Many Minds to Your Advantage

December 1, 2016

As you try to stay with the breath, you’ll notice there are a lot of different voices in your mind. In the beginning, this is a problem, because they’re all clamoring for attention. There’s no order in the discussion. And a lot of them don’t want you to meditate. They have other agendas. So either they’ll just slip off, or else they’ll sabotage what you’re doing. But over time, you can learn how to turn all these many voices to your advantage. After all, suppose you had only one self. If the self was suffering, if it was corrupt and defiled, there’d be nothing you could do. How could it clean itself up? Everything that it would think of would be corrupted and defiled. Someone else would have to come in and save you. And you wouldn’t even know who to trust, because after all, your perceptions would be corrupt, everything would be corrupted. Ultimately, nobody could save you at all. But the fact is, you have lots of different voices in there, and each of them are good for different things. And you learn to realize that the critical voice is good for some things but not for others. The encouraging voice is good for some things but not for others. The voice that suppresses everybody else is good in some circumstances but not in others. And you get a sense of which voice to listen to and which one to bring out and which one to put to the side. They can comment on one another and correct one another. And this is how the meditation actually advances. By now you should have some good Dhamma voices in there. That’s what these Dhamma talks are for. That’s what the chanting is for, why we have chants with translations. So you can get some voices sloshing around in the back of your mind that are Dhamma voices. And they can come out, and you can use them when they’re useful. But that’s the skill right there, to figure out when the particular voice is useful and when it’s not. There’s a passage in the Jhana Mahabhava where he talks about how the meditator meditates and after a while begins to realize that the meditator cannot trust his or her own awareness. I remember reading that at a time when I was having trouble trusting my own awareness. And I have to realize that he’s talking about a different stage in meditation now, where I am right now. What I needed was learning to trust, was to believe that when I was with the breath, that was all I needed. I’d picked up some bad ideas about how when the mind got concentrated, you were going to have to have some light and visions and other things. And none of that was happening. And so when the mind was with the breath, I didn’t trust it. It wasn’t until I finally realized that I had to trust the breath. I realized that you’ve got to trust your awareness right now. If you’re with the breath, okay, that’s good enough. And you hold with that good enough. You say, “When is it going to get excellent?” You say, “You don’t have to worry about that. Just make sure you maintain this good enough awareness of the present moment and stick with it.” Because it’s only when you trust it that you’ll stick with it. And it’s only when you stick with it that it really does become concentration. So even some of the best voices in the world, like a John Lee and a John Mahambo, you have to know when to use them and when to put them to the side. So your treasury of Dhamma that you picked up from your reading, you picked up from the Dhamma talks, you picked up from the chants, you need to have a good librarian inside to figure out which particular message is good for right now. Or, to use another image, you have to be a good chairman of the meeting inside. When something comes up, is it something you have to be suspicious of or something you should trust? Of course, a lot of times the only way you’re going to learn that lesson is by trial and error, trusting some things for a while and saying, “Oh, that doesn’t work.” And learning how not to get discouraged when something doesn’t work. Just say, “Okay, chalk that up. That becomes part of your experience.” And then after a while you get a better and better sense of the terrain inside, of where you should go and where you shouldn’t go. That’s from all these different voices commenting on one another. And you’re watching over the discussion and learning which comments you can trust and which comments you’ve just got to shut up. For which comments you can let them chat around, but don’t let yourself be affected by them. So the fact that there are lots of different voices inside can be useful. Because one voice will tell you to do something, and another one will say, “Well, let’s check it out.” Or, if a critical voice is being too critical, there’ll be another voice inside that will express good will for you and for those around you. You can recognize, “Okay, the critic is getting overbearing, speaking out of time, out of place.” This is how you sort out your mind. Because there is an aspect of the mind that’s just aware. And that’s one part of the meditation. But a lot of the meditation has to do with the part that’s talking to itself. It’s a real skill. You’re not talking to just one self. There are lots of selves in there, and they’re all helping. If you’ve trained them. If you haven’t trained them, they’ve just become part of that, more of the problem. But the essence of the training of the mind is to get them to work together. And for you to get a sense of who to listen to at any one particular time. This way, the “I’m making” and “my making” that go into the practice get more skillful. And as you get more skillful at the processes, you see them more clearly. Then you really see, “Okay, I’ve invented this ‘I,’ I’ve invented this ‘my.’” And like post-it notes, you can place your “I” on something when it’s useful and take it off. That gives you a lot of freedom. So you’re not stuck with any particular identity for any particular time. Unless you want to stick with it. The “I” that can stay concentrated and can stick with something for long periods of time. And get the other voices in your committee to stand around and cheer, keep it going, until you run into the limits of the usefulness of that particular “I.” Otherwise, the “I” that can stay concentrated is one of the ones you want to train, but you also want to train the commentator. So it gives useful advice, the advice that stays with you. Away from saying that you are hopeless or you’re just wonderful. The kind of advice you want is the advice that talks about how something should be done, and looking at the results, and learning how to have a sense of the time and place to look for results. Because some of the things you’re going to do in meditation will take a while to show their results. It’s like different kinds of medicine. Some medicines are like a shot in the arm. You feel it immediately because it goes straight into the bloodstream. Other medicines are like, say, Chinese medicine or Ayurvedic medicine that you boil and drink the concoction for months before you start realizing, “Oh yes, the body’s getting back into balance.” So you have to train your commentators to have a sense of time and place for when to make comments. When to be dubious. When to just sit back and watch, give things a chance to show themselves. So it actually is to our advantage that we have these different voices inside. Otherwise, we couldn’t help ourselves. For the fact that we do have the different voices, they can comment on one another and train one another, because they can see the other voices. So it’s like the difference between not being able to see yourself at all, as opposed to seeing yourself reflected in lots of mirrors. If there’s dirt on your face, if it’s reflected in mirrors, you can take it off. If you don’t have anything to reflect on or anything to reflect back at you, you don’t know the dirt’s there. You don’t know when it’s been removed. So learn how to take advantage of these voices, because working together, they can take you far.

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