When the Mind Is Obstreperous

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There’s a passage where the Buddha is teaching breath meditation to his son, Rahula. And before he starts out with the steps of breath meditation, he gives Rahula some things to contemplate. It’s a varied list, but it’s a good list to know, especially when the mind is having trouble settling down and being with the breath. For whatever reason. It’s coming out of a bad environment, it’s going into a bad environment, or it’s just feeling ill, ill at ease, out of sorts. Then the mind is not cooperating. You can step back from the mind and engage in these contemplations. Some of them are for simply watching things that are happening, and others are for counteracting what’s going through the mind. The first contemplation is not self. We usually think of this as one of the more advanced contemplations. At the very beginning, it’s good to think about whatever is disturbing the mind. It’s not you. You don’t have to identify with it. In fact, you’re better off if you don’t. A lot of the “me, me, me” that comes up, you can say, “Why me? Why not? Why not something else?” So you can step back from things. As I said earlier today, the conversations going on in your head, think of them as just people in a room talking, and you’re in one corner of the room. And their conversations don’t have to involve you at all, no matter how much they may be talking about you or wanting to get you involved. You don’t have to get involved. It’s an outside process. See it as that. And John Lee has the contemplation where he says the thoughts come through your mind. They could be anybody’s thoughts, maybe the germs going through your blood system, going through your brain, drop off a few thoughts here and there, spirits around, anything. In other words, you don’t have to think of the thoughts coming from you. They’re just there. The mind is churning them out. But you don’t have to be involved. That’s a good contemplation. It allows you to step back. And then the Buddha has that contemplation on thinking of your mind like earth or water or wind or fire. In other words, it’s just like a physical element that doesn’t react to things. You can throw things on the earth and the earth doesn’t react, no matter how disgusting they may be or no matter how nice they may be. The earth doesn’t react at all. You can use fire to burn things up, and it doesn’t react to whether it’s dirty or clean. You can use water to wash dirty things away. The water doesn’t react. The wind can blow dirty things around, but the wind doesn’t get disgusted by the dirt. When you’ve been able to think in terms of not-self and to think of these elements, just solid physical elements inside, then whatever comes up in your mind is just like earth. These things don’t have to have an effect on it. This connects with another image the Buddha uses. He says, “When people say awful things to you, try to make your goodwill as large as the earth.” This turns out to be one of the topics that he taught to Rahula as well. Make your goodwill like earth. A man can come along and try to get rid of the earth by digging holes in it and spitting on it and urinating on it. But the earth is not going to be affected by the man’s actions. You want your mind to be that non-reactive. So non-reactivity, even though it’s not the goal of the meditation or the heart of the meditation, it’s still one of the skills you want to develop. And connected with this is the contemplation on inconstancy, the things that you’re here experiencing. They’re not going to last. You can make it your game to say, “Can I make my determination not to react last longer than these things?” They’re going to go away at some point. So think about that. No matter how bad your physical condition right now is, it’s going to leave. But your awareness is stronger than that. The awareness is always going to be here. So think of the awareness as being strong, solid, and doesn’t have to identify with the things that it’s reflecting. Then there’s the contemplation of the foulness of the body. A lot of the issues in life center around how important the body is to us. And it’s good to take it down a notch or two. The body is useful for the practice. It’s useful for all kinds of things. But we tend to give it an overblown importance. So you have to remind yourself, “What is there in this body that’s just got hair at the head, hair at the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bone marrow?” It just goes down the list. Any of those things, if you took it out and put it on the floor, you’d say, “Gee, what’s that?” And yet you put them all together and it’s a huge issue. It has a huge impact on the mind. So learn how to reflect on the body in a way that it’s not that big a deal. It’s something you’re going to have to let go of someday, anyhow. And before it leaves, it’s going to kick you in a couple places. It’s going to provide a disease here, a disease there. So any overblown affection you may have for it, it’s good to drop it a little bit. And as you drop that, you find a lot of other issues dropping. It’s amazing how much it’s connected with our concern for the body. Then, as I said, there are the contemplations of the Brahma-viharas. When you’re in a bad mood, it’s good to stop and think. Why would you gain anything from anybody suffering? Because we’re in a bad mood, we tend to like to see other people suffer, too. But ask yourself, “Why? What’s gained by that?” And we can think thoughts of goodwill. It takes your mind off of whatever is disturbing the mind, rustling around inside the mind, making it hard for the mind to settle down. It takes you out of that. It reminds you that there’s another part of the mind that’s a lot more mature, that does wish for the happiness of all. You see how other people suffer? You feel compassion for them. You see other people who are happy or doing things that will lead to happiness, and you’re happy for them. As for things you can’t change, you’ve got to develop equanimity. This, in many ways, is the hardest of the bunch. I mean, it’s easy to be a quantumist about people you don’t know, people you don’t care about. But people that you really love, things that you really hold in high esteem, you have to realize that these things are going to have to go away as well. You have to be a quantumist about it. I mean, the Buddha saw that even his dharma was going to disappear someday. He didn’t say that it was a good thing. He didn’t tell the monks, “Well, just kind of accept it and go along with it.” He said, “It’s something you fight, but you have to realize that there will be a day when the dharma is gone.” You can’t do anything about that. But what you can do, that’s what equanimity is for us. When you realize there are things you cannot change, the next thought should be, “What can I change?” As you’ve been going through these contemplations, by this time you should realize that the mind really does need to settle down. It needs to develop its strengths. With everything so uncertain all around us and all inside us, too, we need something really solid to hold on to. And only the dharma provides that. So learn to think in some of these ways so that when the mind is obstreperous, you don’t have to get entangled with it. You can pull yourself out with the thoughts of inconstancy and not-self, with your determination not to react so that your mind is like the earth. Learn how to disidentify with the body. And you’ll get more and more sincere in your desire for spreading thoughts of goodwill everywhere and developing the ability to be equanimous everywhere where it’s needed. And Chan Chan noticed that a lot of the Westerners he was teaching had a lot of problems with patience and equanimity. This seems to be one of our signal problems growing up in the West. We’re taught to be impatient. And if you’re equanimous about things, then you’re dull and heartless and whatever, according to our society. And yet, to survive, you need to develop these qualities. Not only to survive change outside, but change inside the ups and downs of the mind, the ups and downs of the body. You’ve got to learn how to be patient. That’s what the contemplation of making your mind like earth is all about. You’ve got to learn how to be equanimous about the things you can’t change, so you can focus on the things that you can change. Because when you’re going to focus on the breath, it’s not simply a matter of just being with whatever the breath is going to do. It’s a very proactive process. And whatever powers of analysis you have, bring them and apply them to the breath. How can you make the breath comfortable? How can you maintain that sense of comfort? How can you let it spread through the body? Feel your bathed-in breath energy, good breath energy, all around you. This is an area where you don’t just sit there and watch. This is where you become more proactive. But to do that, to have the energy to do that, you have to learn how to get disentangled from all your other concerns. So these contemplations are good for getting you disentangled and getting you ready to tangle with the breath, get involved with the breath, get absorbed in the breath. Because that’ll give you the foundation you need so that when things change, there’s something inside that doesn’t change. And you’ll have that to depend on.

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