Meditator, Mediator

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Spellcheck on my computer doesn’t recognize the word “meditator.” It always wants to change it to “mediator.” And, when you think about it, it’s got a point. As a meditator, you’ve got to learn how to mediate. Meditate among the various voices in your mind. You can’t just push things out. If we could push out our defilements, put them on an ice floe, and let them float off into their death in the Arctic Ocean, meditation would be a lot easier. But they don’t go away that easily. You’ve got to learn how to listen to them. Put them in a neutral place where you can actually hear what they have to say. Because, occasionally, what seems to be a defilement actually has a good point. Because sometimes our own attitude toward the practice has some problems as well, and they stir up defilements. It’s actually a sign that we’re doing something wrong. So we have to have a space where everybody can listen to everybody else. It’s the same in society. You’ve got everybody polarized, just yelling at each other, trying to decide who’s the true American and who’s not the true American, and claiming that only a small group of people have the right to make decisions. Society falls apart. Or juvenile delinquents. Many times they get branded as troublemakers, but they’ve actually got a point. They’re not being treated like human beings, so they start acting out. If you treat them like human beings, they start acting like human beings. Give them a place to talk, listen to them, and start reasoning with them. Have a sense that they’re coming from the same place, and then you can actually be in dialogue. It’s the same within your own mind. Remember that every impulse in the mind is aimed at happiness, so that’s common ground. It’s not like there are evil impulses and good impulses. Every impulse starts out neutrally. You want happiness. Some of the impulses tend to be more skeptical. Some are more skillful than others in some areas, but they still have a few skills that they have to learn. Especially if they just simply try to push everybody else out, go straight for awakening and throw everything else overboard. The stuff that gets thrown overboard is going to come back and attack you. So this is one of the things we have to learn how to do, is learn how to get into a dialogue inside. The first thing that’s required is a safe place to talk. That’s where we practice concentration. It’s where you develop a sense of ease, both in the body and with the breath, the ease being in the present moment. When you feel physically at ease, it’s a lot easier to be in a good mood and not feel so desperate. It’s our desperation and our impatience that makes it difficult for us to talk. It makes it easiest for us to make snap judgments, throwing our weight around. What happens, of course, when we throw our weight around is that other parts of the mind throw their weight back. Especially if you don’t have a sense of ease or well-being in the meditation, you start getting desperate after a while. That’s what someone once called “mindfulness hell,” where all you can do is just be mindful of whatever comes up and you don’t have any skills in dealing with it. You’re not allowed to create a sense of ease because you’re supposed to be unattached to anything. Of course you’re going to be attached. You want a sense of ease in the practice. It’s part of the path. It’s something you develop. The right concentration is part of the Eightfold Path, and what’s the duty with regard to the Eightfold Path? Well, you develop it. So even though there may be a germ of attachment in there, it’s a skillful attachment. It’s a useful attachment. It creates space, creates a sense of having some time, having the patience, being in the space where you want to get into a dialogue and not feel so threatened by everything all the time. So when issues do come up in the mind, you’ve got to check and see, one, are you in a position where you can have a dialogue? If you’re not in a position yet, say, “Wait a minute. Let’s get a space where we can both talk.” And then sit down and say, “Okay, what’s the problem? Do you have any ideas for a solution?” And see what comes up. And if the solution is bad, don’t just throw it away. Try to further the dialogue. Give reasons for why that particular solution won’t work and say, “Well, can you think of another one?” The part of the mind that hasn’t had a chance to talk, it’ll start talking. And the part of the mind that’s never learned how to negotiate, never learned how to deflect controversy, will start learning to be in dialogue. Because remember, you’ve got this basis for conversation, your desire for happiness. It’s just that you’re coming at it from different directions with different assumptions. And if you learn to reason with wrong assumptions, after a while you’ll see what grain of truth they may have or what appeal they may have. As the Buddha once said, you can’t really get past something until you see its allure. And part of its allure comes from the fact that it does have a little bit of truth to it. So look for that and then try to take that as your common ground. And as with any mediation or negotiation, it’s not a clear right and wrong. And sometimes it’s a murky process as you work things out. And part of the mind that likes to deal in absolutes is going to get impatient. Well, you’ve got to look at that, that all-or-nothing state of mind. Remember, we’re working on a skill. Skills are not all-or-nothing. You gradually develop skill over time. And it’s learning how to be patient with that that enables the skill to develop. You look at the Buddhist teachings on ignorance at the very beginning of dependent co-arising. Ignorance of what? It’s not ignorance of a thing, or a state, or a principle, something that you either know or don’t know. It’s ignorance of a way of looking at things, a way of dividing up your present experience, or pointing out four things in the present moment that you might want to look for. Stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. And each of these categories has a duty, and the duty is something you master as a skill. It takes time. This is the kind of knowledge we’re working on, the kind of knowledge that comes from learning to be skillful, learning how to learn, which means making mistakes and then coming back and learning from your mistakes. It’s something that a lot of us would rather not do, but it’s the only way you’re going to learn anything of any use. It’s the only way you’re going to take these aggregates we have and turn them into a path. So accept the fact that on the path there are going to be mistakes. You’ve got to figure things out as you go. The principles are there, but actually applying them to whatever issue comes up in the present moment, that requires skill. It’s going to take time to learn strategies. Sometimes it’s good to see strategies that other people use, learning how to deflect a defilement, for instance, that’s a little bit too strong for you right now. Distract it a bit so you can work on this common space where you can actually sit down and talk. And then when you can sit down and talk, you can learn how to ask questions in a way that’s productive. When anger comes up, if you ask it why you’re angry, it’ll probably get even more angry at you. “What’s the problem? What’s the solution? What do you propose here?” And if it comes up with something totally irrational, say, “Well, that’s not going to work for this, that, and the other reason. Can you think of something else?” It’s like the way John Foong used to deal with spirit possession. He spread lots of goodwill toward the spirit, and he found that the spirit would talk. And he could reason with it. He didn’t use force, he didn’t try to push it out. There may be a way we can learn how to live together. You can live together with the person you’re inhabiting in a way that you don’t disturb that person’s life and both of you actually benefit. That was his approach. And the same approach works in the mind. You can teach your anger to be more reasonable. You’ve discovered that you have an ally, or that there used to be an enemy. And it’s going to have its ups and downs, as you sometimes find that the anger sneaks in and takes over, and you can’t totally trust it. But again, how else are you going to live? You can’t learn these skills unless you’re willing to make a few mistakes and then learn from them. So remember, the knowledge we’re working on here is the type of knowledge that’s a skill. After all, “Avijja” is the word for ignorance. “Avijja” is the word for skill. It’s a gradual process. This is why, in the early teachings, there was never any big contract. There’s no controversy about gradual and sudden. If you have the idea that there’s going to be this one thing that you need to know and it’s an all-or-nothing affair, then you might think that the gradual approach is going to get in the way. That’s why they had all those problems in Zen and the other teachings where they thought that it’s all about seeing your true nature. They thought that worrying about the path was going to get in the way of seeing your true nature. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. You’re working on a path. There’s that gradual slope, he says, that goes off the coast of India, and all of a sudden, bang! As you follow the gradual approach, it leads to the sudden drop-off. The amount of attention and alertness that you bring to developing the skill, that’s the quality, eventually, that’s going to have the sudden drop-off. It’s through the path that you find the end of suffering. The qualities of mind that are needed for developing that skill, those are the ones that are eventually going to reach the point where they really can see through. The only way they can see through is by sharpening them through the practice. So you don’t just do the practice waiting for something else to come. It’s in the process of being very alert to what you’re doing that you’re going to see through to something that’s not done, that has no doing, no intention. So, this murky process of dealing with your defilements, it’s the way out. You don’t just go along with it. You just push them out of your way. You work through them. That’s where release is found.

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