Streamlining the Clutter Inside

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My older brother once told me, when he was studying for his MBA, the very first semester, the course load came in, and he realized it was more than he could possibly do. He wondered what the teachers were thinking. Each professor, of course, was assuming that his course was the most important, so it should have priority. But my older brother didn’t. My brother realized that if he tried to do all the work that was assigned to him, he’d die. So he took it as a challenge. He said, “Maybe their purpose is to help me figure out how to prioritize, focus on what’s most important, and let the other things go a little bit.” And that’s how he got through school. And that’s how a lot of us have to go through life. We’ve got work that requires a lot of decisions. On top of that, there’s family life and other issues where we have to keep making decisions. We look at the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula about looking at all your actions before, after, and while you’re doing them. And you wonder how you could possibly apply those instructions in the course of daily life. Here, it’s good to think in several terms. One is that you have to prioritize which of your decisions in the course of the day are going to have the most impact on you and on other people. This, of course, varies from person to person. And you look at them in terms of the precepts, what the Buddha called the Ten Guidelines. You don’t want to kill, steal, have illicit sex. You don’t want to lie. You don’t want to do anything that would be divisive, speak divisively, speak harshly, engage in idle chatter. You don’t want to give in to inordinate greed or ill will. And you want to develop the right view that your actions do matter. At the same time, you don’t want to do anything that would make anyone else, or you don’t want to do anything that you would intentionally try to get somebody else to, break any of these precepts, go against any of these guidelines. That’s the most important thing to keep in mind. When the Buddha talks about harming other people, there are two things. One is getting them to break the precepts, and two is intentionally giving rise to greed, aversion, and delusion. If you find your job is based on that, and there are quite a few jobs that are based on that, giving rise to greed, aversion, and delusion in other people’s minds, you’d better look for another job. You have to make sure that you keep those principles firmly in mind. But then you also have to look at your own mind. You are sitting right here right now. You’ve only got one thing to do. Keep the mind with a breath. And how well are you doing that? If you can clean out a lot of the clutter in your own mind, it makes it a lot easier to handle more in terms of the decisions as you go through the day. So focus here on cleaning out all the greed, aversion, and delusion you can find here, all the impulses to break precepts in here. Think in terms of a John Lee’s images. If you allow a distraction to come in and kill your concentration, that’s a precept against killing. You’re breaking that precept right there. If you’re sitting here thinking about other people’s bad points, why doesn’t this person do this? Why doesn’t that person do that? Why does this person tell me to do things and not do the same things himself or herself? You’re stealing that other person’s bad qualities. That’s theft. If you’re thinking about sensual desires, that breaks the third precept. If you’re not really intent on what you’re doing and you’re telling yourself you’re meditating but you’re not really meditating, that breaks the fourth precept. If you’re getting lousy and sleepy and forgetful, it’s like being intoxicated. So the precepts, you might say, of concentration, you want to make sure you’re not breaking any of those. And do whatever else you can to clear out the mind. The whole purpose of getting the mind to be still is so you can clearly see what’s going on in the mind that’s cluttering it up, getting in the way of your true happiness, getting in the way of acting skillfully. So work here. Many times the issue of having too many things to do and more than you can handle. Sometimes it really is a case where the work you have piles too many things on top of you. But sometimes it’s simply the case that you’ve got too many other things going on in the back of your mind that are distracting or sapping your energy. This applies not only to work, but as you go through the day, all the other decisions you have to make. To what extent are you allowing your inner tigers to eat up a lot of the nourishment that your mind could otherwise use? So turn around and look at them, what’s going to come up as you meditate. We get the mind still, and keeping it still is not a matter just of being still. You have to be alert. Do whatever else is going to come in and nibble at the edges of your concentration. It’s in the protecting of your concentration that discernment arises. You begin to see subtle defilements, subtle little thoughts, subtle little movements of the mind that you wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. Those are the ones that are eating away at your mind’s nourishment. In some cases, all you have to do is zap them. Just figure out which part of the body there’s a pattern of tension that goes with that thought, and just breathe through that pattern of tension, and the thought will go away. Other times you have to analyze it. This thought that keeps coming back, coming back, coming back. What’s the appeal? Why do you like it? Even though part of you may say, “Well, I don’t like it. I don’t like this thought. I wish it would go away.” There’s something in there that likes it, and it keeps bringing it back up. And you have to dig around to see it. In which case, you may be dropping the breath for a while to get into this particular thought. But as long as you can maintain the attitude that, “I’m here watching the thought, not getting into the thought, not taking on the thought, but analyzing the thought,” you’re okay. It’s when you lose that perspective and start thinking in line with that thought. If you catch yourself doing that, you realize you’ve gone off course. You’ve got to go back to the breath. You’re not ready to analyze that yet. But keep it in the back of the mind. This is a problem you’re going to have to come back to sometime. So you work on getting the mind still again, a little bit more solid, and have some more mindfulness, more alertness. This conversation between mindfulness and alertness is a very important part of the practice. In other words, mindfulness reminds you of what you should be doing, and then alertness keeps tabs on what you are doing. And then the two of them check with each other. You are doing in line with what you should be doing. If you catch the fact that it’s not, that’s when you have to bring in your effort, or your ardency, to change things around. And then when you’ve learned something, you see something happening in the mind, a particular strategy that works, okay, you file that away in your mindfulness. There’s a conversation among these qualities that allows you to meditate. You manage your mind a lot more effectively. So you can start cleaning out the basements. It’s like realizing there’s something draining the electricity in your house. You wonder why your electricity bill is so high. You don’t seem to be getting much use out of the electricity. You’re not using much, but there are some drains. You have to go through and check all the wires and find out where that waste of electricity is going. It’s the same with the energy of the mind. We waste so much time on greed, aversion, and delusion, so much energy on these things, that it’s no wonder we don’t have any strength for the other issues we have to face in the course of the day. Because you do want to be in a position where a decision comes up and you know that you’re going to do the most skillful thing that you can think of to deal with that issue. And that requires that you be very present and very mindful. Realize, of course, that there are a lot of things in life that we don’t know where the impact is going to come out. But we do know what our intentions are that we put into the decision. You want to be really clear about that. So when you find yourself making a lot of decisions where you’re not really sure how it’s going to impact yourself or other people, just keep asking yourself, “What’s my motivation here? What am I trying to do?” “Do I have my views right? Do I have my priorities right? Am I understanding what it means to be harmful? Do I have that right?” And then try to clear out as much of the mind as you can so you have the space and the energy to give your decisions your best. Watch out in particular, though, for the part of the mind that keeps on wanting to take on new tasks. New responsibilities. You have to ask yourself, “Can I handle the ones that I’ve already got?” There’s a Peanuts cartoon that’s stuck in my mind for a long time. It’s Lucy complaining at one point that if you have to watch everything you say, you never get much said. Her implication, of course, being that she wanted to say lots and lots of things. But maybe it’s better to just do fewer things if you can, if you can do them well. Also look at the area where you’re just taking on responsibilities. You really don’t have to. As the Buddha said, one of the signs of wisdom is the person who knows to take on what really is his responsibility and not to take on things that are not really his responsibility or hers. The fool is one who takes on all kinds of things that are not really his or her responsibility and then neglects the things that really are responsibilities. Life may be throwing you a lot of issues, but sometimes you find that you’re actually taking on more than you need to. So look at your mind. Look at your priorities. Make sure you have a right understanding of what it means to be helpful or harmful to other people. And have a sense of what your capabilities are. You can expand your capabilities, you can expand your range, by training the mind. But even then, you come up with issues that you realize that you can’t handle. And this is where equanimity comes in. Our problem nowadays is we have knowledge about so many things, but we have only a limited amount of energy to deal with them. We see the situation in the world, and it can sometimes be overwhelming. But you have to remember, just because you know about something doesn’t mean you’re responsible for it. Look at where your responsibilities really lie and focus there. Spread goodwill to everything else. Goodwill tempered with equanimity. Remember that some things will not come out the way you want them to or the way you feel they should. But you want to focus on the areas where you can make a positive difference and do it well.

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