The Balance of Power Inside

August 11, 2017

When you sit down to meditate, one of the first things you notice is that you don’t have the whole mind on board. Some parts of the mind want to stay with the breath; other parts of the mind want to do something else. And you wonder why the mind is divided like this. We use the image of a committee inside. In the Buddhist terms, though, he would call it different kinds of becoming. You start with a desire, and then around that desire you develop a sense of the world in which you’re inhabiting and the extent to which you can fulfill that desire. And then you develop a sense of yourself, what abilities you have to realize the desire, and, of course, the self who’s going to enjoy it. In fact, your identity as a person in this world counts as a kind of becoming, becoming on the large scale. But the mind goes through lots and lots of becomeings on small scales. Which means that at any given moment in the mind you have lots of old becomeings hanging around, unused. And some of them want to get back into the act. They have an idea about what you could be doing with your time now. And so there’s a struggle inside. Some of these becomeings can be pretty harsh. Their ideas of happiness are pretty crude. But their tricks for getting their happiness may not be crude at all. They’ve learned to be subtle. Other becomeings have less harmful, more long-term concepts of happiness. Those are the ones you want to put in power. Those are the ones you want in charge. And meditation is one way of doing that. As you’re working with the breath, you’re developing the strength of mindfulness, which, when it gets fully developed, turns into what’s called a faculty. The word “faculty” in Pali, indriya, is related to Indra, the king of the gods. You want to make mindfulness something in charge. Same with the other strengths, to turn them into faculties. You start with conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. All these things are qualities that you want to put in charge of your mind. These are the things that get strengthened as you meditate. This is going to require a fair amount of attention and intention. You have to stick with the intention that you want to develop these things. And you have to learn. You have to put attention to in order to help. Like you’re sitting here right now trying to figure out how to stay away from distraction, how to stay away from the hindrances. And as long as you have that attitude, you’re on the right track. Because when the hindrances come up, for most of us, the first thought is not, “Oh, this is a hindrance.” The first thought is, “Let’s go with it.” And you tend to side with it. You have to learn how to pull yourself back a bit. And this is what the various strengths can do. They teach you how to think about the hindrance, put it in the context of appropriate attention, i.e., recognizing it as a hindrance. And then mindfulness helps you stick with your intention that you want to get past it. The Buddha himself discovered on the night of his awakening that become-ings, not only by the desire but also by attention and intention. He says it’s how we get reborn, the way we attend to things, the intentions that we act on. So in putting the five strengths in charge of your mind, it requires that you develop right attention and right intention as you practice. And they themselves help with this. Conviction is the first one that tells you what to attend to. Conviction is basically conviction in the Buddha’s awakening that he did find a true happiness. And he did it through his own efforts. And the qualities that he used to find that awakening are things that were not solely his. In other words, they’re qualities we all have in our mind in potential form. Convincing yourself of this helps to change the balance of power inside, because it gives you a different idea of what is possible through your own actions, what is possible in this world, and what do you have within you that you can gain this. If you don’t believe in a true happiness, it’s very easy for the different voices in your mind to say, “Well, let’s go for the immediate fix, or let’s go for something really quick, because you’re going to die at any time, so you might as well get what you can while you can.” So in the night of his awakening, things don’t end with death. They keep going as long as there’s craving. Consciousness will still have some place that it can latch onto and go into a new life based on its attentions and intentions. So what do you want? The things you do in order to gain your happiness. If they’re unskillful, they’re going to lead to misery down the line. Is that what you want? The Buddha’s saying you can actually train your actions to give higher levels of happiness and lead to the ultimate level of happiness that doesn’t need to feed anymore, doesn’t need anymore, where there’s no struggle between types of becoming because there’s no becoming in it. That changes the discussion. The Buddha gives you standards for judging what really does count as genuine happiness. Does it change? Is it inconstant? Well, it’s not genuine happiness then. Why would you want to claim it? There are better things in life. That’s the message of conviction. Then, based on that, you can find it easier to develop the motivation you want in order to put in your efforts to develop persistence. Mindfulness is what keeps the Buddha’s message in mind so that you can remember what to do when things come up. You recognize what’s coming up and then you remember what to do with it. Mindfulness involves three qualities. It’s mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness is the remembering. Alertness is being alert to what you’re doing. It’s not just a general spacious awareness of the present moment or whatever is happening in the present moment. It’s very specifically focused on what you’re doing right now and what are the results. Ardency is the quality of mind that wants to do that well, wants to keep your mindfulness strong, keeps your alertness sharp. When these three qualities work together, they bring the mind to the next strength, which is concentration, getting the mind to be one around one object, like the breath. This is when that work to peel away the defilements begins to show its results. They might not be totally gone, but at least they’re kept at bay for a while. So you can do the work you really need to do, which is the work of discernment. But when the mind gets still, don’t be in too great a hurry to do that, because you need to get the mind really, really still and really solid to gain the nourishment and also the stability that’s needed to start taking things apart. Because if your mind is not well-nourished and we start looking into your own greed, aversion, and delusion, it’s very easy to slip into their ideas and start siding with them. It’s like scientists. If they’re not paid enough for their experiments, they just start cheating. If they’re not feeding well enough, suppose they’re doing experiments with baboons and apes, they start stealing the bananas. If they’re supposed to be studying, rather than letting baboons and apes eat them. This is why the Buddha said it’s important that you have concentration as a pleasant dwelling for the mind, because it enables you to find a respite from pain that doesn’t have to depend on sensual pleasure. It gives you an alternative. So learn to enjoy the concentration. Some people are afraid of getting attached to concentration. But it’s a harmless attachment. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, if you’re not really crazy about the meditation, it’s not going to go well. You really have to be devoted to it. You have to be attached to it. And over time you learn to be attached in a skillful way. And ultimately, of course, when it’s done its work, then you can let it go. But learn to enjoy just being here with the breath, figuring out what way breathing feels good for the body, how you can relate to the body in a way that feels good to be here in the present moment. And that’s a genuine strength. That sense of well-being makes it a lot easier to say “no” to a lot of the voices in the mind that are going for a quick fix. Say, “Here it is. Here’s pleasure. Here’s ease. And that thing that you wanted to do to pull me away from this, it may give a little bit of pleasure and a little bit of ease, but it’s going to have some bad karmic consequences. Why should I go?” This is how you change the balance of power. Then you’re in a position to look at things more carefully, the different becomings in your mind. You can start asking, “What’s the allure of this? When it comes, how does it come? When it goes, how does it go? And when it comes, why am I tempted to go with it? What’s the allure?” You’ll find the allure exists on many levels. It may have an immediate appeal, but then there’s the appeal of being attracted to it. Advertisers take advantage of this. They show you their pretty car or pretty whatever, but they also insinuate that not only will you have a nice car, but you’ll look good in other people’s eyes. Two layers of allure right there. And then who knows what else there is in the mind. So you’re going to have to dig down to the various layers of allure. Because if you don’t see them, then when you try to look at the drawbacks and compare the allure to the drawbacks, it will make a difference. Because you haven’t attacked the allure directly where it is. So you look for the allure, you look for the drawbacks. And when you finally understand why does the mind go for these things, why does it believe the reasoning of these different stupid becomings, and when you see that they’re stupid, that’s when you can let go. You don’t have to tell yourself to let go. The mind just drops those become. Instead of keeping them around as potential puppets that you might want to put your hand in and play a little role with, you throw them out. You have no more use for them. It’s in this way that you begin to sort things out in the mind and really establish good qualities in charge, so the mind is not so divided against itself. So see this as a battle inside. Push up the Buddha’s help. You’ve got the Buddha on your side. This is why we show respect to him day after day after day, to remind the skillful committee members that there’s somebody good on their side, somebody trustworthy, somebody reliable. Who showed that it is possible to come out winning in the end.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2017/170811_The_Balance_of_Power_Inside.mp3>