Your Inner Adult

October 8, 2008

St. John Lee once commented, “Training the mind is like training a child.” There are times when it’s amenable, and times when it doesn’t want to play along at all. I was not saying that the whole mind is a child. Parts of it are like a child, and the other parts are like adults. This is where the adult parts have to learn how to deal with children. If you come down too hard, the children run away. They get even more disobedient, and create even more problems. If, of course, you give in to the children, the children take over. You don’t know what kind of house that’s like. Total chaos. The adults have to be in charge, but they have to be in charge in an intelligent way. They have to have their strategies, their tactics. Just like a parent who knows how to be playful for the child when the child is yelling and screaming. If the child starts to laugh so much that he forgets about yelling and screaming, he’s actually back on track. That’s one of the tricks a parent can have. Or, as John Lee says, when your baby cries, you learn how to read the cry so you know if it needs to be fed or needs to be changed, or to pick it up and walk it around with it. Take it outside. In other words, you have to learn how to read the moods of the mind and have your tactics for dealing with it. One of the primary tactics is working with the breath, because after all, children learn to like comfort, and so you make the breath comfortable. Learn how to use your in-and-out breathing so the whole body feels comfortable. The whole range of energy in your body, the field of energy, begins to feel full, refreshed, gratifying. That means you need to explore a lot in terms of the breathing process. You need to figure out how to adjust the breath, how to think of the breath. When you think of the breath coming in and going out, where do you think it comes in? Where do you think it goes out? When you think of it that way, what does that do to the breathing process? Is it comfortable? How about if you change the way you perceive the breath? In other words, you de-think your old ways of perceiving the breath and you think up some new ones. John Lee talks about the breath energy coming in and out of the back of the neck, or starting at the base of the spine, and either going out the legs or going up the spine. Sometimes you need a breath energy that comes up, and sometimes you need a breath energy that goes down. After a meal, you might want to think about the breath in the stomach and the intestines to help the blood flow down in that part of the body. But you also have to think about how the blood flow is going up in your head, because if all the blood flows down in your stomach and intestines, you start getting sleepy. So how do you manage the breath energy in the body? This is one of the things you have to explore on your own. This is where meditation takes time. It’s not that you’re just tying the mind down to one spot in the body and forcing it to stay there. When you do that, the child in your mind is going to revolt. As John Lee says, sometimes you give the child a doll to play with. The doll here is the—actually, there are four dolls, the different elements in the body, the sense of solidity, the sense of liquidity, the warmth, and then the breath energy. Give the child dolls to play with, and the child is going to be happy. And of course, as we all know, when children play, it’s not just foolishness. They actually learn things. You start learning things about the body. You start learning things about the mind as well. You find yourself getting absorbed in the breath, not because you’re forcing yourself to be there, but because it just becomes very interesting. You start getting curious. How about playing with the breath this way? How about playing with the breath that way? That’s when the child inside begins to grow up. So the whole mind becomes an adult. In other words, we’re not here just to listen to our inner child and then to obey whatever the inner child says, because the inner child tends to whine a lot and get stubborn and do all the things that children do, which is not helpful at all. You don’t want the child in charge of the house. You want the adult to be in charge of the house, but you want the adult to be a real adult, in other words, mature, experienced, the sort of person who can learn from mistakes and notice if something is not going well and you don’t have any instructions on how to make it go well. You try to think up ways to make it go well. There’s no way that anybody can explain all the ins and outs of the meditation so that you don’t have to use your own ingenuity. Your ingenuity is important. After all, how did the Buddha gain awakening? It was through his own ingenuity. He had tried all the different ways that were recommended back in his time and found that none of them worked. So you have to think up new possibilities and then explore them. There was a point in his practice where he’d come to the dead end of austerities. He asked himself, “Could there be another way?” He’d already tried sensual indulgence. He’d already tried austerities. So what was the other alternative? He thought of the time when he was a child sitting under a tree while his father was plowing. His mind had entered the first jhana, a sense of ease and rapture, as he was thinking about and evaluating his breath. He said, “Could that be the way?” Something inside him said, “Yes.” But even though that something inside him said, “Yes,” then he had to test it. So there was an element of trust in his insight, but he also had to test the insight. This is how you learn. This is how scientists learn. We think about scientists being very skeptical and not willing to come to any conclusions. They don’t come to any conclusions before they’ve tested everything. But they do have to have a certain amount of trust that the issue they’re trying to solve is an important issue and that their hypothesis has a chance. So you have to give it every chance, allow it to show its stuff, and then you come to a conclusion. It’s the same with the breath. You try different ways of breathing. You try different ways of thinking about the breath, perceiving the breath, and you give them a genuine try. If they work out, fine, you’ve learned something. Then you try them again to make sure. You want to know how many different situations they’re useful for. If they work out in some but not in others, okay, you’ve learned something important. Then you’ve got to think up ways of working with them. Working with the breath will work out in other areas as well. Just because you’ve come up with an idea doesn’t mean that it’s a wonderful idea that’s going to have to be true all the time. That’s child’s thinking. An adult way of thinking is to think something up, test it, then test it in lots of different situations so you get a good sense of its range. If you’re in an area that that particular idea doesn’t work, well, think up other ideas. That’s how you combine your creativity with your more adult mind. We tend to think that children are creative and adults are not, but that’s not really the case. The true adult is someone who can be creative and sober. At the same time, balanced in the practice. So you listen to the inner child to figure out what it wants, and then you’ve got to figure out what it needs. That’s the adult who realizes that part. Then figure out ways of inducing the child to be willing to play along. This is why John Lee talks about gaining a sense of well-being, a sense of inner wealth, in the practice. He says, “When you let go, you don’t want to let go like a pauper.” You say, “Well, everything is stressful and inconstant and not-self,” because you’ve never really tried to see what might be easeful and constant and under your control. The only kind of letting go that you can really trust is when you let go out of well-being, not out of desperation or frustration. Letting go out of desperation and frustration doesn’t last very long. It’s kind of a sour grapes letting go. As soon as things get better, you’re back to your old ways. You want to get everybody on board in the mind, all the different voices in the mind. Train them so they’re all adult, skillful, masterful. Then when you let go out of a sense of mastery, that’s the kind of letting go that you can really trust. [BELLS RINGING]

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