

Dualities

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There's an interesting passage in Luang Pu Dune's teachings where he talks about how to develop discernment. He says you get your mind quiet, and then you start contemplating things that come in pairs. He says, for example, black and white or fast and slow.

Of course, he's not talking about things outside. He's talking about things in the mind—black states of mind and white states of mind, fast thoughts and slow thoughts—so that you can see differences. And you can see better and worse, when the mind is clearer than other times, when it's less clear. You want to compare those. Which do you prefer? Which is actually less stressful? Where do these thoughts and states of mind go? What do they lead you to do? This is the way you develop your sensitivity, which is what discernment is all about: seeing that some states of mind are preferable to others.

The black states of mind, of course, the Buddha refers to as defilements: greed, aversion, and delusion. We don't like to hear the word "defilement" applied to our minds. It's as if we're being harshly judged. But the Buddha's like someone coming into your house and telling you that the walls of your house could be cleaner. And certainly, it's when you realize that, yeah, there is soot on the walls and there's dirt on the walls, that you have a chance to clean them and see what a clean room is really like. Otherwise, you just take the dirt for granted. Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says the soot on our own kitchen walls is pretty invisible. The soot on other people's kitchen walls: You see it and you want to run away.

So the Buddha's trying to get you to become sensitive to the soot on your own walls. And the way to do that is to compare your different states of mind. So you want to get the mind really, really still—as still as you can. And then, when it's no longer quite so still, compare it. What happened? What's the difference?

The Buddha talks about this in his sutta on emptiness. He says you compare the mind when it's at home and with the mind when it's out in the wilderness. Which feels freer? Which feels less burdened? Here at home, you've got all the issues of being at home: the house itself, the people in the house. When you're out in the wilderness, things are a lot simpler. The issues of the home and the village begin to fall away. But then, of course, there are still the issues of being in the wilderness. Where is your food and water going to come from? What kinds of animals are there out there?

So you bring the mind into concentration. Drop the perception of wilderness and just be with the object of your concentration. And then take a while, after the mind has settled down, to notice that it's freer than it used to be—less burdened. There's less disturbance. That observation is the beginning of discernment, because what made the difference? You're in the same place. You're in the same situation. But your perceptions have changed. You see that the perceptions are the issue.

The same happens as you go through different levels of concentration. You want to notice that when you're thinking about the breath and adjusting the breath, that's one level of concentration. Then you get the mind to the point where it doesn't need to adjust things any more. Just be with the breath. See if you can let your awareness and the breath kind of meld into one.

When you've gotten really good at that, then compare it with your earlier state of concentration. Which is better? And what was the difference? How did you get from one stage into the next? Well, you changed your perception. Instead of the breath being in one place and your being something else, now you're *in* the breath. You're surrounded by the breath. And instead of being outside, encompassing the breath, hovering over it, or pushing it around, you're bathed in the breath. Which is less burdensome?

And so on, down through the different levels of concentration. You want to get good at each level before you start doing this comparison. Otherwise, it all falls apart. But the discernment comes from noticing, "Okay, this is better than that. This is less disturbed than that. This is empty of that disturbance." Whatever else comes up that disturbs the mind, see it as something you want to let go.

This is where another kind of emptiness comes in. That's seeing that things are not really things you'd want to identify with: one, looking at them as a disturbance; two, looking at them as undependable or whatever way you can look at them so that you realize, "Okay, I could identify with this if I wanted to, but right now, I don't." That ability to see that you have the choice—there's nothing inherently *you* in that thought or *you* in that desire—that's another kind of emptiness. It's empty of self or empty of anything that you would want to call self.

That's one of the ways to let go of these disturbances. In some cases, they're obviously things that bother us and we'd clearly rather be rid of them. Others, though, have their appeal. This is where you've got to look at why there is the appeal—and this is where your greed, aversion, and delusion come in. You think they serve a purpose that you want to have served. Or there are things that you identify with because you don't like them. That's one of the paradoxical things about the mind. You get some pleasure out of not liking certain things, so you

want to look for that pleasure. You want to look for the allure. We like our greed; we like our aversion; we even like our delusion.

This is when you've got to step back from these things again and say, "Okay, where do these things come from? Where do they go? What do they do for the mind? And which is better, the mind with these qualities, or the mind during its moments when it's free from them?" It does switch back and forth. It's not as if you've got greed all the time. When the Buddha says the defilements are like clouds that obscure the sun, the point is that when the cloud passes, it doesn't leave its darkness on the sun. It doesn't stain the sun. There's a brightness.

Again, that's something you can compare. And you want to develop your sensitivity so that you finally decide that your greed isn't worth it. Aversion isn't worth it. There are better things you can do with the mind. That, they say, is when you get to taste the ultimate emptiness—when the greed, aversion, and delusion finally go away for good. It's not that they just go away on their own. You have to let go of them because it's not that they come unbidden. You've been pulling them in.

This is where the analogy with clouds breaks down. But the Buddha wants you to be sensitized to the fact that you do have choice as to whether to go with these things or not. And you do want to see the differences. This is why discernment is a quality of sensitivity, of being able to compare dark with bright, fast with slow—things that are opposites—so that you can see how some things are preferable to others.

They do have that saying that the great way is not hard for people with no preferences. But what that means is that you're willing to do whatever needs to be done to get past defilement. In this case, you have to do some difficult things. It's not easy to let go of some of your favorite defilements. But you have to learn how to recognize: Yes, they are defilements. And something needs to be done about them. Now.

So when the Buddha talks about defilement, you realize he's not just trying to judge you. He's trying to help you sensitize yourself to the way you're causing yourself suffering. When he's talking about emptiness, it's not some far away and abstract thing. On one level, it's an emptiness of disturbance. On another level, you use the emptiness of self as a tool to let go of some of the disturbances you really like so that you can get the mind to the ultimate level of emptiness, where there's no greed, aversion, and delusion to cloud it at all.

Sometimes you hear that emptiness is an issue of Oneness. It's not. It's actually based on seeing things in pairs and realizing that one member of the pair is preferable to the other. The only way you get beyond dualities is by using them to

your own advantage. That's a lot of what the Buddha's wisdom and discernment are about: learning how to use things that eventually you're going to have to let go—and not being in too great a hurry to let them go, either. For example, with these states of concentration we're working on: You want to get very familiar with them before you'll be able to see things really, really clearly.

So try to get the mind as still and as solid as you can. The question sometimes comes up, "How much stillness is enough?" Always go for as much stillness as you can manage. As long as you're mindful and alert, then the more stillness, the better. It's only when the mind is really still that you can really see the distinction in some of these subtle defilements, and even in the ones that are not so subtle, the ones that you're used to day in and day out, that you've taken for granted. Like the dirt on the wall. You see it, but you don't see it.

What the Buddha does is to point your eyes right at the dirt and say, "Look at this." Sometimes he rubs your nose in: This dirt doesn't have to be there. It's for your own good that he does this.