

Using the Committee of the Mind

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The fact that the mind is like a committee can be a weakness or it can be a strength. It's a weakness when you're trying to get the mind to settle down. You have a clear idea of what you want to do but not everybody in the mind is on board. You realize that there's some free time here, and something in the mind says, "Well, now you can think about x . You haven't had time all day. Now's some free time to think about x ." And you suddenly find yourself away from the breath, away from the meditation.

Then, you come back and then there's another opinion about y —or how about z ?—and, if you spend your time stamping out all those different opinions, it's like playing Whack-A-Mole. A mole comes up out of a hole, you whack it, and then another one comes up out of another hole, you whack that, and the mind never gets a chance to settle down, to really be at ease, or to have any stillness.

But the fact that the mind is like a committee means you have lots of different selves in there. And that means that when an unskillful one takes over, you don't have to follow it. There is that tendency in the mind—and it's a strange tendency—that when you're working on something skillful, the mind can find all sorts of excuses not to be there, not to go down the noble eightfold path, but to go down another path. Yet when you get on an unskillful path, something in the mind says, "Well, now you're committed. You may as well follow it all the way through." You've got to switch those attitudes.

The fact that you do have other voices in the mind that can say, "Hey, wait a minute. This is off the track," and the realization that you don't have to identify with everybody on the committee: That's what can get you back on track. Now, it can be difficult because every voice in the committee sounds like you. There may be attitudes you picked up from your parents, picked up from school, picked up from the media, but you've internalized them, so that every thought sounds like your thought; every desire, your desire. But, when you realize that you have a choice—that you can have other desires, other thoughts—that allows you to pull yourself out.

Otherwise, you're stuck with the conundrum: If you have just one self, either the self is good or it's bad. If it's already good, then why do you need to practice? If it's already bad, how *can* you practice? Everything you come up with is going to be suspect; you're going to have to go for some outside help. But, when you realize

that you've got multiple selves, and they're on all levels of goodness and bad, you can strengthen the good ones and starve the bad ones.

That's an image the Buddha uses. He talks about starving the hindrances. Sensual desire comes up, ill will comes up, sleepiness, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty: You try to starve them by pulling out and looking at them with appropriate attention, asking yourself, "What is this? If you were to apply the four noble truths, or the basic distinction between skillful and unskillful, where would this mind state fall?"

Would it fall into the causes of suffering? Something unskillful? In cases like that, the duty is to abandon it. Our problem is that, when the hindrances come up, we don't pull out of them quickly enough. We tend to believe in them.

Sensual desire says, "This particular thought is really attractive. It's worth desiring."

Ill-will will tell you, "So-and-so did something really bad and they deserve to suffer for it," and it can come up with all kinds of reasons for wanting to see that person suffer.

Sleepiness comes on, and a part of the mind says, "Yes, I really do need to rest."

Restlessness and anxiety: You feel virtuous about getting worried about things, that you really are concerned about realities.

As for uncertainty, you can find all sorts of reasons to be cynical or to not believe.

So it's quite a step to say, "I don't have to believe these voices in the mind. I can step out of them and just look at where they're coming from and see that they're not worth going with." So, we have that choice. We want to make the most of it.

As for the skillful qualities to be developed, those are the factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities—when the mind gets very clear about what's skillful and what's not skillful inside. That's followed by persistence, where you actually try to abandon what's unskillful, develop what's skillful. You continue doing that, you keep at it until there's a sense of fullness that comes from the fact that you've been able to abandon unskillful qualities.

That's the definition of the rapture that comes in the first jhana: rapture born of seclusion from unskillful qualities. Then the rapture gets based on concentration, which makes it even stronger, and then you move the mind to a state of calm and, eventually, to equanimity.

In every case, you apply appropriate attention to these things, which means that you see that they're good things and you try to develop them, maintain them,

let them grow. But it's based on the ability to step out and evaluate the voices in the mind, to see which ones are worth going with, which ones are not.

And, because you have so many voices, you can take the good ones and strengthen them. They become your power, they become your strength on the path. Because you *need* that strength.

We get encouragement from our teachers, we get encouragement from our fellow practitioners, but there comes a point where you really have to depend on yourself. You have to find the resources of appropriate attention inside you. This is when the practice really becomes yours.

Ajaan Fuang noted, when I first stayed with him—we'd have a group meditation every evening, and he'd always encourage me—"When you go back to your hut, meditate some more." He said that his experience was that, with people who would sit through the group sit and that was the extent of their meditation, they didn't go very far.

The ones who went far were the self-starters, the ones who realized, "We're not doing this just to fit in with the group; we're doing this because there's suffering in the mind, and something needs to be done about it, and this is the best thing to do about it."

So, whatever resistance there is in the mind, whatever voices say No, you have your reasons to say Yes. It's as you resist the temptation just to go back and chill out for the rest of the evening that you learn how to deal with your defilements. You learn how to argue with them so that you don't give into them all the time.

This is an important part of the meditation: the fact that you're doing the work. They do have these electronic devices now that will either give you biofeedback, so you get an idea of when you've got the right brainwaves, or they'll actually change your brainwaves for you. They say it's a great shortcut to awakening. Well, it's a shortcut to concentration maybe, but when you're not doing the work, you're not getting any understanding.

It's when you actually fight off a defilement, it's actually when you get the mind to settle in and see all the different fabrications that go into getting the mind to settle in—either in terms of the three fabrications or the five aggregates, you see these as activities and you master them yourself: That's when you gain insight. That's when you gain the discernment that allows you to be free.

Otherwise, you're just coasting along, plugging in, and getting a buzz, and that's it—no understanding, because you're not making any of the choices. The voices in the mind can continue chattering along as they did in the past.

It's when you learn how to argue with them—the unskillful ones—and learn how to give some encouragement to the skillful ones: That's when you begin

sorting things out in the mind. You gain some understanding of how the mind works, because how the mind works has been going on in ignorance for so long, and that's why we suffer. Here, we're trying to bring knowledge to that process.

The knowledge comes from getting your hands dirty—in other words, actually doing the work: meditating on days when the meditation is not going well, and not giving up; meditating at times when, say, early in the morning you get up and you really want to continue lying down for a while but there's a voice inside that says, "No, you don't gain awakening by lying down and indulging in the pleasure of lying down; you gain awakening by getting up." And you actually follow through. That's when you've made a step in the right direction, and you've begun to train the members of the committee of the mind so that they actually become your friends.

The ones that are really your enemies—the ones that don't have any concern about long-term happiness—you can put them out to pasture. You can retire them. You work with the ones that are determined—that realize you've suffered enough, and this is the way out.

So, don't get discouraged when the unskillful members of the mind take over. Find resources inside yourself to say, "I've got to figure out the way around these people."

Ajaan Maha Boowa has an image. It's like being in the boxing ring with the defilements. He says that even when you lose to them, you can still curse them as you're lying on the mat. It's okay to be angry about the fact that you're not as skillful as you'd like to be. After all, the Buddha himself said the key to his awakening was discontent with his skillful qualities.

So, learn how to nurture that attitude in a healthy way, and you'll find that there will be times when you win, and you get that much closer to realizing that maybe you, too, can find an end to suffering.

So, learn how to aim high and, as you take this higher point of view, you can look at the committee of the mind and get a clearer idea of who needs to be removed and who needs to be promoted. It's simply a matter of figuring out the politics inside so that you can actually *do* that—get the right people in charge.

But you're the one who has to do the work. Even the Buddha said that all he could do was point out the way. Still, the fact that we have someone who has pointed out the way based on his experience: That's a big leg up right there.