

The Radiant Mind

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This mind is radiant, the Buddha said, but it's darkened by passing defilements. So exactly where does that radiance lie? He's not saying that the mind is innately pure. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes this point very clear. If the mind were innately pure, then how did it get defiled? If a pure mind can be defiled, what's going to happen to it after it gets purified again? It could get defiled again. In fact, Ajaan Maha Boowa says that the radiance of the mind is actually part of its main defilement, ignorance: the defilement that's left when all the obvious defilements go away. But, the Buddha said, it's because of this radiance that we can train the mind.

So he's obviously not talking about the enlightened mind or an innately enlightened mind. He's talking about a mind that has a potential to clean up its act. It comes down to the fact that the mind can observe itself. Our problem is that we're not very observant, which is why one of the main tasks in the meditation is to get the mind still and to get it asking the right questions so that it can observe itself well.

And particularly, it can observe itself making choices. There are so many choices we make that we're oblivious to. We're like a large corporation, where decisions are coming out of the corporation and no one seems to be really aware of who actually made the decision.

We've got to get the mind still so that we can watch it, because obviously the mind is hiding some of its decisions from itself. That's what ignorance is all about. We've got to get the mind clear about what it's doing. Part of the clarity comes from the vocabulary the Buddha gives us for analyzing what's going on, say, in terms of fabrication, particularly the way the mind shapes its experience through its intentions. The breath is shaped through our intentions: That's bodily fabrication. Then we talk to ourselves, with certain intentions in mind: That's verbal fabrication. And then mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings: the images we hold in mind and the feeling tones we focus on and encourage. Again, we're awfully ignorant of how we encourage these things. As the Buddha said, we shape our future lifetimes through these types of fabrication.

Fortunately, we can observe these processes in action as we meditate. In fact, we use these types of fabrication to create a state of concentration. You focus on the breath. You talk to yourself about the breath. And you use perceptions to help you stay with the breath. Ask yourself what kind of perception helps the mind to

settle down and have a sense of ease with the breath. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. As the Buddha says, when the mind settles down and has a sense of pleasure or even rapture, you want that to permeate the body.

The best way to do that is to follow Ajaan Lee's recommendation: You think of the breath as an element that fills the whole body. What you've got here is breath breathing breath. To perceive it in that way gets rid of a lot of the harshness with which we sometimes breathe. There's the still breath, there's the moving breath, and you want them to all be coordinated. Hold that perception in mind and talk to yourself in these ways. That way, you get the mind to settle down.

At the same time, you get more conscious of how you do these things. As we discussed this afternoon, it's not the case that one type of fabrication is always the cause, although Ajaan Lee points out that verbal fabrication is probably the most important to watch out for, because we can tell ourselves all kinds of things. The way we talk to ourselves can make us miserable or make us happy, given the same set of circumstances.

And of course, when we're talking to ourselves, we're using perceptions. So those play a huge role as well. You change your perceptions, and that changes the conversation. Then again, sometimes it's the breath that leads the way. You wake up in the morning, you find yourself breathing in a weird way, creating headaches, creating discomfort in the body, and that gets you talking to yourself in ways that you don't particularly find useful. So if you notice that happening, you've got to change your conversation. In other words, use whichever handle you can grab hold of, out of these three types.

The important point is that you become conscious of the fact that you are making choices. You're going to be alert to see when the choice is made, what kind of discussion goes into it, and then the results of following through with that choice. That ability to step back and watch these things: That's the brightness of the mind. That's what allows us to train the mind. If we didn't have that kind of brightness inside, we'd be helpless in the face of our defilements.

So that's where you look for the radiance. And being with the breath gives you a good place to step back from what's going on in the mind so that you can watch.

It's through this radiance that we can nourish the Dhamma inside. Remember the Buddha's statement that there are two things that nourish the Dhamma. One is commitment, and the other is reflection. This ability to step back and reflect: That's how we learn. It's in the Buddha's instructions to Rahula, at the very beginning of the practice. Be conscious of your intentions. Then ask yourself,

where are they going? Where would they lead you if you followed through with them?

If an intention seems unskillful, then don't follow it. The reason for that is because if you act on intentions you know to be unskillful, it's going to be hard to learn from them. You'll tend to hide from yourself the fact that you could foresee that it was going to be unskillful. When you start putting up walls like that, that darkens the mind.

So you try your best. After all, how are you going to grow as a person unless you try your best? Years back, when I was teaching English at the university in Cheing Mai, they had me teach literature courses. So for one of the courses, I had the kids reading *The Good Soldier* by Ford Maddox Ford. It's not the easiest book to read, even for a native speaker, because the main point of the story is that the narrator is lying to you. He's trying to keep some secrets from you, even as he's telling you the story. So the story jumps back and forth. Every time he gets to something sensitive, he skips over it or jumps back. Of course, for the students reading this as a second language, it was pretty confusing. So I set out a timeline, did everything I could to help them. But there were complaints. Finally, when one of the students asked me, "Ajaan, why do you give us such difficult things to read?" I said to her, "If I gave you easy things, what would you learn?" It was as if a light bulb went off over her head, and she turned from a C student to an A student.

So when you stretch yourself, when you do your best and find out that your best isn't good enough: That's when you learn, because then you can ask yourself, "What could I have done that would have been better?" That's when you put some light into your mind, or you allow the light that's there in the mind's ability to observe itself to have a chance. You're not constantly covering it up.

So you're acting on skillful intentions, but you discover that what you're doing is actually causing harm? You stop. You don't just blunder your way through, saying, "Well, it was a good intention, so it's got to be good." You have to ask yourself, maybe something was wrong with the intention. So you stop. There's nothing that you're doing that's creating harm? Okay, you continue with the action.

Then when it's done, you reflect: What were the long-term consequences? You see that you've caused harm? You talk it over with someone who's more advanced than you in the path and then you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake. The talking it over—this is for verbal or physical actions—is to help you get so that you're not ashamed to discuss your mistakes with yourself. As for mental actions, you don't have to tell everything bad that's gone through your mind. But

still, you should have a sense of shame over the fact that you gave in to jealousy, you gave in to pettiness and resentment or whatever it was. When you recognize that there was something wrong with the intention, then you decide not to repeat that.

This is how you learn, this is how you shine light into the mind, or allow the light in the mind to show itself. This is how it's useful for developing the mind. As the Buddha said, if the mind were not radiant like this, you couldn't train it. You couldn't develop it.

So through this combination of commitment and reflection you make more and more use of the light of the mind, the radiance of the mind. After all, we do have this ability to make choices in the present moment that don't have to be determined by the past. The Buddha was very critical of people who said that everything you experience is determined by the past, which means there must be something in the present moment that's not determined. You can take advantage of that, that ability to choose, that ability to be conscious of your choices. That's where the radiance begins to show. That's how you learn.

It's not the unconditioned mind or the unconditioned consciousness. That's something separate entirely. But it's a path there, and it's a bright path. As Ajaan Maha Boowa points out, at the very end, you have to abandon even the bright path to get to what's really valuable in the mind.

But wherever you see a glimmer of brightness, follow that for the time being, as it's heading in the right direction. You want to get to the point where the brightness of the mind is the only defilement remaining. Get rid of the obvious clouds, and you can get more and more in charge of your own training. If we didn't have this radiance, we'd have to depend on other people to come and save us. But as the Buddha said, there's nobody else who can be your refuge. You have to be your own refuge.

So take advantage of what radiance you find in the mind, and encourage it through this ability to step back and observe, to be alert and mindful, so that you can check on the results of your ardency to see if they really are heading in the right direction. That's how the radiance of the mind helps you to develop. It can take you to something beyond it.