, so that you don't get boxed in by your defilements.

This is why the Buddha taught the Dhamma, the practice, in clusters of qualities. There's no place where he said just one quality will take care of everything. Even when he talks about mindfulness as being the one quality that's always skillful, it has to be used in conjunction with other qualities—alertness, discernment, right effort—if it's going to be right mindfulness. The concentration is the heart of the practice, but it's a concentration that has to include right effort and right mindfulness in order for it to be right as well. It has to include all the right factors of the path.

That's when you have all the tools, all the weapons you need to deal with defilement from no matter which direction it comes from. No matter what its tactics, you need to be alert enough and resourceful enough to think up new tactics of your own.