

Informing the Whole Committee

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One of the strangest things about the mind is that it talks to itself. You'd think that if the mind were a single thing, it wouldn't have to talk to itself. Everything it knows, it would know, without having to communicate. But the fact is there are a lot of different power centers or knowing centers here in the mind. It's like a committee, and the different members have to send messages to one another. They have to inform one another of what's going on. Sometimes one part of the mind will know something, and another part won't know. Part of the reason for this is that we actually build walls inside the mind. In some cases the walls are necessary in order to function. When you're paying attention to a particular task, you have to blot out everything not related to that task.

Sometimes the walls are very, very impenetrable, sometimes they're not. They're more permeable. In other words, you're working on a task but there's the possibility that if some emergency comes up, you can get a message through so that you can drop the task and turn to whatever else is more pressing. Say you're focused on reading a book, but there's a sudden sharp pain in your stomach. Okay, the message can get through so that you can stop reading and focus attention on the pain. Which means that there's part of the mind that's still surveying the body to make sure nothing really painful or horrible is happening, while another part of the mind focuses on reading the book.

But the walls can also be problematic. This is one of the reasons why we have our problems with the mind. It's not thoroughly informed. You can make up your mind to stick with the meditation. You can make up your mind to do something that's really truly going to lead to true happiness. But soon afterwards, you find yourself off wandering looking at something else. So this multiplicity of the mind can be a real problem.

Still, it's also part of the solution. In fact, it's what makes the solution to the problem possible. If the mind were a totally monolithic thing, if your sense of self were monolithic, you'd play right into the hands of that question of "How is it possible for something that's so unskillful and so ignorant to gain knowledge?" If the mind were a single thing, if your sense of self were a single thing, it couldn't change itself. That's the basic premise of the old issue of self power versus other power. The idea being that if the self is so screwed up, if your ego is so screwed up, you need some help from outside. It's only through surrendering yourself to some outside power that you'll be able to find true happiness, or to save yourself from yourself.

This is the basic premise in a lot of the Mahayana, in the Pure Land schools. You need the saving grace of Amitabha or some Buddha outside to come and save you, because your ego is so corrupt that it can't possibly abandon its corruption. Any of the forms of religion that require you to focus on an outside power to come in to save you have as their premise the idea that your self is a single solid thing that's corrupt and can't possibly save itself. That's where the question of self power and other power gets born.

But the fact is that your self, your mind, your ego, is not a single thing. There are lots of different selves, lots of different minds, lots of different egos going on

here. This committee going on here: It's because it's a committee that you can change yourself. One member of the committee can look at another member of the committee and say, "Your policy isn't working, your strategy isn't working. You've got to change." Because there is no one, overarching sense of self, the different members of the committee have learned that they've got to listen to one another. The people in whom the different members of the committee don't listen to each other—they get schizoid. The normally functioning human being has different parts of the mind and they listen to one another, and they know they have to listen to one another in order to function. This is what makes the practice possible. The difficulty simply is in taking the side of the mind that wants to practice, that wants to meditate, that wants to stay focused on the breath, and giving that member of the committee strength so it starts having influence over other members of the committee, so they all can sit down together.

So when someone asks us what kind of Buddhism we are practicing here, whether we're the other power kind or the self power kind, the answer is, "Neither." It's the committee power kind. You can apply this point immediately as you focus on the breath. There will be part of the mind that's intent on actually doing the work, focusing on the breath. And you notice there is another part of the mind that's watching, that can be alert both to the breath and to the conscious effort to stay focused. So learn to make use of that observer. That's the observer that allows for alertness, get all these different parts working together, the intention to stay with the breath, the ability to remember that intention, then the part of the mind that watches.

Once you've got those three parts working together, then there is going to be progress. They help one another along. And the more they learn to cooperate, then the more they are going to be able to get other parts of the mind in this together. So more and more members of the committee sit down and participate. You notice when the Buddha describes the process of meditation, it's not one quality acting alone that's going to make all the difference. He never said all you need is mindfulness, or all you need is concentration. It's always clusters of factors. It's in the clustering that we gain strength in the practice.

So don't be surprised when you find that there are lots of different voices in the mind, or there's parts of the mind that know, and other parts that don't know what's going on. That's to be taken for granted. And he said that's part of the problem, but it's also part of the solution. Once you understand what the actual problem is, then you can work on gathering more and more members of the mind. The part that wants immediate gratification, well, you give a little something to that by making the breath comfortable. The part that gets easily bored, you give something to that by asking yourself questions about the breath, exploring this whole issue of the breath energy in the body. The part that wants to talk, well, you give something to talk about, talk about the breath. If you're skillful, you can give all these different voices, all these different urges some form of gratification so they're willing to pitch in with the effort. And as with any task, the more people you have working on the task, the quicker it gets done.

So think of this as a group effort. You keep surveying to see which parts of the mind are not getting in on the effort. You can see what you can do to get their cooperation. Because it is this way, bit by bit by bit, we get more skillful in this whole issue of trying to find a way out of suffering. We catch ourselves in

different ways of creating suffering, and learn to convert the various tendencies of the mind to this one goal so that when there is a state of oneness in the mind, it's one in a good way, it's one on the path. And then when it's one, you can really teach it. This is why concentration comes before discernment. And there is an element of discernment that is needed for the concentration itself. But the discernment that's actually going to break through the mind's misunderstandings has to be based on getting as many members of the mind in on the message. I mean you can read a book and learn all about the basic teachings. And then as you put the book down, you find that you forget about them. Or even if you remember them, you start acting in other ways. You go back to your old habits. It's because not all the mind was there.

You want to bring your full attention to the breath. You want to bring your full attention to this issue of getting the mind gathered in a comfortable place. And the more the different factions, the more the different committee members are there, then when the message comes and they're all in a mood to listen, that's when it has a very pervasive effect on the mind. In many cases the insights that really make a difference in the mind are not anything new, nothing you've never heard before. It's simply that not everybody was there to listen, not everybody was there to see the truth of that particular insight. Once you've got the whole mind gathered together, then one single message can seep through everything.

This is why as we are meditating, it's not just a matter of getting the mind focused, the body's got to be involved as well. That image in the Canon of taking the sense of ease and pleasure that come from the concentration, that come from a comfortable breath and allowing it to permeate throughout the body, working it, kneading it throughout the body, so that every part has a sense of belonging to the concentration, that's really important. Without that the messages don't get thoroughly transmitted. Some parts of the mind will hold back. But when everyone's working together, when everyone's feeling a sense of ease, gratification and fullness, then they all hear the lesson. They are all happy to hear the lesson because they can see how true it is. This particular insight that you gain really does make a difference, really does cut through ignorance, really does cut through this problem of random members of the committee causing problems.

Try to get everybody involved, try to get everybody to cooperate, so that the committee as a whole gets free from suffering.