

The Bureaucracy of the Defilements

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Years back there was a teacher in another Buddhist tradition who liked to talk a lot about the bureaucracy of the ego and how we had to throw off the shackles and tyranny of that bureaucracy. By that, he meant your ideas of right and wrong, of what you should and shouldn't do. His way of overcoming the tyranny of that bureaucracy was to deliberately do a lot of the things your mind said you shouldn't do. As you can imagine, he ended up doing a lot of harm to himself and to many other people, breaking the precepts and getting them to break the precepts as well.

The thing is that that's not the bureaucracy that you have to be afraid of, and that's not the tyranny you have to overthrow. You have another bureaucracy: the bureaucracy of your defilements—things like greed, aversion, and delusion, which cloud the mind and get in the way of genuine discernment.

Our mind is very complex. It's like a large organization, making all kinds of decisions all the time, and we have a tendency to delegate a lot of our decisions to our old habits. There are a lot of little bureaus in there that we haven't looked into for a long time. We gave them a job and they protect their jobs.

If you've ever studied the theory of bureaucracy, you know that each bureaucrat's main job is to protect his or her job. That is why bureaucrats don't like reform and don't like to have their work looked into. It's the same with your defilement bureaucrats: Their main desire is to hold onto their positions. But if you give them their way, you're the one who's going to suffer. They're not going to suffer. They're creating your kamma and it's all going to affect you. It's because you, as the boss, delegated things and you tend to get distracted—you're not even there in the head office all of the time—that you end up suffering from the decisions that these lower-level bureaucrats have made.

So, one of the main purposes of the meditation is to shine a light down into this bureaucracy, all of these lower-level functionaries inside your mind, the ones that allow greed, aversion, and delusion to have sway over the choices you're making, that you're barely aware that you're making. And as in dealing with any kind of bureaucracy, there's what you call the deep politics, the really inner-level workings of the various defilements that scratch one another's backs, help one another along. You've got to shine a light into there, or do a little bit of investigative reporting, so that you can get the mind to settle down and really see what's going on.

The first thing you've got to do is to learn how to simplify your life in as many ways as possible, because one of the excuses for having a large bureaucracy where there are lots of dark corridors and hidden offices is because there's just so much work to be done that you've got to delegate things and need a lot of people to do it.

But when you simplify your life, you begin to realize that a lot of these bureaus aren't necessary. The Bureau of Wine Affairs. The Bureau of What To Do With All My Stuff Affairs. As you simplify things, you can see that these bureaus just churn out busywork. They have less of an excuse to be there. As you get more and more settled into the present moment—when, as the boss, you have fewer distractions—you stop running off to corporate meetings or corporate vacations. You're right there in the office, so you have the chance to walk around.

This is what we do when we settle into the breath. You start out, of course, with the in-and-out breath. But then you begin to realize that there are other subtle movements of energy in the different parts of the body and you begin to open up areas of awareness and areas of the body that used to get closed off because you were interested in something else. But now you're here. You can settle in and spread out to fill the body. You begin to see the movements of the mind a lot more clearly and a lot more quickly. A thought forms and you can see it in the beginning stages.

In the past, as you were just up there in the head office, you would hear about things only after the functionaries below you had sent things up through the channels, and, of

course, when they sent things up, they tended to put their little spin on it. But now you can wander through the corridors, check who's doing what, and get a sense of what's necessary and what's not. You can actually see the decisions that are being made because you'll notice—and this is one of the reasons that we practice concentration and try to stay with one object like the breath—that once you decide that everything else that's irrelevant to your object is going to be dropped, you have to get quicker and quicker at sensing what's happening that you need to drop. Only then can you let go of it in time.

You begin to see that there are certain stages. There's a little bit of stirring here or there in the mind and it's right at the boundary between the mind and the breath. Then a perception comes along and stamps a meaning on it, saying that "This is a thought about x." You realize you can go with that perception or not. If you're clear about what's happening, if you're watching the functionaries, then you can decide, "Do I really want to go with that?" And your decision is an informed one.

And it can be an effective one, too. Once you've become conscious of your choice and you've made up your mind that you don't want to go, it's a lot easier to say, "Nope, nope, nope, nope," down the line. That clears out a lot because you see that, with some of the defilements creating suffering, all you have to do is be aware of them and they wither away. Once you shine the light of your investigative reporting on them and you can see clearly that what they're doing is unnecessary and is causing a lot of suffering, they vanish.

Your other functionaries, though, know that no matter how much you shine a light on them, they have their ways of staying on, as they say in Thailand, "hugging their chairs." Those are the ones where you have to dig around and figure out, "Okay, what is it that's keeping this particular defilement from going away? Why does it keep coming back again and again and again? What's the appeal?"

As the Buddha said, these are the things that you have to look into. There are five steps in all, five steps for cleaning out the bureaucracy. First, notice when things come. Second, notice when they go. Third, notice, when they're coming, what's their appeal? Why does the mind go for these things? What felt need does it satisfy? And do you really feel that need anymore?

Because this is the problem: A lot of the times you assign a job to a certain functionary and then you forget about it entirely. These old habits: Some of them go back to your childhood, old ways of thinking, old ways of seeing the world, understanding how you can get pleasure out of something—because that is what these functionaries are all working for, their ideas of what happiness should be, what pleasure would be. You've got to look at the pleasure and say, "Okay, what's the price of this pleasure?" The functionaries don't care about the price of the pleasure, but as the boss, you've got to have your accounting books uppermost in your mind. Otherwise the firm will go bankrupt. This is where you begin to see the drawbacks of the pleasures advanced by the defilements, which is the fourth step in cleaning out the bureaucracy. You really see that the pleasure isn't worth the price, and you lose your taste for it.

And then the fifth step is seeing the escape. How do you escape from your delight in the allure? Part of the answer lies in seeing the drawbacks, and part lies in realizing that you have the choice—and that there is a better choice. You don't have to go with greed, aversion, and delusion anymore. You don't have to believe their PR. You learn how to see through all of their political maneuverings.

This is how you engage with the deep politics of the mind. It takes a lot of rooting out. It's not easy work, but once the mind is settled down and has a good strong sense of being stable and being here, fully here, filling the whole body with your awareness so that these lower-level functionaries are all exposed for what they're doing, then it's a lot easier to clean them out of the bureaucracy.

You find that having a bureaucracy doesn't always have to be a bad thing. A lot of decisions do have to be made. Even simply sitting here with the body, a lot of things are being decided in various levels of your awareness, and it's good that you don't have to take on every little detail. As long as everything is transparent—you've got wisdom in charge, you've got discernment in charge—you find that this bureaucracy, instead of continually

churning out problems and churning out suffering, can actually become harmless. Blameless. Useful.

So it's the bureaucracy of your defilements, not the bureaucracy of the ego, that you have to watch out for. The problem lies, not in having a sense of right and wrong, but in having the wrong sense of right and wrong, one that's been skewed by the defilements. That's what you have to straighten out. Above all, as long as your life is very complex and your mind is taking on lots of tasks, it's going to be hard to deal with these things, hard to see these things. You want to simplify as much as possible and get your awareness to settle down. Instead of focusing outside all the time, get it to fully inhabit your body. That way, all the little back corridors and basements in this bureaucracy you've got here become opened to your conscious awareness. All of the kamma that you've been creating in a semiconscious way becomes a lot more conscious—and your ability to bring consciousness and discernment to these things is what's going to make all the difference.