

## *Factions in the Mind*

*September 14, 2003*

When you stop to look at your mind, you begin to realize that there's a whole committee in there: lots of different opinions, lots of different agendas. You see this especially when you're trying to get the mind to settle down. One part of the mind decides to focus on the breath, but other parts of the mind want to go other places and couldn't be bothered with anything as ordinary as the breath. So in the beginning, you have to learn how to strengthen the side of the mind that wants to stay.

You can do this in lots of different ways. First, you can remind yourself of why you're here, of all the good things that can come through staying with the breath: You develop mindfulness, you develop concentration, the mind gains a sense of inner peace when the concentration gets strong. You develop alertness: You begin to see your own actions a lot more clearly, and you sense the importance of their consequences. This is important, as it's the basis for heedfulness. And heedfulness is so important that it was the topic of the Buddha's last words. "Watch out," he said. When you practice, you have to be careful. You have to be heedful. You can't be complacent. This is because your actions are important.

Think about it: The Buddha could have said a few last words about something wonderful or grand: nibbana, limitless compassion, or emptiness. But instead, he focused on heedfulness—the principle that your actions are important and you have to be careful about what you do because actions can take you in all sorts of different directions. They have results.

And so, as you meditate, remind yourself that you're here to learn how to be a lot clearer about what's going on in your mind. The more steadily and consistently you can stay with the breath, then the more you see in terms of all the subtle politics going on in the mind: the part of the mind that wants to be heedful and the parts of the mind that don't. There are many different voices in there, after all, many different sides to any question, not just two. So, when you settle down to be with the breath, be prepared: Lots of other voices will be pulling in different directions. And it's normal. Don't get discouraged. Try to strengthen the good voices by making the breath comfortable, so that there's an immediately felt sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing that comes just by sitting here breathing. It feels good to breathe in, feels good to breathe out. You don't have to force the breath, you don't have to hold it in, you don't have to count. Let the

breath come in and out at whatever rhythm feels good for the body. If the rhythm keeps changing, fine—as long as it feels good. Be on top of each breath. Make sure it feels right for the body, coming in and going out.

As you do this, you get more and more sensitive, which means that you can get more and more precise in what you're doing. The more precise and sensitive you are, the more absorbing the breath becomes. The easier it is to stay here so that this mindful, alert faction of the mind gets stronger. It doesn't get kicked out so easily. Ordinarily, when the factions of greed, anger, and delusion take over the mind, they kick out the mindfulness and alertness; they don't want anybody around watching. It's like politicians when they're discussing a corrupt deal: They don't want journalists in the room; they don't want anybody to see or hear what they're doing.

You notice this when part of the mind wants to do something unskillful, something it knows it shouldn't be doing: It tries to kick out your alertness, kick out your mindfulness. It doesn't want to hear what they have to say. That's how it can then go ahead and do those things. But if mindfulness and alertness develop a strong hold here in the present moment, they can refuse to budge. They can stand in the way of any unskillful decisions.

This is why it's important to keep hanging on to the breath and allowing the breath to feel good, to feel clear in the different parts of the body. This is how you exercise mindfulness and alertness so that they grow strong. Wherever you can sense the breath, focus on that. Then let the different breathing sensations connect so that they feel all-around good. This gives mindfulness and alertness a really solid place to settle in. And in this way you can turn the fact that the mind is a committee to your advantage. In other words, when greed, anger, and delusion threaten to take over the mind, they don't get the whole mind. You have another faction of the committee that says "No. We don't want to go there, because we know better."

This is called having a sense of shame, a sense of compunction: a fear of the consequences of evil. Ordinarily, we don't like to hear about the word "shame," but it's important that we understand what the Buddha meant by the word "shame." It's not being ashamed of yourself; it's being ashamed of the idea of doing something you know you shouldn't do. You realize that it's beneath you. In this sense, shame is a result not of low self-esteem but of high self-esteem. You know better than to do those things. You're not the kind of person who really wants to do those things. So when you have mindfulness and alertness on your side, that sense of shame becomes an important protector of the mind, a protector of your future.

The same with compunction, the fear of the consequences of doing evil: That's a skillful type of fear. It's wise. The unskillful part of the mind says, "I

don't care what the long-term consequences are. I want pleasure right now. I'm going to make my profits right now and run." But a sense of compunction looks to the future and says, "I don't want to go there. No matter how much fun this may be right now, even if I run I won't escape the consequences."

So when mindfulness and alertness have developed this beachhead here in the present moment and can stay right here with the breath, then these qualities of shame and compunction come and help, strengthen your heedfulness, strengthen your lack of complacency, strengthen the good members of the committee, the good factions of the mind. You've got a place where they can all band together and work in unison.

In the past, the good members of the committee were all separated. They didn't work together. Like the hummingbirds at the feeder who can't band together to fight off a bigger bird, they got beaten out by the other more forceful factions, the unskillful factions of the committee. But now you've given them a corner of the mind where they won't budge, where they grow stronger and begin to take over. When they take over, it's not that they're going to abuse the other side. In fact, as these skillful members of the committee take over, the whole committee learns that it can live more and more peacefully with itself.

Having this corner of the mind helps you step back and see the mind for what it is, to see what's going wrong. Without this corner here, you're totally immersed in unskillful states and can't see a way out at all. But if you remind yourself that the mind is a committee, then even though unskillful things are coming up in the mind, you remember that there can still be a part of you that keeps watching, keeps mindful, alert. By standing on the breath, you gain a better perspective: You're not totally in your head; you're also in your body. That takes you out of the back-and-forth of the thoughts in your mind. This separate perspective is what allows the mind to train itself.

As the Buddha said, training the mind is something you have to do for yourself. Other people can't do it for you. They can point out the way, but the actual work is something *you* have to do. There would seem to be a paradox there. If the mind were one solid unit, it wouldn't be able to teach itself anything new. If it were defiled, it would be totally defiled and wouldn't be able to clean up its own act. This is the assumption behind the idea that we can't do this work ourselves, that we need outside help and have to depend on some other, outside power. But the fact is that there are lots of different you's, lots of different minds in the mind. When you learn to turn that fact to your advantage—strengthening the good voices, not allowing them to get pushed out when unskillful states come in—you find that the mind can train itself. In other words, the good committee members can band together and start training the less skillful ones,

the more short-sighted ones, teaching them to look at things in a longer perspective.

This is how you can bring the mind to a sense of unity, when all the different factions realize that it's in their best interest to undergo this training. They all start working together instead of at cross-purposes. This gives the mind strength. If it decides to work on a project, it'll see the project through. If it's faced with pain and difficulty, all the parts of the mind work together so that you don't cause yourself suffering.

These are some of the advantages that come from training the mind to stay with the breath. If you find it difficult to stay with the breath, if you can't quite get it comfortable yet, at least remind yourself that you're headed in the right direction. You're working on important skills here. Even though they may take time, whatever amount of time that it takes is well invested, well spent. That sense of conviction will see you through the difficult patches and remind you that they're not always going to be that way: They're just patches. If you stick with the training, you develop these qualities of the mind, which, at the beginning, seem to be pretty weak—mindfulness and alertness can seem awfully ordinary and very momentary—but when you get them working together, you find that they develop strengths you wouldn't have imagined before.