

Organizing Your Inner Committee

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As you meditate, you want to bring the whole mind to the breath. And sometimes it's easy. You're in the mood, everybody in the mind is in the mood, and they all can settle down. But other times, some members of the committee would rather do something else. They have their other agendas, their other desires. And even though they may let you focus on the breath for a few minutes, they're going to try to sabotage it. So you've got to realize, as Ajaan Lee says, that there's more than one mind in the mind. There are lots of minds in here, lots of intentions. It's a problem in the beginning of meditation, but learning to see the mind as a committee can also be something that helps you in the meditation. That perception helps you pull away from some of the more unskillful voices inside you. Even though they're very loud in the mind and a very insistent, you don't have to identify with them.

When you say you're not in the mood to meditate, which part is not in the mood? Which part is in the mood? Why is the part that's in the mood overcome by the other side? Well, the other side may have lined up certain sensations in your body that seem to be pretty insistent and pretty permanent. But you can pry yourself loose. Tell yourself: This is a voice in the mind, and the sensation is something separate. There may be a dull feeling, a feeling of lack of energy, and the lazy voice has latched onto that. Try to pry them apart. The physical sensation is one thing; the voice is something else. It's providing an interpretation, a spin. And just as you have to learn how to look for spin when you're reading newspapers and magazines, you have to look for spin in your own mind, to recognize that it's placed an interpretation on events that you don't have to agree with.

You also want to see which part of the mind is a little bit wiser. If the mind were one single unit, it would have to be either inherently good or inherently bad. If it were inherently bad, there would be nothing you could do to meditate. You could never trust yourself. If it were inherently good, there would be no need to meditate. But it's because we have this committee that, on the one hand, we need to meditate, but on the other hand, we feel we can't. The solution is learning how to strengthen the healthy voices inside, and learning how to rely on yourself more and more to be able to do this.

Often when we're in a bad mood, we depend on other people to get us out of the bad mood. That's the way it is in regular human society. But going off alone, spending some time alone here at the monastery, requires you to learn how to

manage yourself, how to dis-identify with your bad moods, and how to, for the time being, side with your good moods, your wiser moods, your more skillful moods.

Learn the tricks of the unskillful sides. It's not that they're totally lacking in skill, just that their skills are aimed at the wrong thing: a shortsighted happiness, a shortsighted pleasure. They have their tricks and their subterfuges to make you see things their way. So you've got to teach your good side some tricks and subterfuges, too. Teach it to be insistent; teach it to be more strategic. This can involve anything from promising yourself a reward at the end of the meditation—if you stick with the breath for this hour, okay, you get a reward—to making a game of it: See how long you can stay with the breath this time.

The important thing is that, if you find yourself falling off the breath, you not get upset. Because when you get upset, that's when the unskillful voices can move in to take advantage of the opportunity, to start berating you and making you feel bad, pulling you further and further away from the practice. When things go very well, you have to be careful, too. That's when the unskillful voices slip in and get you to be complacent.

So there has to be part of the mind that steps back and watches these things without being too quick to identify with any particular voice. Even the voices that sometimes seem like the Dhamma police coming in to berate you for not being a good meditator: Those are your defilements, you know, unless you can convert them to the point where they simply notice, "Okay, you're off the path here, let's move over a little bit and get back on the path." When you're on the path, you don't have to add any further commentary. Just stick with it and try to be more careful the next time—like the policeman who doesn't give you the ticket but simply gives you a warning and sends you on your way.

You find that this relates to different members of the committee as you go through the day. The kinds of conversations you have with yourself, the kinds of things they say to one another, are important—and it's an essential part of the practice to learn how to keep watch over these voices all the time. If certain patterns of conversation get established during the day, you'll find that they resurface during the meditation. If they're unskillful, they're going to cause trouble in your meditation. So you've got to keep watch over this constant committee chatter all the time. Try to keep the committee going in a good direction.

This is a huge part of the meditation. We like to think of meditation as all about getting the mind to be really still, very quiet, nothing being said by anybody anywhere in the mind. And there are stages in the meditation where things *are*

very, very quiet. But you don't get there simply by squashing all the conversation. You first have to learn how to conduct more skillful conversations inside. The things you focus on, the kind of commentary you make on those things: You've got to keep tabs on this. When you see that an unskillful voice is taking over, you need to learn how to pull yourself out of it so that you don't identify with it. As the Buddha said: All fabrications are not self. That includes this verbal fabrication in the mind. It's not-self.

For the time being you want to use that principle selectively. Continue to side with the skillful voices, identify with them when they're useful. As for anything that's unskillful, learn how to pull out. It's like those times when you're in a dream and you begin to realize that there's something really wrong with this dream—to the point where you finally realize it is a dream, that's what's wrong with it. Then you wake up. And it's the same with the different voices in the mind. You can wake up from them. Just learn to realize when there's something wrong with the voice, either in its tone or in what it has to say, or in the effect it has on the mind if you take on that identity. You learn how to question the need, question the desire that you have to have that identity. We've learned some pretty unskillful identities over time. But we have a few skillful ones, too. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here. It's simply a matter of learning how to strengthen the skillful ones, not getting deluded into the slipping back into the old roles, unskillful roles that you played in the past.

So take it for granted: There will be a fair amount of chatter going on in the meditation, and don't regard it simply as a nuisance. It has its role, and you need to learn how to conduct the conversation in a skillful way, how to hold the meeting in such a way that the unskillful forces don't take over. When you can, you try to convert them. Because after all, all the voices here are simply expressions of a desire for happiness and ideas about how that happiness can be obtained. When you can convert different voices to the idea that this is really where you want to look, this is really what you really want to do, you've made things that much easier.

So learn how to use this committee for your purposes instead of being annoyed by it or overwhelmed by it—the “you” here being, as Ajaan Mun once said, the determination not to come back and suffer. Try to equip that determination with its weapons of discernment and mindfulness, so that you can develop all the other qualities of the path you need to make that determination a reality.