

Games the Mind Plays

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One of the few times Ajaan Fuang accepted an invitation to a meal was at the home of one of his students, whose sister was also a Dhamma practitioner. Instead of chanting, we made a Dhamma conversation. Or Ajaan Fuang had a Dhamma conversation with the hosts. The woman's sister said, "I've been meditating, trying to get my mind as empty as possible." And Ajaan Fuang said, "No. No. No. Don't do that. When the mind is empty, anything can come into it: good or bad. It's like leaving the door of your house open. Anyone can walk in."

You've got to have work for the mind to do. You've got to have a direction for the mind. This is why we have right view: to remind us that we have a path that takes us from our suffering to the end of suffering. You've got to keep that direction in mind. It's only when you get to the very end of the path that you can start practicing what they call undirected concentration. But until you get to that point, you have to have a strong sense of direction, because otherwise the mind would just go off in all sorts of other directions.

There are a lot of strange ideas about what meditation is about. One of the strangest is that by getting the mind open and empty, your natural wisdom will come to the surface. And it is true that there are times when something that's been hidden inside you—kept down by your social conditioning or whatever unhealthy ideas you've picked up from the people around you—will have a chance to come to the surface when you clear those ideas away. But there are a lot of other things down there that can come to the surface as well. In addition to your natural wisdom, there's your natural greed, your natural anger, natural fears, and natural delusion: things that can pull you off the path and into the thickets on either side. So don't believe that just whatever comes up in your quiet mind is something that can be trusted. You have to question it.

Then you have to keep in mind the fact that you are working on a path that has direction and has very clear instructions. Fortunately, this path is a path that's got your true interest in mind, unlike the paths that, say, your society, or members of your family may have gotten into your head one way or another.

The Buddha's path focuses specifically on what is *your* problem: the fact the mind is causing suffering for itself. And the Buddha gives clear instructions on how to put an end to that. This is something you've got to hold onto, because other parts of your mind will say, "No, I don't particularly care for that analysis. I don't care for that goal. I've got other goals right now." And it's a mistake to think

that this resistance is somehow the deepest thought in your mind, or the most reliable thought in your mind, just because it's coming up when things have cleared up a bit.

Remember that image of the committee. And there's not just the committee that's operating on the surface. As we all know in any political discussion, very rarely do the real operators show their faces. They let their puppets act for them. So just because something is hidden doesn't mean it's reliable.

There was a game that my stepmother used to play with my father. If she wanted something out of him that she knew was unreasonable, she wouldn't talk to him for days on end. He wanted to know what was wrong. What had he done? At first she wouldn't say, wouldn't say, wouldn't say. Then, if she knew that he was desperate enough, that he'd do anything to please her, she'd make her demand. And he'd be all too happy to give in for the sake of peace in the household. And we found ourselves being pushed more and more out of the family as a result.

Well, the mind plays that trick on itself, too. It's not just a trick that you find in couples. It holds things back for a while and it can make you miserable. You don't know what's going on. Something's wrong. Something's got you depressed. Something's got you worried. Something's got you anxious. But the mind's demand is basically unreasonable, so it knows that you're not going to give in until you're desperate and you're willing to do anything for a little peace. So finally, when you're desperate enough, it'll come up to the surface. Then the simple sense of relief that, "Ah, at last I know what's going on" makes you believe whatever it says. Well, don't fall for those tricks.

Remember, this committee of the mind is not a gathering of saints, or your wise old ancestors. There's greed in there. There's anger. There's delusion. There's all kinds of ignorance, fears, jealousy: lots of unskillful things sloshing around in the mind. That's the other reason why things are kept down in the basement, not necessarily because your social conditioning has pushed them out unfairly, but because there issues where you'd be embarrassed to admit to yourself that you actually have these feelings inside. And so they have to act indirectly.

One of the reasons we get the mind still, get it quiet, get it settled down, is so that we can have a sense of well-being and a sense of confidence, so that when these things do come to the surface, we can admit, "Oh yeah. There is greed in there. There is anger. There is delusion." You're also in a position where you realize, "I don't have to give in to those things." Just because they're hidden doesn't mean they're true—and it certainly doesn't mean that they should have control over your life. After all, this path that we're on is not a path of just

watching whatever happens. You've got a goal. You've got a direction. You want to point things in that direction.

All the images in the Buddha's teachings have that sense of direction. You're following a path, a path that's meant to go someplace. You're crossing over the river. You're on this side where there's suffering. On the other side is total freedom from suffering. You want to get over to the other side. When the image is simple and clear like that, it seems like this would just be a simple thing. You're suffering. You don't want to suffer. You get across the river. You follow the path to the end of suffering.

But there are parts of the mind that have other agendas. So you say, "Before I go to the end of suffering, I'd like to try this a little bit. I'd like to try that a bit." Or you take on responsibilities that just eat, eat, eat away at you. Either way, you're letting yourself get washed downstream to the whirlpools. So you've got to do what you can to get past these things and get over to the other side.

This path is a truth of the will—in other words, the kind of truth that's not going to happen unless you make up your mind that it'll happen. Teach yourself to trust that determination. This right here is an important element: the element of trust.

Again, we have this sense that "Well, my deep feelings down inside, my deepest craving: There's something I must trust about that. I've got to feed it before I can move on." Well, how long have you been trusting your craving? Do you know how long? And do you know where it's taken you all these many, many lifetimes? Can't you learn to trust the part of the mind that's at least got its nose above water so that it can breathe a bit? And can't you tell yourself, "That would be much better: getting you over to the other side of the river so I'm not totally immersed in suffering"?

And you can't wait until everybody inside is on board before you make the next step. You've got to keep making that step, pushing things, finding where there's resistance and learning how to deal with it.

And don't be surprised that the resistance is there. Don't think, "Ah, this is some hidden part of my mind that I didn't see before. I must give it some time to express its wisdom." As in any process of strengthening, you have to push back at the resistance again and again. Part of the mind says, "Well, I've had these ideas in the past that by reason should be in charge and they made me miserable." Well, what exactly did your reason say? What was informing your reason?

The Buddha's wisdom is something with a really good track record. And although his reasons may be really demanding, the rewards are huge. In the beginning, you have to take that on trust. But then again, who are you going to

trust: your greed, your anger, your delusion, your fears? Or would you like to trust the Buddha for a change? Trust the example of the noble sangha? Try not to fall for the games that the mind plays on itself. Remember this is a training for the whole mind, and not just for your gut feelings.

There was that joke about how your gut has more nerve endings than your brain. Your gut is what tells you that. But how far can you trust your gut? You want to learn how to use your reason. You want to learn how to master all the tricks of the mind and turn those tricks on the defilements. Don't let them have all the tricks. Talk to your mind.

This is another misunderstanding: the idea that somehow the non-verbal part of your mind is wiser; and as for the conditioned part of the mind, the language, just get rid of that conditioning and you've reached the unconditioned. Well, no. The non-verbal part of your mind is hugely conditioned: all those vague feelings and half-formed desires. The reason they're vague is because if they became clear, you'd see right through them. So it's not a matter that your feelings are right and your reasons are wrong, or that all the words you've learned from other people are bad for you. You've got to learn how to use your discernment.

Some ways in which the mind talks to itself are really unskillful. But you can train it to talk to itself in skillful ways. Learn how to improve the quality of the dialogue in your committee. Try to get the mind still so that it's in a position where it can let everybody have their say, and then sort things out, not believing everything the mind tells itself.

So when the mind gets still, things will come up. And that's when the work of discernment begins, in figuring out: "What is this coming up? Is this some suppressed wisdom that's coming up or is it some suppressed greed, aversion, and delusion coming up?" And remember, the path is not going to just come up and push you to the end. Your discernment has to be in charge to keep reminding yourself, "This is the noblest. This is the best. This is the wisest aim that you can have for yourself; the wisest goal you can have for yourself—to learn how to abandon all the unskillful ways in which the mind creates suffering."

And to build. You do have to build the path. It's not going to be a natural flow. You do build the path. It develops some momentum as you build it to the point where it develops a sense of flow. But it takes determination to go against the stream of your defilements. And that determination is informed by your discernment. Sometimes you have to remember that the discernment has to be informed by the determination, too. The two have to go together. Remember the image from Ajaan Mun's last major Dhamma talk: You're a soldier going to battle.

Your primary weapon is your discernment. And what is the soldier? Your determination not to come back and suffer ever again.

Always try to keep that image in mind.