Committee Politics

May 27, 2017

When you settle down to train the mind and get it into concentration, it’s good to remember that the mind is not a single, unitary thing. There are lots of voices, lots of ideas. It’s like a committee in there. In some cases the committee is a well-behaved one, everybody’s getting along. Other times it’s not. There’s a battle. But lots of different ideas about what you could be doing right now. There’s part of the mind, of course, that wants to settle down and meditate, but not everybody’s on board. You’re sitting here with a breath, and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else, thinking about something you hadn’t planned to think about at all. And you wonder how it happened. Part of the problem, of course, is a lapse of mindfulness. But the other problem is that there are parts of the mind that want to do something else, and they’re going to look for that lapse of mindfulness and take advantage of it. When you’ve winded off, you’ve got to bring the mind right back. And in some cases, simply bringing it back will be enough. In other cases it’s not. The mind will just keep going back, going back to the other things. Which means that you’ve got to introspect. There’s an inner civil war going on. Because these different voices in the mind, they’ve all been you at one point or another. You’ve taken them on as an inner identity. There’s usually a desire behind them of one kind or another, and a strategy for how you’re going to find happiness, what you’re going to enjoy. And so you have to think strategically and almost politically. You’re in negotiation here. Although this is a negotiation, where you can’t give much to the other side. Because if they’re going to be pulling you away from the good things you want to do, they don’t have much to offer in return. They have their pleasures that they’re going to offer in return. But you have to learn how to look at them and say, “No, these are nothing compared to what I want.” So when it’s not just enough to come back, you’ve got to reason with these things. You’ve got to remind yourself of why you want to do the right thing. You need to train the mind. There are dangers in the future. And if the mind is untrained, it’s going to mishandle those situations. You can prepare in other ways, but if the mind is not on top of things, then no matter how much preparation you’ve got behind you, it’s for nothing. It’s like when you get on stage and suddenly you’ve got a bad case of stage fright. All the planning you’ve done, the talk you had prepared, whatever, is undone by the stage fright, by a lack of concentration, a lack of firmness inside. So remind yourself, this is how you’re going to handle dangers in the future. And there’ll be part of the mind that says, “I don’t want to hear about dangers. I want pleasure right now.” So breathe deeply and breathe in a way that’s comforting. Breathe in a way that’s going to give you a sense of fullness inside. This is a crucial part of the meditation, learning how to breathe in a way that does feel refreshing and feels filling, so that the breath energy in the blood vessels and the breath energy in the nerves feels full. How do you do that? Hold that idea in mind that the breath can feel full. Notice where there’s a sense of fullness in the body. It’s just going to be in an area that’s fairly relaxed, and the blood can flow freely. So find some part of the body that you can relax well that way. Often it’s good to start with the feet or the hands. Work your way into the center of the body. As you breathe in, keep the hands totally relaxed. As you breathe out, keep your hands totally relaxed. Let there be no difference in the hands at all between in and out. If you’re very observant, you begin to see that sometimes when you breathe in there will be a little bit of tension in your hands. Release that. Or there may be an attempt to squeeze a little bit at the end of the breath to mark the difference between the in-breath and the out-breath. Release that. Allow there to be that sense of fullness, relaxed, in the hands. Then once it’s there, it seems solid and steady, think of it creeping up your arms. Let it creep up until it gets into the chest and the area around the heart. Usually that’s where rapture first comes, when there’s a sense of fullness around the heart. Then from there it can spread through the rest of the body. Let that member of the committee say, “See? I can have a sense of pleasure, and it’s an abundant sense of pleasure.” Which may not be as interesting as the other pleasures you want, but it’s constant. Learn how to keep this going. This is a good skill to have in your repertoire. That’s when any temptation comes up to do something or think something unskillful. You’ve got this pleasure to tap into, because all too often the unskillful things we want to do are based on a sense of lack and a sense of hunger for pleasure. But then you can provide this right away. Then why bother with the other? So being heedful of future dangers is one way you can deal with these abstract worries. But the concentration itself and the sense of fullness is why the Buddha said in that description we had of the path just now, “The concentration has to be pleasure, rapture.” When you’ve got this, it’s a lot easier to say no. But still, those other voices may have their reasons, and sometimes they catch you. Sometimes with a sense of duty, sometimes with a sense of whatever. But when you’ve got this, then when you’re saying no to them, you can watch them with a lot more equanimity and see exactly what their real reasons are. Because all too often we fall for these things not for reasons that we admit to ourselves, but for something hidden. And no matter how much we deal with the official reasons for going for something, if there’s a hidden agenda, it’s going to be able to work its way into your desires. And then all of a sudden that agenda becomes your agenda and you go running with it. So when you say no from a sense of fullness, you can watch more easily and say, “Nope.” And you can begin to see the things that the mind wants to say. Because one of the best ways of finding out what’s lying behind a particular urge is just to keep saying no very consistently from a sense of fullness. Because it’ll start giving us reasons. And you figure, “Well, that’s not a good one. Then go to the next one.” It’ll keep coming up with reasons and more and more and more. And finally, it’ll show itself. That’s when you understand it. It’s when you understand a particular defilement. That’s what many of these committee members are. They’re defilements. When you really understand it, that’s when you can let it go. It’s not going to have that much power over you anymore. So we clear away these other voices enough so we can get the mind into concentration, and then use the concentration to clear away more. It’s a progressive housecleaning here inside. Because you take one part of the body and establish a beachhead there, and take one part of the mind and establish a beachhead there, and then from that position of strength you can begin to deal with the rest of the body and the rest of the mind. By putting yourself in a position of strength. Remember, you’re the one in charge. Your desire for true happiness should be in charge. And if you abdicate that, then who knows what’s going to take over your mind. And you ask yourself, “Do you really love yourself if you do that?” “Do you really wish your true well-being? May I be happy, may I be happy?” But then we go off and find other things. A little bit of pleasure here, a little bit of pleasure there, but nothing that’s going to be true or lasting. Do you really want to be happy? Do you really want to have well-being? Well, give yourself a shot of the well-being that comes from concentration and look at everything else that gets proposed in the committee until you can see through all these other voices. Remember the Buddha’s analysis when something like this comes up in the mind. You want to see, one, how it comes, and two, how it goes. Because all too often it gives the impression that it’s a constant. But actually, these desires come and go. They come and go. But we stitch them together. So first you want to see it’s not as constant as it seems to be, or not as constant as it threatens to be. And the next thing is to see what’s the allure. Why do you go for it? Which, as I said earlier, can often be hidden. So as long as you can keep saying, “No, I’m not going to go there,” and come from a position of strength so that you can stick with that “no” and not get exasperated or run out of steam, then eventually the allure will show itself. That’s when you can compare it to the drawbacks of going through that particular thought. And when you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, you get a sense of dispassion. In other words, you don’t want to continue manufacturing that particular voice anymore, because it is something you manufacture. It’s a fabrication. And when there’s dispassion, that puts an end to the process. That’s your escape. So use the breath. Use the sense of inner well-being you can develop around the breath to make yourself stronger than these other things are, to make sure that you’re in charge of the committee, and you have the right to exile different members of the committee, and you have the right to deny their membership. We can’t control the world outside, but we can learn to be dictators inside, the benevolent dictator who’s really in charge and takes care of everything very properly, and doesn’t let the unskillful elements take over.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2017/170527_Committee_Politics.mp3>