

Inner Discontent

December 22, 2009

Training the mind is like training a child. You have to have a sense of when to be gentle with it and when to be strict. This is a sense that you can develop only over time—which means that there are going to be mistakes in the practice, times when you push yourself way too hard, you get frazzled, and you begin to get discouraged. There will be other times when you don't push yourself enough, and let everything go with the flow. After a while you began to realize that going with the flow is like going with the flow of water: Everything just flows downhill. This means that you need standards, and you need to learn how to be observant to gain a sense of what you're doing, when it's working, and when it's not.

This is when the meditation becomes a lifelong project. If you're doing it just for a weekend or two, you simply listen to instructions and try to follow them through as best as you can. If things don't work out, you can tell yourself that the instructions weren't all that good. You go looking for another teacher, another practice. But when you really look at your life and you see, "I'm suffering. There's something wrong here," that's when you really get started on the practice in earnest.

The Buddha actually encourages that perception: that there's something wrong. He doesn't tell you to accept everything with equanimity or just let it be. A sense of contentment, a sense of equanimity works in some cases, but not all. Admittedly, an important part of the practice is learning to gain a sense of when you can just let things be, either because you don't want to get involved with them at all or you let them be for a while, so that you can get a sense of what's going on. But as you look the Buddha's life, you realize he himself was motivated by the strong sense that something is wrong: There is suffering. Here he was, subject to aging, illness, and death, and he was looking for happiness in other things that were also subject to aging, illness, and death. There was something not right there.

That sense of "something's wrong, somethings is not quite right": That was his motivation. That's what got him started. He ultimately began to see that the "something wrong" was not so much what's wrong out there, as what's wrong in here.

This is why, when he talks about contentment, it has to do with material things. You want to content yourself with whatever food, clothing, and shelter you get, realizing that if you have enough to practice, that's plenty right there. It

also means getting a realistic view of what “enough” means. Usually it’s a lot less than we tend to think. You can get by with a lot less than we normally have.

He has you develop that kind of contentment because he wants you to pay more attention inside. As long as long as there’s still suffering in the mind, you can’t be content with what’s going on in the mind. You have to be very careful, very watchful, to figure out exactly what it is you’re doing that’s causing suffering. He has you look at your actions, he has you look at your words, he has you look at your thoughts for their potential to cause pain, suffering, stress. As you keep your focus right here—as long as the work is not done, as long as you haven’t learned to weed out every form of unskillful behavior—he has you acknowledge the fact that there is still something wrong. You don’t just accept things as they are.

Sometimes you have to accept that you’ve made a mistake. Okay, you’ve made a mistake. Learn how to accept that. But you don’t stop with the acceptance. The next step is to figure out the next time around, “How can I improve on this? How can I learn not to make that mistake again? And how can I also encourage the set of skills that I can depend on?”—i.e., developing things that are right in the mind, that can give you the strength to keep going.

This perception of your own mistakes is often hard to take unless you’ve got a good solid sense of well-being to fall back on, so that you realize: In addition to something wrong, there’s also something right.

You look for what that something right might be, in terms of your virtue, in terms of your commitment, in terms of your mindfulness and concentration. How do you make these things right, or even more reliable than they are now?

So it’s not simply a case of learning how to accept things just the way they are. If the Buddha had been that kind of person, just accepting things as they are, we wouldn’t have heard of him. He would have been just one more prince who was satisfied with his life, didn’t do anything special, never left behind any special knowledge or skills, and then died. And we wouldn’t have anything to work with our own suffering. But he was the sort of person who realized there is something wrong and wanted to find a way of looking deeply into his own mind to see exactly where that something wrong came from.

So it’s important as you continue with the practice that you have that sense, on the one hand, that there is something wrong, but on the other hand that there’s also something right—but what’s right is still not yet good enough, and what’s wrong is still too powerful in the mind.

This is why right effort is such an important part of the practice. You may have noticed, as we were chanting the sutta just now—the analysis the path—that the first five factors are fairly short. Then you get into the long ones, the ones that

involve concentration, starting with right effort. Many times we're told that efforting is a bad part of the practice, something that's going to get in the way, and that we should just relax and be with things as they are. But that's not what the Buddha said. When you've got unskillful qualities appearing in the mind, you want to learn how to recognize them, you want to develop the desire to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, you want to develop desire to give rise to them. You have both potentials in the mind, so it's going to require work to sort things out.

You want to make changes in the mind as you practice. If you find that unskillful qualities are coming up in the mind, don't get discouraged. Everybody has to meet up with these things. An important part of the concentration is learning how to deal with them. You may not like to keep seeing the mind wandering off, wandering off, but if that's what the mind is doing, that's what you've got to deal with. If you find it wandering off, just bring it right back. Wandering off again, then as soon as you catch it, bring it right back. Try to be quicker and quicker in catching it. It's that determination to be quicker: That's what's going to make your concentration more solid, your mindfulness more continuous.

Once you've developed that mindfulness, developed that concentration, then you try to develop it even further. You find in the beginning that it comes in phrases. There'll be little phrase of concentration, and then it disappears. Then you start up again, it'll go for a while, then disappear. You have to get a sense of what the rhythm is, and exactly what happens as things begin to unravel. The causes may not seem like much.

You may wonder, "What am I doing here, just working with the breath, keeping my mind focused on this one little thing, when there are so many bigger issues in life?" Well, you need a mind well trained in order to deal with those bigger issues. Remind yourself of that. You need more mindfulness, more alertness. So you just keep coming back to the breath. When you find that the mind is beginning to lose its focus, what can you do ramp things up so that the focus stays continuous? It's these little things that make all the difference.

So there is something to be content with right here. Content yourself with what has to be done right now, where you are in the practice, what the task is that has to be done, rather than wondering about when all the great insights are going to come. After all, big insights come from little insights, from taking the little insights seriously and learning from them. It's not a matter of suddenly gaining a pristine vision of the world, that that's what the world is all about, or this is what the meaning of life is all about. It's more a matter of just noticing little things

about the mind and then taking advantage of the things you've noticed as tools to develop further mindfulness, further concentration.

You may wonder when you're going to get to the big stuff. Well, the big stuff lies in the little stuff, and in finding a balance between contentment and discontent: discontent in the sense that things are not yet right in the mind, and content in realizing that "This is the lesson I've got to learn right now, so I'll learn this lesson." You're not so proud that you're going to wait only for the great insights or a wonderful sense of interconnectedness or whatever. What little tasks have to be done right now, don't regard them as unimportant. Ajaan Mun once made the comment that it's not the case that people often get logs in their eyes, but they do get sawdust in their eyes, and it can blind you. The little things can blind you. So you work on the little things.

As you observe the little things, you begin to notice the subtleties of how the mind creates stress for itself, how it looks for the wrong things, cultivates the wrong attitudes, how a little bit of anger—if you don't watch out for it, if you're not alert to it—can grow into something really big. Once it's taken over the mind, then it's really difficult to pull yourself free from it.

So this is what the discontent comes down to: being very watchful, realizing you can't trust everything that comes along in the mind. You've got to test things. As soon as you recognize something as unskillful, you've got to do something about it. If you don't, it'll grow, it'll fester, it'll take over.

This is where you've got to keep watch. This is why the Buddha recommends that you be content with your outside situation so that you can focus your discontent on what's going on inside. And again, you have to be very careful about how you balance things here. You may not like where you are in the practice. You would like to be further along. Well, this is where you are right now. The only way you're going to get further along is to take whatever step is the next step. It's that willingness to keep taking the next step and then the next, the next: That's what gets you to the end of the path. And the end really is something special. As the Buddha said, you see things that you've never seen before. You learn things you've never learned before. You attain things you've never attained before.

That requires that you do things you never did before—not necessarily that you have to throw yourself into it all at once, exhausting yourself in the process. Exhausting yourself doesn't help. Doing things you've never done before means putting more into the path than you might want, sticking with it even as it gets hard, with the conviction that there have got to be rewards here. It's part of right effort: generating desire. Sometimes generating desire means generating conviction, nourishing it, looking around and seeing all the suffering around you,

and realizing if there is any way out, it's in this path of looking into your mind and not accepting everything that's there, trying to do something about it.

So be very clear about what you accept, what you don't have to accept, where you should be content, and where you should foster a sense of discontent. There are no quick and easy answers to these questions. But then again, this is how you develop discernment, this is how you develop insight, realizing that there are distinctions you have to make and, through trial and error, finding out exactly where the lines are drawn.