Negotiating with the Committee

September 3, 2009

The Buddha made an important distinction between physical seclusion and mental seclusion. You might be sitting alone under a tree, alone in the sense that there’s nobody else around you. But there can be a lot of people in your mind. Is it all your cravings? Or are your thoughts of past and future, all that conversation, going in your mind? It’s as if you have a lot of people there. You have to learn to find some peace among them. So you really can be alone, one, in the present moment. And that’s just to get to concentration. There are several ways of doing this. One is to banish all the unskillful members. That’s what you have to do in the beginning. Any unskillful thought that comes up, you just say, “Nope, nope, nope, we’re not going there.” And sometimes you have to reinforce that with reasons. As I said, one of the ways of dealing with unskillful thoughts is to look at the drawbacks. You have to realize that you’ve been watching these old movies many, many times, and you know exactly what Humphrey Bogart is going to say. And often the movies don’t even have Humphrey Bogart. You’re family, you’re friends, playing horrible roles and not playing them very well either. But they’re all in there. You have to remind yourself that these thoughts don’t go anywhere. If they do go someplace, they don’t go anywhere good. And for the sake of concentration practice, that’s often enough just to put them aside. Because while you’re practicing concentration, you’re developing a really important skill. So you can learn how to negotiate with all the voices in the mind. That’s learning how to give rise to a sense of immediate pleasure, rapture even, here in the present moment, using various simple materials. The breath, the ability to stay mindful of one thing over time, the ability to stay concentrated on one thing over time. So the mind has a chance to rest, settle down. And the physical elements in the body can become balanced, giving rise to that sense of ease, well-being. And as things get more and more still, there comes a sense of rapture, of fullness. It’s almost like every little cell in your body is full. All the blood vessels are full. In any parts of the body where you tend to carry tension, you allow that tension to relax. And so they get a sense of fullness as well. So you’re not constantly starving yourself. Because the mind does like to feed, and it likes to feed on pleasure. And as you negotiate with all the unskillful thoughts in the mind, all the unskillful voices, it’s really good to be able to throw them a little pleasure. Because what it comes down to is every voice in the mind, every identity, every self that you’ve ever created, is created for the purpose of happiness. So when you bring them to the table so you can get everybody together so you can talk about things, reason with the different parts of the mind, a lot of them don’t like listening to reason because they want instant happiness right now. And you’re going to train them to see that it’s important to respect cause and effect. But before they’re willing to listen to that, you have to be able to show them, “Okay, it is possible to attain a sense of ease and well-being right here, right now, in a skillful way.” So what are their unskillful demands for pleasure right now? You can say, “Look, here’s a better pleasure. It’s right here. It’s right now.” And then as you perfect this skill, then you can start bringing those unskillful thoughts to the table and learn how to inspect them. Because, as the Buddha says, you don’t really see through things simply by pushing them away or just seeing their drawbacks. You have to see, “Well, what is it about this particular idea, this particular inner persona, that has an appeal? Why do you do it? What do you like falling into that old habit? What gratification does it provide?” And you’ll see that there is part of the mind that likes even the habits that you have that you generally don’t like. There’s part of the mind that does like them, otherwise it wouldn’t be going for them. So you’ve got to be able to see both sides. What do you like about this unskillful behavior, and what do you not like about it? And you’ll see that what you like about it is that it does give a certain sense of pleasure, and what you don’t like about it is that it’s obscuring other possible pleasures. There’s a conflict in the mind. The different desires, your different identities, that form around these desires. As the Buddha says, craving takes a location. It’s right at something. One of the six senses is where this seed of an identity gets planted and gets watered, nourished. There’s not just one sense of identity. There are lots of different identities that you’ve developed over time. Each one is related to a particular skill set, and some of the skills may be really skillful and others are very crude. It may give a little hit of pleasure right now, but then there’s pain down the line. So it’s hard, really, to call them skills. But there was one point in your past where you got results from them, and so you tend to keep that particular identity in your menagerie. You bring it out whenever you feel like it. And because a lot of this stuff goes on in a very unskillful way, we don’t like to admit it to ourselves. We hide it from ourselves. This is ignorance. So to end the ignorance, you have to look at what’s the pleasure that comes from this. Is this really a healthy pleasure, a useful pleasure, or is it something that ends up causing more trouble than it’s worth? That’s where you learn how to negotiate with all the different voices in the mind. Instead of pushing them away and hiding them, once you’ve got a good state of concentration, you can bring them out. You’re more in control now because you do have that sense of immediate pleasure. That you can draw on when you need it. And you can sympathize with those various identities that you didn’t like before, because you can see, you can understand them. They’re all based on some idea of pleasure—sometimes very benighted, sometimes very ignorant. But that’s the basis for negotiation. Everybody at the table wants happiness. That’s the way that some desires for happiness are. Some desires are wiser than others. Remember the Buddha’s definition of the beginning point of wisdom? That question you go ask somebody who knows. What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term suffering and harm? It’s because you see that your actions are responsible for your happiness or your suffering. And you realize that long-term happiness is better than short-term. And you realize also that you can learn. You’re not just stuck in your old ways. That’s the beginning of wisdom right there. So then you try to apply those principles to all the various voices and all the various desires you had. See what pleasure they offer. See what drawbacks they carry. And when you have a better sense of pleasure, a better way of bringing about pleasure and well-being—in other words, a wider set of skills—you begin to see that some of your old skills are just skills in quotes. In other words, they’re not part of the toolkit that you’d want to keep with you. So when you see their allure, when you see their drawbacks, that’s when you can begin to see the escape from them, as you develop a sense of dispassion, as you see that your old skills really are not skillful. They’re not worth encouraging. They’re not worth keeping around, because you’ve got better skills. And you can learn how to apply those better skills to a wider and wider range of your interactions. That’s when you begin to create peace inside. And that sense of mental seclusion grows even deeper. It’s not just the enforced mental seclusion of concentration. It’s the seclusion of a mind that’s not carrying around a lot of unnecessary baggage. The word upati in Pali means essentially that upati was the whole pile of paraphernalia that you would carry around. Say you lived in a nomad household, and time comes to pick everything up. So you pick up your big tent, you pick up all your belongings and carry them with you. All those belongings, those are your upati. And for most of us, we have this huge pile of luggage, filled with straw and old garbage, weeds, all kinds of stuff that has no real use at all. And so as the mind begins to settle down, you begin to sort through your old baggage. See what you can throw away. You can travel a lot lighter until you really are totally without a companion. In other words, everything in the mind is on the same page. So those are some of the steps in how seclusion becomes complete, and it goes deep. It’s not just physical seclusion, sitting alone here, but with all sorts of voices clamoring in your mind. The desire is behind the voices, “Calm down.” Especially when you reach the experience of the deathless, you say, “Oh, there is a happiness that doesn’t require feeding. It doesn’t require any of those other skills.” In fact, you can be found only by letting go of your “skills.” You can pare down the range of skills so that it’s in line with the skills of the Four Noble Truths. We talked today about that Dharma wheel out front, the one that has too many spokes. Well, one inside here has twelve spokes. The Four Noble Truths, each truth has its duty, which you have to master as a skill. You want to comprehend stress. You want to learn how to abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. Those are the skills we’re working on here. Those are the Buddha’s real skills. The skills that fall outside of this, he says, are not going to help you on the path. Many of them can actually get in the way. We were talking about the various emotional strategies that you’re used to find some pleasure in, find some satisfaction in. Anything that doesn’t fall in line with the Four Skills of the Four Noble Truths, you’ve got to learn how to set aside. So you can finally complete that third round of spokes on the wheel. The first round is knowing the Four Truths. The second round is knowing the duties that have to be developed with regard to those truths. And finally, at one point in the practice, you get to the point where everything is completed. All the skills have been fully mastered. That’s when the twelve spokes are complete and we all meet at the hub, knowledge of things as they’ve come to be. And when you get there, that’s when things open to the Deathless. That’s why here in the wheel, inside the cell and the wheel outside, the middle of the hub is empty. The happiness doesn’t require feeding. And when there’s no feeding, it can’t be traced. We talk about the person who’s gained this total seclusion that even Davis, who can read other beings’ minds, can’t find. The mind of this person is established. The peace is that great.

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