

Be a Light

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Christmas has always been about celebrating the light. The Buddha has often been referred to as the "maker of light" for the bewildered. This imagery evokes the vision of someone holding a torch, illuminating the path for others. In reflecting on our practice, it becomes clear that this concept of light is central to our spiritual journey.

To illustrate this point, I want to share several quotes from the Buddhist texts. The narratives surrounding the Buddha's birth bear striking similarities to those of other religious figures, such as Christ. For instance, during Christ's birth, a star appeared in the East, guiding the magi to celebrate the event. Similarly, in the Sutta Nipata, we find a beautiful passage from the perspective of a Rishi named Asita, who witnesses celestial beings rejoicing. He is informed that the Bodhisatta, a being destined for enlightenment, has been born in Lumbini, heralding well-being and happiness for all. Overcome with joy, Asita seeks out the newborn prince, who radiates splendor and symbolizes hope.

These narratives reflect a common theme: the heavens rejoicing amidst a world often shrouded in darkness. However, the crucial distinction is that the Buddha serves as a guide to understanding and wisdom rather than a savior figure. He opens the door to truth and reveals where wisdom and light can be found. The responsibility then lies with us to cultivate our own light. Near the end of his life, the Buddha urged us to "make a lamp of yourself" — an invitation to become sources of light in our own right.

The essence of our practice is not merely to rely on external figures but to engage actively in our own spiritual development. We must have faith in ourselves and in the light we seek. This faith is characterized by trust, allowing us to embark on the path of truth with clarity and confidence.

A fundamental aspect of cultivating light is understanding what constitutes light and what does not. This involves discerning between wholesome and unwholesome actions, knowing what leads to light and what leads to darkness. This discernment is a valuable quality that we all possess, though we may not always recognize its importance.

In the Anguttara Nikāya, the Buddha discusses four types of individuals: those who move from darkness to darkness, from darkness to light, from light to darkness, and from light to light. Understanding the difference between light and darkness, and choosing the right direction, is precious and significant. We cannot rely solely on external sources for salvation; we must act and turn toward the light ourselves.

The Eightfold Path outlines practical steps for this journey. After establishing right view and right intention, we are called to embody right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These components emphasize the importance of ethical conduct in every aspect of our lives, guiding how we communicate with ourselves and others, and how we conduct ourselves both alone and in society.

The journey from darkness to light, and vice versa, is also linked to cultivating wholesome qualities. Individuals may come from various backgrounds, and through diligence and virtue, they can find themselves in better circumstances, while those in favorable situations may fall into unwholesome behaviors.

However, the path extends beyond mere action; it involves purifying the mind. The Buddha's teachings often employ the metaphor of light to describe the ultimate freedom from ignorance. Across different languages, the concept of enlightenment consistently conveys the same meaning—illuminating the understanding of our experience.

In the Sutta Nipāta there is a small verse 'The questions of Ajita'. The Buddha said that the world is shrouded in ignorance, with avarice and heedlessness preventing it from shining. The craving is what binds us, leading to suffering. By cultivating Sila (ethical conduct) and understanding what is wholesome, we can begin to train and purify our minds.

This process often requires struggle, as we are accustomed to the familiar comfort of darkness. The transition from darkness to light, or even from one light to a deeper light, demands consistent effort. Right effort being the first aspect of the Samadhi group of the Eightfold Path—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—is crucial in deepening our cultivation of light.

Cultivating the light of wisdom is a journey that requires our full engagement. It asks us to hold nothing back, and the reward is the illumination of understanding and clarity that arises as ignorance is dispelled.

As we advance in our practice, we begin to recognize the layers of ignorance—both gross and subtle—that obscure our understanding. We learn to see how ego and self-interest create barriers to our ability to connect with one another and with wisdom. The practice of awareness and the cultivation of beautiful qualities such as compassion and mettā can help us transcend the limitations of our individual selves.

The journey from darkness to light requires courage, especially when faced with challenges. The ten paramis, or perfections, are vital qualities that we need to nurture. They can manifest as mindfulness, renunciation, effort, equanimity, mettā, generosity, and more, prompting us to consider how we can cultivate light in our daily lives.

Stories of individuals who bravely navigate difficult circumstances serve as reminders of the potential for light even in adversity. For instance, a young man in Burma, dedicated to supporting others amidst oppression, exemplifies the qualities we aspire to embody.

This journey demands everything from us, especially when faced with danger. The cultivation of light requires a willingness to move beyond our comfort zones and act for the benefit of others.

Ultimately, we must strive to be sources of light in a world often overshadowed by darkness. This means engaging deeply with our ethical conduct and spiritual practices, fostering qualities that uplift ourselves and those around us. The act of becoming a light unto ourselves and others is not a superficial task; it is a commitment to embody wisdom, kindness, and understanding.

In the Anguttara Nikāya, the Buddha spoke about the four lights: the light of the moon, the light of the sun, the light of fire, and the light of wisdom. Of these four lights, the light of wisdom is foremost. Brighter, better than any other kind of light.

As we move forward, let us remain dedicated to this path, recognizing that we can each be beacons of light in a world that desperately needs it. Thank you for your commitment to this journey and for caring about the light we cultivate together.