

Purifying & Freeing the Mind

Purification of Mind

- Bhikkhu Bodhi

An ancient maxim found in the Dhammapada sums up the practice of the Buddha's teaching in three simple guidelines to training: to abstain from all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind. These three principles form a graded sequence of steps progressing from the outward and preparatory to the inward and essential. Each step leads naturally into the one that follows it, and the culmination of the three in purification of mind makes it plain that the heart of Buddhist practice is to be found here.

Purification of mind as understood in the Buddha's teaching is the sustained endeavor to cleanse the mind of defilements, those dark unwholesome mental forces which run beneath the surface stream of consciousness vivitating our thinking, values, attitudes, and actions. The chief among the defilements are the three that the Buddha has termed the "roots of evil" — greed, hatred, and delusion — from which emerge their numerous offshoots and variants: anger and cruelty, avarice and envy, conceit and arrogance, hypocrisy and vanity, the multitude of erroneous views.

Contemporary attitudes do not look favorably upon such notions as defilement and purity, and on first encounter they may strike us as throwbacks to an outdated moralism, valid perhaps in an era when prudery and taboo were dominant, but having no claims upon us emancipated torchbearers of modernity. Admittedly, we do not all wallow in the mire of gross materialism and many among us seek our enlightenments and spiritual highs, but we want them on our own terms, and as heirs of the new freedom we believe they are to be won through an unbridled quest for experience without any special need for introspection, personal change, or self-control.

However, in the Buddha's teaching the criterion of genuine enlightenment lies precisely in purity of mind. The purpose of all insight and enlightened understanding is to liberate the mind from the defilements, and Nibbana itself, the goal of the teaching, is defined quite clearly as freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion. From the perspective of the Dhamma defilement and purity are not mere postulates of a rigid authoritarian moralism but real and solid facts essential to a correct understanding of the human situation in the world.

As facts of lived experience, defilement and purity pose a vital distinction having a crucial significance for those who seek deliverance from suffering. They represent the two points between which the path to liberation unfolds — the former its problematic and starting point, the latter its resolution and end. The defilements, the Buddha declares, lie at the bottom of all human

suffering. Burning within as lust and craving, as rage and resentment, they lay to waste hearts, lives, hopes, and civilizations, and drive us blind and thirsty through the round of birth and death. The Buddha describes the defilements as bonds, fetters, hindrances, and knots; thence the path to unbonding, release, and liberation, to untying the knots, is at the same time a discipline aimed at inward cleansing.

The work of purification must be undertaken in the same place where the defilements arise, in the mind itself, and the main method the Dhamma offers for purifying the mind is meditation. Meditation, in the Buddhist training, is neither a quest for self-effusive ecstasies nor a technique of home-applied psychotherapy, but a carefully devised method of mental development — theoretically precise and practically efficient — for attaining inner purity and spiritual freedom. The principal tools of Buddhist meditation are the core wholesome mental factors of energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding. But in the systematic practice of meditation, these are strengthened and yoked together in a program of self-purification which aims at extirpating the defilements root and branch so that not even the subtlest unwholesome stirrings remain.

Since all defiled states of consciousness are born from ignorance, the most deeply embedded defilement, the final and ultimate purification of mind is to be accomplished through the instrumentality of wisdom, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Wisdom, however, does not arise through chance or random good intentions, but only in a purified mind. Thus in order for wisdom to come forth and accomplish the ultimate purification through the eradication of defilements, we first have to create a space for it by developing a provisional purification of mind — a purification which, though temporary and vulnerable, is still indispensable as a foundation for the emergence of all liberative insight.

The achievement of this preparatory purification of mind begins with the challenge of self-understanding. To eliminate defilements we must first learn to know them, to detect them at work infiltrating and dominating our everyday thoughts and lives. For countless eons we have acted on the spur of greed, hatred, and delusion, and thus the work of self-purification cannot be executed hastily, in obedience to our demand for quick results. The task requires patience, care, and persistence — and the Buddha's crystal clear instructions. For every defilement the Buddha in his compassion has given us the antidote, the method to emerge from it and vanquish it. By learning these principles and applying them properly, we can gradually wear away the most stubborn inner ingrained patterns and reach the end of suffering, the "stainless liberation of the mind."

Freeing the Mind

- Robert Bogoda. Born 1918 Sri Lanka.. Author of A Simple Guide to Life

Mind occupies the pre-eminent place in Buddhism, for everything that one says or does first arises in the mind as a thought. To have a well-trained mind is indeed to possess a treasure. When a person trains the mind, turns inward to examine and cleanse his own mind, he will find therein a vast storehouse of happiness. Real happiness is a quality of the mind which has to be sought and found in the mind. The Buddha teaches that non-attachment to worldly pleasures is a greater happiness than the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. Nibbana is the highest happiness, the happiness of relief from suffering and from repeated birth, and this happiness is only to be attained by freeing the mind from its defilements.

The misguided worldling thinks otherwise. In his view the enjoyment of sensual pleasures is the only real happiness. He forgets, however, that sensual happiness arises merely from the gratification of desire, and thus that this happiness must fade when the desired object is obtained. Nor will the multiplication of desires make sensual pleasure permanent, for there is no permanence in the passing. The pursuit of sensual pleasures ends only in restlessness and dissatisfaction.

The aim of Buddhist mental culture is to gain direct intuitive knowledge of the real nature of existence by systematic training of the mind through meditation. This practice issues in detachment and thus frees the mind from its delusions. Meditation leads the mind from the pain-laden things of the world to the sorrowless, transcendent state of deliverance, Nibbana. The basic cause of rebirth and suffering is ignorance of the true nature of life. We consider what is passing, unsatisfactory, and empty to be permanent, a source of true happiness, and substantial. This delusion sustains the craving for more existence and leads to the accumulation of kamma. Meditation is designed to lead step-by-step to the dissolution of these delusions and thereby to freedom from the grip of craving.

There are two kinds of meditation recognized in Buddhism: the development of tranquillity (samatha-bhavana), which emphasizes concentration, and the development of insight (vipassana-bhavana), which emphasizes wisdom. These two types of meditation respectively correspond to the second and third groups of the Noble Eightfold Path, the concentration group and the wisdom group. Concentration means one-pointedness of the mind, the ability to fix the mind on a single object to the exclusion of all else. Concentration is not an end in itself, but to be developed primarily because it is the foundation for wisdom, the ability to see things exactly as they are. It is this wisdom that frees the mind from bondage.

To train the mind is not at all easy, for the mind has long been accustomed to flow in the channels of greed, hatred, and delusion; through ages we have relished sense pleasures, raged with anger, wallowed in torpor, fidgeted restlessly, and vacillated with doubt. Such habits are indeed difficult to break. Moreover, it is the very nature of the untrained mind to wander from one idea to another. Thus when the meditator sits down to begin the practice, strange thoughts may dance before his mind. .

At the outset meditation will be a continual effort to pull the mind back whenever it strays from the subject of meditation. It will seem impossible to focus the attention on the selected subject for more than a few seconds at a stretch. With continued practice, however, one will refine one's skills until one can keep the mind focused steadily and calmly on the chosen topic for increasingly longer periods. Then the practice becomes more engaging, more rewarding, and also less tiring. Eventually one's efforts will culminate in one-pointedness of mind, samadhi.

With the attainment of the one-pointed mind, the meditator turns this pure, steady, clear mind to the contemplation of existence itself. This marks the beginning of vipassana-bhavana, the meditative development of insight. The meditator mindfully investigates his own compound of the "five aggregates." He sees that the body, or form, is made up of changing physical qualities, while mind itself consists of fleeting mental factors: feeling, perception, mental formations (intentions, emotions, thoughts, desires, etc.), and consciousness. He sees that these all occur in mutual dependence, all in a flow. There is no substantial self to be called "I" or "mine." As the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness, and the "not self" nature of the five aggregates become manifest to the meditator, one realizes that clinging to the conditioned is unsatisfactory, for everything conditioned is fleeting and changing, and in the fleeting it is impossible to find stable happiness. This is pañña, wisdom, the third and final stage in the Noble Eightfold Path.

With the development of wisdom, ignorance ceases in all its forms and shades. Craving and kamma, the fuel for becoming, are exhausted. Hence the conditions for existence cease for lack of fuel. When such a person who has reached this realization, one day passes away, this person no longer takes rebirth in any realm of becoming. This one has attained release, Nibbana, the deathless.

The Buddha

SN 42.8 Sankha Sutta (Purification Through Lovingkindness)

A follower of the Buddha develops a mind devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unbewildered, alert, mindful — keeps pervading the first direction with an awareness imbued with: compassion, appreciation, equanimity, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth directions. Thus above, below, & all around, everywhere, in its entirety, one keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness imbued with: equanimity, abundant, expansive, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will.

Just as a strong conch-trumpet blower can notify the four directions without any difficulty, in the same way, when the awareness-release through equanimity is thus developed, as a result, any deed done, to a limited extent, no longer remains there, no longer stays there."