The Inner Saboteur

June 10, 2011

The woman once came to meditate with a Jan Phuong, a friend of hers who worked in the kitchen at the monastery, and had invited her there. She told a Jan Phuong beforehand that this woman had a problem. Every time she sat down to meditate, her body would start shaking very violently to the point where she couldn’t meditate. Sure enough, she sat down to meditate and started shaking. Jan Phuong had one of his students, who was somewhat psychic, look into what was happening. And his other student saw that the first woman was being shaken by people standing behind her. They got the story from them that they had been this woman’s parents in a previous lifetime, and she’d killed them. And they didn’t want her to meditate and get away. So they were trying to make sure that she didn’t escape into nirvana until they’d gotten their revenge. Many of us, when we meditate, have a similar problem. Not that there’s anybody standing behind us shaking us, but there’s a part of us that’s actually afraid. What would happen if we no longer had any greed, aversion, or delusion? What would happen if we really got good at the practice? What then? There’s a part of us that’s afraid that we’ll get away, that we’ll be deprived of the pleasures we like, either on the path to the goal or actually attaining the goal. So it’s good to acknowledge that there are those voices in the committee and to learn how to look at them, because we often identify with them very strongly. This is where the teaching on not-self is important, where it comes in handy. You have to ask yourself, “What kind of happiness do you want? Do you want a happiness that’s going to let you down, that’s going to disappoint you? Or do you want one that’s going to be totally reliable? Do you have the conviction that there is such a happiness, and do you have the conviction that you can do it?” A large part of you will probably say, “No, no, no,” especially of that last one. That’s probably one of the biggest deterrents on the practice, the fear that you put a lot of energy and effort into the practice and then come up wanting at the end. And Jan Mahapabhu admits that that was one of the things that discouraged him from practicing in the beginning. He didn’t feel that he was up for it. In fact, back in those days, he actually taught that nirvana was no longer attainable, that somehow the door had been closed. His fear was, “Would it be a waste? All that energy, all that effort, all that effort put into the practice, all the deprivations that the practice would involve, would you come up with nothing?” And part of what got him over the hump there was meeting a jhana man and being convinced, “Okay, here’s someone who really was able to do it.” The other part was simply saying to himself, “Look, if you don’t really give it a try, you’ll never know. And then you’ll be haunted for the rest of your life. Did you miss out on a good opportunity?” So here we have the opportunity, as we sit here right now, to try to get all the members of the committee together and say, “Look, we all want to be happy. Nothing’s accomplished by sabotaging our efforts. At the very least for this hour, let’s really get together and focus our attention on trying to do something about the mind, learning how to bring it to its object, how to keep it there, really paying attention to what’s actually going on in the mind. Because it’s this element of having some traders inside, you might call them, the parts of you that sabotage your efforts. What does that accomplish? It accomplishes nothing. You set yourself up to fail, and then when the failure comes, you say,”See? See? See?” But nothing was ever learned. So if you really do care for your happiness, you want to give it your all. This is one of the big mysteries of the human mind. We’re all saying that we want happiness, and then we go ahead and sabotage our best chances for happiness. An important part of the practice is learning how to sort that out, on the one hand. And before sorting it out, it’s saying, “Well, let’s really give it a try here.” For the time being, all those other voices are going to say, “No, no, no,” and then we’re going to say, “Yes,” to the breaths, “Yes,” to the exhalations, and “Yes,” to the exploration of the breath. Because it’s only in this way that we’re going to find something we’ve never found before, see something we’ve never seen before. Because everything else out there in the world is something that you’ve been through many, many times. As Ajaan Furing once said, all the pleasures you miss, especially the sensual pleasures, ones that you really aspire to, it’s because you’ve had them before and you miss them. Maybe in some previous lifetime. Just thinking about that is enough to make you gain a sense of dismay. Because if you get them again, you’ll lose them again, and you’ll miss them again, and then you’ll struggle to find them again. It’s like going up a mountain with a gravel slope. You’re working your way up, up, up, and you finally think you’ve got something, and then the gravel slope just slides down. It’s probably because we’re used to that kind of happiness that we don’t trust the happiness that the Buddha promised. We think, “Well, it’s probably just another gravel slope.” But he promised that it’s not. The disciples who started out where you are now, who made the effort, guarantee that once they’ve found this true happiness, they’ll say, “This is different. It’s special.” So give it a fair chance. Give yourself a fair chance. The quality of citta, when you’re really intent on what you’re doing, doesn’t require superhuman intent. There’s nothing in the path that requires superhuman abilities. It’s simply a very alive sense that anything less than the ultimate happiness is always going to end up as a disappointment. So this is something you really want to give yourself to. At least give yourself over to the effort right now. Give it a fair chance right now. Don’t let yourself be haunted by the nagging feeling that you had the chance but you didn’t make the most of it. That’s not something you want to carry around.

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