Cooperation, Inside & Out

October 29, 2016

Today we had a good reminder of the power of cooperation. Everybody working together got the place all ready for tomorrow’s kathina. You can imagine what it would be like if only one person had to do all that work. There was once one time when I had to prepare for a kathina alone. John Foon was going to come back with the other people. It was Friday night, the kathina was going to be on Sunday. It took me a whole week to get the monastery ready, working from right after the meal in the morning, eight o’clock, until ten at night, five days. And that didn’t count the food booths. Those were going to go up on Saturday. Peter, everything was done in just a couple of hours, all through the power of cooperation. So try to take that lesson and apply it to your mind. You can get the mind to cooperate with the body, and the body to cooperate with the mind, and the mind to cooperate with itself. You can accomplish a lot. First, get the mind and the body to cooperate. You want to be here. Don’t think of anything away from the body right now. Just be with the breath coming in and going out, and try to be fully sensitive to what’s going on. And if the breath doesn’t feel good, then you can change. Try longer breathing, shorter breathing. And listen to what the body has to say. It won’t speak in words, of course, but you can learn to tell by the sense of energy inside, a sense of ease or a sense of constriction, how well the breath is going. So in adjusting the breath, you just can’t force your preconceived notions on the body. You will have some preconceived notions, but you try them out. You can think of the breath going down the spine, or if that doesn’t work, think of the breath coming up the spine. The breath going down the arms, out the palms of the hands, out the fingers, or coming back up. You can think of the breath coming in and out of the body from all directions, into one spot inside, and then going out from that one spot in all directions. In other words, try different ways of thinking about the breath energy, and then see how the body responds in terms of how it breathes. And then learn to read how well that kind of breath actually gets the body easier to stay with, more relaxed, more energized. That way, when the mind cooperates with the body, both sides benefit. The mind then has a good place to stay here in the present moment. We wonder why the mind is always wandering out. Well, it’s like having a child that you beat every time the child comes home. So the child, of course, is not going to stay. But if you treat the child well, they’ll be happy to stay at home. It’s the same with the mind. If it has a sense of ease right here, it’s less likely to want to go wandering off. And even if it does go wandering off, it’ll be happy to come back. So see how long you can get the mind and the body to cooperate right now. The larger issue, of course, is that the mind doesn’t cooperate with itself. It comes up with a desire and creates an entire identity around the desire and a sense of the world around that desire. And then another desire comes in and pushes the first one out of the way. So it’s not just desires fighting with each other. It’s whole worlds and whole identities. In some cases, that clash of identities doesn’t go too deep, and other times it can really be disturbing inside. Because you have an identity going with a desire. Say it’s an identity for some pleasure, or a desire from some pleasure. Well, the identity around that then becomes the person who’s going to enjoy the pleasure, and then the person also who can do something to bring that pleasure about. The various skills you have in dealing with other people, negotiating the world. And the world that’s relevant to that desire will consist of the things that either help with achieving your desire or get in the way. So you’ve got a desire for chocolate. All of a sudden, where is the chocolate right now? That’s the part of the world that’s important. What’s in the way of you getting the chocolate? And who might help get the chocolate? And everything else that’s not relevant to chocolate is not relevant to that particular world. Then you might have a desire to get some peace of mind. Well, then you become a different person. You become a meditator. And the relevant world right now, of course, is the world inside your body. This is actually a skillful form of becoming. But then there’ll be other kinds of becoming that come up that are going to fight with this one, either in terms of getting in the way or getting in the way while you’re trying to meditate. A desire for a little entertainment aside from breath comes up and you’re gone. And you really are in another world. The mind has this habit of blanking out as it goes from one world to the next, because the desire that’s moved in wants you to forget about the first desire. One of the purposes of learning how to be consistently alert and mindful is to see through those curtains that the desire throws down over the old desire. It’s like going backstage in a play. If you sit out in the audience, the curtain goes down at the end of a scene and then it comes up. And in the meantime, they’ve been rearranging the furniture and the scenery on the stage. And so it gives the illusion that you’re in a new place. If they left the curtain up, you’d see the stage hands moving the furniture around, and it would destroy the illusion. So desires like to keep you deluded. And of course, you’re playing along with them. You become the person associated with the new desire, so you play along with all these tricks of illusion. Now, as a meditator, you want to see through those things. You want to make sure the curtain doesn’t come down. And in spite of that, it goes down. And then you’re off someplace else. So you have to be alert to the fact that as you’re with the breath, other things will come up and you want to detect them as they’re coming up. So you have to have one eye on the breath and one eye on the mind to see when they’re together and to see when they’re beginning to split apart, when they’re not cooperating anymore. Of course, the breath is not the problem. The problem is the mind. A new desire comes in and you become a trader to your original desire, which was to stay here. So you want to learn how to not play along with every new desire as it comes, via a little skepticism. The mind’s desire to have a little entertainment, it’s desire for a change of topic. You have to ask it why. If it’s really insistent. If it’s not insistent, all you have to do is remind yourself that, “I’ve got this original intention and I want to stick with it because it’s the intention that’s going to make a difference in my life.” The ability to keep the mind focused for long periods of time is what will make changes in the mind. And as long as you can stick with that desire to stay there, that becomes the becoming that you are maintaining as you sit here. So that’s one way in which the mind is not in cooperation, is when it suddenly changes its mind during the meditation. Other ways, of course, are when you’re outside of the formal meditation and you start planning the rest of your life. We’re not passive recipients of events in the world. We’re out there actively shaping our worlds through our desires. And you want to be really careful about the desires that you shape to make sure they are conducive to allowing you to meditate, to train the mind. The Buddha talks about three kinds of resolve. There’s the resolve for sensuality, the resolve for ill will, and the resolve for harm. Those are the things that are going to destroy your life as a meditator. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about and planning for sensual pleasures. The pleasures themselves are not the problem. It’s the mind’s fascination with thinking about, say, how good tomorrow’s meal could be if you fix it this way. Well, no, how about that way? Or if you’re going to rearrange the furniture of the house, you can spend hours thinking about how you rearrange the furniture of the house. Or getting a new house. Often it’s a lot more fun to think about buying something than it is to actually buy it. It’s more fun thinking about planning the meal than it is actually to eat the meal. And it’s our obsession with that thinking that’s the problem. Because those desires pull us down. The whole purpose of the meditation is to find a happiness that’s not dependent on sensual pleasures. And it’s a lot clearer, because when you’re fascinated with sensual pleasures, you can’t really observe the mind properly. When you’re trying to develop the pleasure on the sense of just inhabiting the form of the body, that’s a pleasure that doesn’t harm anybody, and it allows your mind to be a lot clearer. You can actually see the processes of becoming as they’re happening. So one of the forms of resolve you have to work on is resolve not to get entangled in fascination with sensual plans. If you have to make a plan, do what needs to be done, think what needs to be thought, and then drop it. Don’t just sit there and try to get your entertainment for the day, playing with your plans for sensual pleasures. Another form of right resolve is the resolve for goodwill. That’s the right resolve you want that counteracts ill will or equanimity when the case desires. But at the very least, you don’t want to have ill will for people. So when you’re working on your desires, ask yourself, “This world that I’m creating, what role will I have to take on? Will it actually be a role that will be good for my happiness? And what role am I giving to other people? Is this going to get in the way of their happiness? This plan that I have, is it going to require that other people break the precepts? Is it going to require that they play along with my passion or play along with my aversion or play along with my delusion? If that’s the case, it’s a bad becoming. And then finally, there’s a resolve for harmlessness. That’s the third kind of right resolve. You want to make sure that your plans for yourself and as other people get involved in your plans, you’re not going to be adding to their suffering. Ill will and harmfulness, goodwill and compassion, each of those pairs is very close. Goodwill is a general wish for happiness. Compassion is when you see someone suffering. Ill will is the desire to see somebody suffer. Harmfulness is when you see their suffering. And you want to add a little bit more suffering on top of that. These are the things you’ve got to avoid if you don’t want your plans for your life to be in conflict with your desire to put an end to suffering. Everybody wants to put an end to suffering, but our problem is that we plan things the wrong way. We have wrong ideas about what true happiness would be. And operating out of ignorance, we make all kinds of plans. And they actually become reality. There’s that great novel one of my friends wrote, which is about a story contest between the Taoist gods. The male god’s on one side, the female god’s on the other side. And they throw a story back and forth. One side writes one chapter, the next side writes the next chapter. And the male gods are trying to make sure that the female character suffers quite a lot, and the female gods are trying to get her out of the suffering. It’s going back and forth like this. And there’s a lot of politics in the course of the novel as you’re reading both the story that they’re creating and the machinations between the two factions of the gods. And it’s a pretty sad story. And then at the very end, Kuan Yin comes in. She represents Buddhism and informs the gods,”Okay, now that you’ve made up this story, you’re going to have to live it.” And the novel ends with all the gods falling from heaven down to earth, forced to live this miserable story that they created. So you have to be careful about your plans for your life, because you really are creating worlds. And the people around you are going to get pressed into service for your world. Of course, if they don’t like it, they’re going to fight. And that creates more competition and more conflict, which is one of the reasons why you want to make sure that when you’re planning your world, what kind of desires do you really want to act on? You have to remember the principles of goodwill and harmlessness, so that you don’t create unnecessary external conflict. And also so that the mind can learn how to cooperate with its best interests, which is that it legitimately does put an end to suffering. So remember that we’re here to help. And the lessons we learn in cooperation, when we cooperate with other people, should be brought inside so the mind learns how to cooperate with itself. As the Buddha once said, the untrained mind is so quick to change, there’s no way you can compare it to anything. Even the twinkling of an eye, I guess, would be too slow to compare with how quickly the mind can change. And its changes can create a lot of conflict, because it’s not just a clash between desires, it’s a clash between your identity as a person based on those different desires and the worlds in which you’re going to live. So try to get a sense of priorities and try to get a sense of values and some rules for yourself as you choose among your desires and the identities that you take on and the worlds that you inhabit based on those desires. Try to get them as cooperative as possible. Because it’s only then that you can actually accomplish anything of real worth. Otherwise, you end up destroying the very things you built.

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