

Your Inner Mob

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

September 6, 2005

The mind is like a town meeting: lots of people, lots of different opinions. Sometimes the town meeting is well run – people are reasonable, courteous – but often it goes out of control. People start shouting, and a kind of mob psychology takes over. If you're standing outside the mob, it's easy enough to see that the people are crazy, but if you get down in a mob with enough people who believe, say, that somebody's a witch, you can end up setting her on fire. And then after it's all over you say, "Gee, how did that happen?"

It's the same with the mind. Every now and then some crazy idea comes and takes hold of every voice in the mind, and the only way you can *not* get swept up in the craziness is to step outside. Unfortunately, there's no little compartment in your head outside of your brain where you can go to escape the voices. You're in there with them. But there is an aspect of your awareness that's separate from these voices, and finding it is a really important skill in the meditation.

There are states of mind that the Buddha called "hindrances," which can come sweeping through the mind. The problem with each of them – sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty – is that it blinds you. You start seeing things in line with the hindrance and you lose sight of what's genuinely for your own true benefit. In other words, when sensual desire comes along, the object *really is* attractive, and you can't stand not pursuing it. When ill will comes along, the person that you don't like is *really* a bad person. That's how it seems. When sleepiness comes, you can talk yourself into falling asleep, taking an extra nap, waking up and turning over and falling back to sleep again, because the body *really needs sleep* at a time like that. And so on down the list. And yet after the hindrance has passed, you look back on it and realize that you didn't really have to follow through with it. You could have done perfectly well not following the object of your lust or desire. You could have done perfectly well without doing anything nasty to the person that you don't like. It's just that, at the time, your perceptions were skewed.

The Buddha compares each of the hindrances to a different kind of water. Sensual desire is water with dye in it. Say there's red dye in the water: The things in the water look red, but when you take them out, they're not. It was just the dye in the water. Ill will is like boiling water. If you try to look down into boiling water you can't see anything clearly because of the turbulence. Torpor and lethargy are like water filled with algae. Restlessness and anxiety are water ruffled by the wind. Uncertainty is like water in the dark. Even though the water may be clear by its nature, it's not in a situation where you can see anything in it.

When the mind is seized by these hindrances, you can't really see things for what they are. So you've got to learn how to recognize the hindrances when they

come and realize that you don't want to get involved with them. If you can catch them in time, in their very early stages, you can realize, "This is a hindrance. This is nothing to get involved with." You can separate yourself out. This is one of *the* basic skills that you need, not only as a meditator, but also to survive in life.

When I visited Ajaan Suwat that last time – he'd had some brain damage in his automobile accident – he mentioned that he had the mindfulness to know when his brain wasn't functioning right. He said that his brain was giving him all sorts of weird perceptions. But because he'd been a good meditator, he had developed the mindfulness not to fall in with them. This was very different from my father, who developed Parkinson's dementia as he got older: He'd see big animals in the house and people committing suicide out in the yard – all kinds of disturbing things. You'd try to talk him into realizing that they were all illusions, but he wouldn't believe you. If there was a black dog in the living room, there was a black dog in the living room no matter what evidence you could show that there wasn't. This is the difference between a mind that's trained and a mind that's not.

So you have to nip these things in the bud. Otherwise a mob psychology takes over in the mind, and it's not just voices screaming in your head, but also changes in your body. The blood starts racing faster, the heart's racing faster, different feelings of tension and pressure arise in different parts of the body. When you're angry, there's a weird feeling in your gut. And because there are the physical symptoms you say, "Gee, this must be what I really feel." But that's not the case. It's just your hormones running amok. A hormone gets into your blood and it keeps circulating around in your body even after the particular mind state is gone. You've gotten used to the idea that if you've been angry and the physical symptoms of anger are still in the body, then you must still be angry. That makes room for the thought of anger to come back in and take over again. So one thing to remind yourself of is, "It's just the hormones in the blood, and the actual thought of anger comes and goes." It's the same with all the other hindrances.

Just because there's a physical symptom doesn't mean that the emotion is especially real. It's like people presenting arguments. I've been reading through a critique of the monks' rules book right now and the person writing the critique has some strong arguments as well as some weak ones. The strong arguments are the ones where he simply points out, "This is a mistranslation," and that's it. When the arguments are weak, that's when he starts getting belligerent, throwing in a lot of emotion.

This is the way the mind works. When a particular defilement knows that it has a weak case, it shouts and it screams and it uses every trick it can think of in order to push you into following it. So when things come on that strong, learn to recognize them just as the hype of the defilements, in the same way that you learn to see through the hype in an advertisement. If all else fails, just hunker down, for sometimes when these things come on really strong they've got to run

their course. All you can do is make up your mind that you're not going to fall in line with them, you're not going to act under their power, and you just hunker down with the breath. Don't get involved in the conversations. Don't get pulled into a shouting match.

It's like that storm we had several years back, with hundred-mile-per-hour winds: There was nothing you could do, just stay in your tent or your hut and wait for the storm to pass. In the morning, when the winds had died down, you could come out, survey the damage, and figure out what needed to be done, but while the wind was blowing it was hard to figure out anything at all. So when these strong emotions come blowing through the mind, just try to keep yourself separate. Hunker down.

Ajaan Lee has a good way of viewing these things. He says, "You don't know who's actually speaking in your mind. You've got all those little germs in your blood. Maybe the thoughts in your mind are the thoughts of the little germs passing through your brain. Or you may have seen cases of people actually possessed by a spirit. Maybe this is a spirit coming and trying to possess your mind." In other words, learn how not to identify with these crazy voices. Ask yourself: If you actually followed through with that particular voice, where would it take you? And if you start getting crazy answers to that question, you realize, "It's impossible to have a conversation here." Just hunker down. Wait for the storm to pass. Wait for the craziness of the mob psychology to run its course, but the important thing is that you don't become part of the mob.

If you can gain this kind of perspective on your thoughts, you can save yourself a lot of grief. As that bumper sticker says, "Don't believe everything you think." Don't *identify* with everything that's coming through your mind. Don't fall for the hype of the defilements pressing their case. When these things get really strong, just hold onto the breath for dear life. When the storm is past you'll be glad that you didn't allow yourself to get swept away.