

## *Even Common Animals Can Be Trained*

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There's a controversial passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that the mind is luminous. It's like the Sun, which can be darkened by passing clouds, but the Sun itself is not dark. In the same way, the mind is darkened by passing defilements, but the defilements are not part of the nature of the mind.

Now, some people interpret this as saying that the mind is innately pure. But that doesn't seem to be what the Buddha's saying, because he goes on to say that it's because the mind is luminous that we can develop it, we can train it. If it were already pure, there would be no need to develop or train it. So it seems more likely that he's simply saying it's because the mind can know itself, can observe itself: That's why it can be trained. That's why it can be developed.

And this makes the teaching really useful. If we were to say that the mind was already pure, you'd simply think, "Well, get in touch with its initial purity," and then you'd be okay. But if it starts out pure and then gets defiled, that would mean that it could get pure again, and it could get defiled again, whereas the whole point of training the mind is to try to take it to a place where the task is done: The mind reaches a purity that can never be defiled. So that would be a useless interpretation, saying that it's already pure.

A useful interpretation is reminding you that you can step back and observe yourself. Just because you have certain habits of acting and speaking doesn't mean that they're hardwired into the mind, just as the clouds that cover the sun are not hardwired into the sun. They're simply habits that have been developed over who knows how many years—and we're not only talking about years in this lifetime. But no matter how long they've been there, they don't have any right to say, "Well, we've been here a long time. You can't move us away." When you see that they're unskillful, that they cause you suffering and harm, you can learn how to stop engaging in them.

This ability to step back from our habits is what makes us human beings really different from animals. Animals are very instinctive. I was reading a while back about some baby beavers who'd been raised in captivity. Their parents had been killed, so the animal rescuers came and raised them, and they were concerned about them. Would they know how to build lodges and dams? They hadn't received any training in this from their parents. So the rescuers observed them when they released them into the wild, and the first thing the beavers set about doing was building dams and building lodges. It was very instinctive.

But even beavers can observe and know when they're not welcome. If you mistreat them enough, they'll go away. They'll see that building a dam right there is not the best idea, so they'll go and build a dam someplace else. The same with animals in the home: When dogs do something they know is wrong, part of them knows that they had the choice not to do it wrong, but they did it anyhow. And so they feel very guilty. Even though their powers of self-reflection and self-observation are pretty impaired compared to ours, still they have some ability to observe themselves and to know that they're making choices.

So think about that when you decide, "Well, I just have my way of doing things, this is just the way I am, and this is the way I'm going to be."

If it's a harmful way of doing things, why keep it up? You have the ability to step back, to observe, to choose a different path of action. So remember that. Your mind does have this luminous quality where it can observe itself. And it's because of that that we can train. As the Buddha said, if we couldn't abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities, he wouldn't have bothered to teach. The fact that we have a Buddha and a Buddha's teachings means that we can change our habits. So try to hold yourself in check when you see yourself slipping into old habits that you know are wrong. Don't just give in to the old impulses that say, "Well, this is the way I am." It's not how you are. This is the way you've been acting, but you have the ability to choose to act in a different way. So take advantage of that.

As you change your ways, there will be parts of the mind that will complain. But you can observe them too. You can ask yourself, "To what extent do I want to give in to this view of how I should act? To what extent should I give in to this excuse? Where does it get me?" It may give you a little bit of self-righteousness, but you're getting self-righteous about things that another part of the mind knows are not part of your skillful arsenal of behavior. They may have been skills useful for some purposes, but when you're practicing the Dhamma, they get in the way. Your mind is luminous enough to realize that the Dhamma is worth it: It's worth practicing; it's worth the sacrifices that are needed; it's worth the restraint that's needed—because so much of the training is restraint: Generosity is restraint, virtue is restraint. Concentration, discernment: All of these things involve restraint.

With generosity, you hold yourself back from using up things that you could give to other people. With the precepts, of course, you hold yourself back from doing and saying things that you know are going to be harmful. With concentration, you restrain your mind from wandering around as it ordinarily might. You keep your mind tied to an object. The Buddha's image is of an

elephant tied to a post. It's been a wild elephant wandering through the forest, but now they're going to tame it. So they tie it to a post, and even though it may pull and strain to get away, they make sure that the chains or whatever else they use to tie the elephant are strong enough to keep it there. Then, of course, they'll play music for it and feed it food until it's ready to calm down. But it's still under restraint. The same with discernment: You see that certain things you've done in the past cause unnecessary suffering, and you realize you've got to stop doing those things.

So the whole practice is about restraint.

And it's because the mind is luminous that we can restrain it. We can restrain it ourselves. We don't have to have other people come in and chain our mind down. We're the ones who say, "No, you've got to stay here." And who are we? We're the part of the mind that does step back to look and see things clearly.

So as long as you're going to identify with something inside, identify with the luminous part of the mind, the part that can observe itself, reflect, see the harm of some actions, see the benefits of other actions, and be willing to change its ways.

It's in that way that we get rid of the clouds, we get rid of the darkness. Remember Ajaan Suwat's image. You take a candle into a dark cave, and the darkness in the cave can't say, "Well, we've been here for eons. We've been dark for eons. You have no right to bring the light in." Once the light comes in, the darkness has to go.

So bring this luminous quality of your mind to the darkness of your unskillful actions, and disperse the darkness. If common animals can learn and be trained, why can't you? That was a reflection of one of the nuns in the Canon. She'd been meditating all day. Her mind was a mess. She came out of the forest where she'd been meditating, and she saw an elephant trainer telling the elephant, "Give me your foot." And the elephant gave him its foot. She thought, "Even elephants, even common animals, can be trained. Why not me?"

That's a good image to keep in mind.