Break It Down

June, 2003

There’s an old principle in approaching any large job that you try to break it down into smaller jobs to make it manageable, take it piece by piece, so that it’s not so overwhelming. And the same principle applies to dealing with negative states in the mind. They can come on so strong, so overwhelming, that it’s very easy to get blown away. But if you can break them down into their component parts, you find that you can manage them. Greed, anger, delusion, lust, aversion, fear, all these states come on. They seem so strong, so big. And often, as we’re meditating, they seem even bigger and stronger because the mind is getting more quiet and can sense the havoc that these things create in the mind, the damage that they do, even more clearly. Because you have had states of mind when things are calm and collected, and all of a sudden these storms come blowing in. And if you’re used to storms, stormy weather, it doesn’t seem all that unusual. But if you’re used to quiet times, then the storm seems all that more dramatic. So it’s important that you try to take these things apart bit by bit. Take apart the mental side from the physical side. Try to catch these things as they come on. In other words, don’t wait until they hit with full strength. Try to be mindful, knowing that they’re going to come. You can’t be complacent. The mind is nice and calm. It seems like it’s just going to stay calm that way forever. And then, of course, something comes in, sneaks in to begin with. This is why the Buddha has us pay so much attention to restraint of the senses, the things you look at, the things you listen to, the things you smell, taste, touch, things that the mind focuses on, thinks about a lot. How do you look? How do you listen? When you go through a crowd, do you look for the pretty people, good-looking people? You can switch your eyes around. Go down into the crowd and look for the old people. See what a very different impression that makes on the mind. In other words, it’s what you’re looking for. I mean, it’s not that these things come in and attack you. You go out looking for trouble. That’s the problem. A good place to nip it in the bud is right here, where the eye sees forms, the ear hears sounds, and so on down through the senses. So try to catch these things quickly as they come. Another way of dealing with things, when they’ve taken over, is to make that distinction between the mental state and the physical state. Often, when a mental state arises, it sets the hormones racing through the body. Sometimes the actual mental state itself has gone, but because the hormones are still racing, we have the feeling that, say, the fear is still there, or the anger is still there, or the lust is still there, even though the actual fearful thought, the angry thought, the lustful thought have stopped. But all the physical signs are there, so we assume, “Well, it must still be there,” and that generates more fearful, angry, lustful thoughts. We feel that we’re tied to them. So, learn how to make a distinction between the two. Even though the hormones may still be doing their work in the body, you can change what your mind thinks about. Learn how to make that distinction. Then you can look at the actual physical sensations in the body. On the one hand, you can see, “How does anger feel? How does lust feel? How does fear feel?” Look at them simply as events, sensations in the body, and try to bring your techniques from breath meditation to bear on them, sort of dissolving through the anger, surrounding the anger with a good breath. Actually, not the anger, but the feelings, the sensations in the body, the constriction, the sense of oppression that comes along with these things. Breathe through them. Breathe around them. When you find that that way, it helps weaken the hold this emotion has. Then you can actually turn and look at the incident that got you angry, or whatever, to begin with, from a better vantage point. What could you do now? What is the best thing to do now? Can you say something? Can you do something? Can you think about something that will resolve the situation? Assuming there really is a bad situation, not simply just a matter of likes and dislikes. If you can’t do anything right now, put the focus of the matter aside. There will come a time when you can do something about it. And if there doesn’t come such a time, well, there’s nothing you could have done anyhow. Don’t waste your time with it. This is why equanimity is such an important part of the practice. Learning how to realize what’s worth dealing with, what’s not. What’s a waste of time, what’s not. That way, you get some distance. You get some perspective on what’s going on. Then look at the individual thoughts that are coming through the mind. Many times things come rushing through the mind when a particular emotion is strong. But if you took each of the thoughts one by one by one, they don’t make all that much sense. Many times it’s simply coming through with such strong force. It’s like a person who wants to push a particular agenda on a committee. But there’s no real reason for the agenda, so they use all kinds of subterfuge—an insistent tone of voice, threatening tone of voice. You find that your mind does that same sort of thing, too. So just listen to the thoughts. What kind of voice is speaking? Is it a voice you want to listen to, something that you would like to give credence to? Again, when you can step away from the thinking this way and just see the thoughts one by one by one as they come, you find they’re a lot easier to deal with. Don’t think about how many thoughts you’ve had to deal with in the past, how much longer it’s going to take to resolve the issue. Just deal with things one by one by one as they come, and you find them a lot easier to handle. There also come the thoughts that say, “Well, it’s hopeless to try to resist this, because you know you’re going to give in in the end, in the end of the anger, in the lust, whatever.” Well, notice that thought. “Well, who’s saying that? Why do I have to believe that thought?” Even if you are defeated in the end, it’s better to fight for a while, because you learn about your enemy much more than if you simply gave in. So when emotion comes like this, try to break it down into the individual thoughts, into the individual senses. That’s if it’s already taken over. If it hasn’t yet taken over, watch for its beginning signals, its beginning symptoms, that something like this is going to happen, and try to nip it in the bud, both by the way you look and listen and smell and taste and touch things and think about things, and the way you try to maintain mindfulness with the breath. Being with the breath puts you in the ideal place to watch for these things to happen, because you’re right at the boundary line between the mind and the body. The interaction between the two happens right here. The more sensitive you get to the breath sensations in the body, the quicker you’ll be able to see these things as they come, and you’ll be in a better position to deal with them. This is why we have the techniques of breathing comfortably. Breathing through things, being aware of the whole body, so there are no blind spots where these things can sneak in. There are no gaps in your awareness where they can come and take over. When you put yourself in a position like this, you find you’re better situated for dealing with these issues as they arise, and you find that you have a handle on the medium. If you can’t overcome them, if you can’t win out with them every time, at least you’re in a better position—not so totally helpless. As I said, when you do battle with these things, after a while you begin to notice patterns, how they keep winning out. What do they do? Then look at the specific thoughts, the specific sensations that make you give up, and ask yourself, “Why do I give up with that? Why is that so unbearable? Why am I so willing to give in?” Who is this fifth column that’s already willing to give in all the time? Your gaze has to be at 360 degrees to catch these things as they come, and learn how not to identify with any of them. It’s in breaking these things down that they become manageable. Common image is that of seeing a cloud. You see a big thunderhead coming up, and it looks enormous and very substantial. But when you get closer, you see it’s made up of just these little tiny droplets of mist, not all that much. If there was some way that you could take a cloud apart piece by piece by piece like this, then you could get rid of the danger of, say, a thunderstrike. It may not work out in clouds, but it certainly does work in the mind. When things are taken apart, you find it’s the glue that was causing the problem anyhow. Once you cut through the glue, then the individual incidents, the individual sensations and thoughts really don’t carry that much weight. The cloud dissolves.

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