Complexity

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The mind is a very complex thing. It’s capable of just about anything. It can change on itself very quickly. It’s as if it’s not just one mind, it’s many minds in there, a whole committee. And a very unruly one at that. You make up your mind to do something, and the committee members start changing their minds almost immediately. This is one of the reasons why it’s so difficult to get a handle on the mind, to get it to settle down. But we have to reflect on the fact that if the mind weren’t complex, it would be stuck. In other words, if there were just one mind to it, it wouldn’t be able to help itself in both senses of that phrase. One, it would simply act under its nature, whatever that given nature was. It wouldn’t be able to change. And secondly, it wouldn’t be able to change itself. If there was any change that came, it would have to come from outside. What we’re doing as we’re practicing is learning how to take advantage of the complexity of the mind. Because you have many minds in there, one mind can observe another. One mind can change another. And as the committee learns to work together, each member pulls the other members along. For example, when you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, one of the first things you notice is that other thoughts come in, other intentions come in. Almost as soon as you’ve made up your mind, you’re going to stay with the breath. In the beginning, they’re part of the problem. But in learning how to deal with them, they become part of the solution. So when you find the mind wandering off, don’t get frustrated. Realize this is a natural part of the process. You simply have to learn skill and bring it back. Otherwise, you bring it back without a lot of remorse or self-chastisement. You say, “Okay, it’s wandered off. You bring it back.” You want it off, you bring it back again. Just get very matter-of-fact about it. And because you know it’s going to wander off, keep one eye out to look for the warning signs. When it wanders, what’s happening? Does something happen in the breath? Keeping one eye out for this tendency to wander, you don’t have to look anywhere else. The breath will let you know. If you’re really sensitive to the breathing, you can tell. There’s an antsiness in the mind, and it will be reflected in the breath. That antsiness is what gets it ready to go. Even when you’re looking at the breath, part of it’s already scanning the horizon, seeing where else it might go. So if you detect that happening before it latches on to something else, before it flies off to the horizon, do what you can to make the breath more interesting. As you’re more sensitive in this way, quicker in this way, you find that you get more and more of the committee on your side. The main technique in getting the mind to settle down is to make it comfortable. And all the members of the committee like comfort. That’s why they function. They want a sense of ease. It’s just that they have lots of different ideas about how to go about it. But if you can show them that you can have a sense of ease, well-being, and fullness simply by sitting here breathing, the committee members will begin to rally to your cause. And that way you put yourself in a position where you really can observe things properly, because it’s the ability of one part of the mind to observe another part of the mind, or one event in the mind. That’s what allows you to apply the principle of the four noble truths and look for where there’s stress. In the beginning, the concentration member of the committee will find it easier to look at the stress of wandering off, the stress of unskillful habits, when they’re really a sense of ease. You’ll notice something is unskillful because it creates a sense of dis-ease. That’s your clue. This is something you’ve got to understand. Why does the mind go for that dis-ease? Usually because it’s ignoring the uncomfortable part of that mental event. It’s focused more on what you want, or where you hope it’s going to take you. But if you can look at the event simply in and of itself, you’ll see that it’s stressful. Then any ease or satisfaction it’s going to produce has to be compared with the stress that it’s involved with, the stress involved in pursuing that ease. So you get to compare things. This is why the Buddha says, “To understand something, one, you have to watch it arise; you have to watch it pass away.” When you see an event in the mind simply as that, something arising, something passing away, then you can watch to see what’s its allure, what you like about it. Sometimes you like it because it produces satisfaction someplace down the line. Sometimes you like it even though it doesn’t really produce any satisfaction, but you’ve got some preconceived notions about it. You think, “This is going to be good.” A lot of psychotherapy is all about that, just seeing where you’ve picked up notions that something is going to be good, something is going to work in the mind, even though it doesn’t work, but you still stick with it. Their approach is to try to trace it back to your childhood. The Buddha’s approach is simply to watch it in the present moment. You don’t have to go back and dig out the roots in time. You simply dig out the roots in the present moment. There’s a misunderstanding, there’s an ignorance going on in the present moment. You’re not seeing the stress that’s caused by that event. For example, you might like anger. That feels good. There’s a rush in the body, a rush in the mind, a breaking down of the barriers that your common sense builds up around your behavior. Then you feel liberated, for a little bit at least. So that’s the allure. But then you have to look at what are the drawbacks. What do you actually do when you’re angry, when you give in to irritation? As the Buddha once said, the things we tend to do under anger are precisely the things that our enemies would be happy to see us do. We destroy our friendships. Sometimes we actually destroy our material possessions, throw them around. We look ugly. We think we’re gaining an advantage when we’re actually harming ourselves. So you take those drawbacks and you compare them with the allure and see which is greater. Is the allure worth the pain that comes with the drawbacks? If you look at it from a good, solid vantage point, you see that they’re not. Especially when you’ve got this sense of ease that comes with the concentration. Because all too often we run after things. The allure of things is because we’re starved for a sense of satisfaction, starved for a sense of pleasure. But when you can provide that sense of ease, that sense of pleasure, simply by breathing and spreading that comfortable breath around, you’re much less likely to go for those baits, to fall for that allure. So when you see the drawbacks and that they way outweigh the allure, that provides the escape. You develop a sense of dispassion for that particular event. This way, one side of the committee can begin to investigate other sides of the committee and strip them of their power. So this is how the complexity of the mind actually can be turned to your advantage. This is part of the Buddha’s general strategy. The mind is capable of straightening ourselves out, if the mind had a simple nature. As in some teachings, they say the mind is inherently good or the mind is inherently bad. If it’s inherently good, then there’s a question, of course, of why is it suffering? If it were inherently bad, there’d be nothing you could do. If its nature were simple. When you realize so, it’s not that case at all. You’ve got some good habits in the mind; you’ve got some bad habits in the mind. So what you want to do is cultivate the good habits, starve the bad habits, and that way you can lift the state of the mind. So it goes from a state of becoming that’s focused on sensuality, it moves into the state of form or formlessness. In other words, your kinetic sense of the body, how it feels from the inside, that lifts the body. It lifts the mind to a higher level. Then from that higher level, it can look at its other attachments. So in this way, one side of the mind helps another side of the mind. The various committee members can critique one another, especially the committee members that get on the side of concentration. First they critique the unskillful members of the committee. Then, when the unskillful members are stripped of their power, the different factors in concentration can observe one another. Again, looking for the stress that’s caused when they arise. What stress comes with them when they arise? What goes away when they pass away? In that sense, the Buddha’s teachings are simple. You apply the Four Noble Truths, the categories of the Four Noble Truths, to whatever you can observe arising and passing away. There are three perceptions. You see that something is inconstant. If it’s inconstant, you look for the stress. When you see the stress, you realize that it’s not really worth holding on to as you are yours. You don’t have to identify with it. Even though the mind is complex, you can apply that question, that series of questions, to whatever comes up. For instance, if there’s a good state of mindfulness and concentration, you apply the Four Noble Truths to it. You say, “Ah, this is part of the path. This should be developed.” This point usually gets missed when people rush to apply the three perceptions or the three characteristics to things that arise in the mind. You look first in terms of the Four Noble Truths. In the teaching, you don’t drop everything. Some things get cultivated. Some things get observed. You have to observe the suffering until you can see the cause. Only when you see the cause, that’s when you let it go. And in the letting go, that’s when you apply the three perceptions of inconsistency, stress, and not-self. So in that sense, the path is simple. But it’s the complexity of the mind that allows you to apply that path, to let go of things, to use the mind as a tool to let go of things. You use events in the mind to clean up events in the mind, so you don’t have to go running for outside help. So when you find that the changeability and unpredictability of the mind is exasperating you, remind yourself that this is a part of the problem right now, but eventually it’s going to be part of the solution. One of the problems of the modern world is that we’re so bombarded with news and stories and all kinds of things all the time that the mind gets a feeling of being overworked. It doesn’t like to deal with complexity. It wants to cut everything down to simple, easy answers. This is one of the reasons we come to a place like this, to cut down on the outside input, so the mind can develop more patience to deal with complexity. And then to turn that complexity to your advantage. So right now we’re working on developing those good members of the committee. And sometimes it may seem like herding cats, but it’s not always going to be that way. Keep coming back. Come back to the breath. Realize that there’s a lot of potential here for creating a sense of ease and well-being in the present moment. That’s going to be your friend. That’s going to be the rallying point for all the good qualities you want to develop in the mind. So make sure that at least that part of the committee is solid. And at that point then you can bring the whole committee in line.

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