Inner Negotiating Skills

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We hear so much about how the ego is a bad thing, selfish, neurominded, grasping, threatened, that we forget that the concept of the ego in Western psychology is actually quite positive. It’s your negotiator inside, between the things you actually want to do and the things that you feel you should want to do. Now, in Western psychology there’s a real conflict between those two things. You will always have a conflict that never really gets resolved. In the Buddhist teachings, though, it’s quite different. The “shoulds” are designed for your own happiness. You should try to comprehend suffering, you should cry about it and its cause. You should try to realize the cessation of suffering and you should try to develop the path. Those are your “shoulds.” And where are they aimed? They’re aimed at true happiness. In Western psychology, the “shoulds” are not necessarily aimed at your happiness, which is why there’s an eternal conflict. But the Buddhist “shoulds” are friendly “shoulds.” Which means that the negotiation is a lot easier. Still, you have to negotiate because you have your greed, aversion and delusion. They want to pull you off in different directions, away from the path. And so you need a healthy set of ego functions, in other words, internal skills for negotiating, to get everybody on board. Because every voice in your mind wants happiness. It’s just that they have some very different notions of what that’s going to be and how it’s going to be found. And so the healthy ego functions are the ones that enable you to educate everybody inside, so that they realize that the Buddha was right. True happiness is found through training yourself in virtue, concentration, discernment, and mindfulness. It’s something you can do. This is probably one of the most important parts of the Buddhist teachings, his emphasis on what human beings can do for themselves. You look at the other teachings of his time, and so many of them said, “Well, there’s only so much you can do, and in many cases there’s nothing you can do at all.” Some said that action is unreal. Some said that action is real, but it’s motivated by forces that are outside of you. You’re totally not in control. And the ideas of right and wrong, some of them said, are just pure social constructs. There are no “shoulds” at all, they would say. And the Buddha would say, “All these teachings leave you unprotected, because you have to create your own protection, and you have to trust in your power to choose what is right, to choose what is skillful, and to follow through with it.” It’s an important part of this negotiator inside, this healthy ego function inside, is that you be confident that, yes, the battles are real, but they can be won. None of us are so original that we can come up with a definement that nobody’s ever had before, and that nobody’s ever solved before. So she would approach the whole negotiation here with good humor. In fact, humor is one of the healthy ego functions that Western psychology points out, and it’s there in the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha doesn’t talk about it much, but he displays it. There’s the humor in the origin stories. There’s humor in some of the suttas. And the tradition’s been passed down. The Ajahns of the forest tradition, even the really fierce, serious ones, Ajahn Mahabhua and Ajahn Mun, had very sharp senses of humor. Ajahn Mahabhua apparently one time gave a Dharma talk on people’s addictions to the lottery, and he had his preceptor laughing and laughing and couldn’t stop. And Ajahn Mun liked to play with words, with a point. And he had a good sense of humor about his definements. This is what the humor is for, is seeing your definements and being able to laugh at them. Not in a nasty way, but just in a good-humored, “this is the way human nature is” kind of way. So it’s always good to have that in the back of your mind. When you’re confident that this battle can be won, then you can approach the whole thing with a better sense of humor, in good humor. But there are other functions you’re going to need as well, other skills you’re going to need as well. The first one in Western psychology is called anticipation. In Buddhism it’s called heedfulness. You realize that your actions now are going to have consequences down the line. So you want to make sure that you can anticipate what the consequences of your actions are going to be, and aim at actions that are going to be skillful. It’s based on this that you develop a quality that’s called compunction. You develop appropriate attention. As the Buddha said, heedfulness is the root of all skillfulness. The compunction is that you really do care about the consequences of your actions. You’re not apathetic. You’re not defeatist. You realize that you can make a choice and you want to make the choice as well. You simply don’t want to cause any more suffering. You realize that you’ve suffered enough as it is, so why add more pain onto the pile? And appropriate attention is all about that, just looking at your actions, not in terms of whether you like them or not, but in terms of where they’re going to lead you. You look at your thoughts, you look at your words, you look at your deeds. In terms of the long-term consequences. So this is the voice of the negotiator inside, pointing out that if you really want to be happy, you do have to take your actions seriously. Not so much in a grim way, but simply see their importance, and that you really do want to have long-term happiness. If you’ve had enough of short-term happiness, that turns into something else. So whatever you can do to induce a state of heatfulness, or quality of heatfulness, is one of your really important skills as a negotiator. The second skill is altruism, realizing that your happiness, if it depends on other people’s misery, is not going to last. So you have to take their happiness into consideration. Not that you have to please them all the time. Again, the Buddhist idea of acting in a beneficial way for other people comes down to getting them to observe the precepts, getting them to overcome their greed, aversion, and delusion. So you have to think about their happiness as well as yours. There’s that scene in the canon. King Vasenade is one-on-one with his queen, Mallika, and in a tender moment he turns to her and asks her, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And you know what he’s thinking. He wants her to say, “Yes, Your Majesty, I love you more than myself.” If this were a Hollywood movie, that’s probably what she’d say, but it’s not. It’s in the Pali canon. There’s no room for foolishness. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Anybody you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit, “No, there’s nobody he loves more than himself.” That’s the end of that scene. So the king leaves the palace, goes down to see the Buddha, tells him of the conversation, and the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and not find anybody that you love more than yourself.” In the same way, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely. And the conclusion he draws is not that it’s a dog-eat-dog world. It’s that you should never harm anyone or get them to do any harm. In other words, think about their well-being. Take their well-being into consideration as you look for your own. So again, we have equality, compassion. It’s rooted in heedfulness. This, too, is one of your skills as a negotiator, reminding the wants in the mind, the short-sightedness of the blinded ones, that if you just do what you want without thought for other people, it’s going to lead to suffering down the line. The third skill is suppression, your ability to say “no” to yourself and make the “no” stick. In the Buddhist vocabulary, this is restraint. As you hold yourself back from doing things that you know are going to be harmful. It’s paired with what’s called sublimation in Western psychology. The Buddha doesn’t have a term for it, but he does provide you with alternative forms of happiness. Think of his image of the six animals. So you’re trying to practice sense restraint. You need to have a sense of well-being in the body. So you develop mindfulness of the body based on the breath. The image he has is of six animals. You’ve got a bird, a monkey, a dog, a hyena, a crocodile, a snake. And you tie them up with leashes, and you tie the leashes together. And if you don’t have a post for them to tie the leashes to, they’re going to pull and pull and pull in different directions. The monkey will want to go up a tree, the bird will want to fly up in the sky. The crocodile will want to go down into the river, that’s probably where they’re all going to go. The crocodile will just drag them down into the river where they all drown. That’s sense restraint without any solid foundation. In other words, it’s no restraint at all in the end. But if you have a post, and he says mindfulness of the body, you tie all the leashes to the post, and pull and pull and pull as they might, they’re not going to go anywhere. So you have a sense of well-being in the body as you go through the day. This is one of the reasons why we work so much with the breath. We make the breath comfortable, we make the breath interesting. Here it is, one of the primary properties of your body, and it can be used for all kinds of good things. It can create a sense of lightness when you feel heavy, a sense of heaviness when you feel light-headed. It can improve circulation through the different parts of your body. It can provide you with a sense of well-being that spreads through all the nerves, out to the pores. It’s not only pleasant, but it’s just fascinating, this element that you have that we, as a society, are not very good at explaining or talking about. So open your imagination. See what you can do with this breath element. John Foon tells the story of a nun who was studying with a Chan Lee, studying breath meditation, and she’d gone off on her own, and she found that she could breathe in a certain rhythm that would get her body to hop up in the air about a foot. She told this to John Foon, he tried it out and found that he could do it too. He had a group of people studying meditation with him, so one night he had them hop, hop, hop, hop, across the room, they turned around, hop, hop, hop, hop, hop, back. After a while he realized this was going nowhere. But it’s interesting that you can get the breath to do that. So there are all kinds of ins and outs to the breath. It’s not just in-and-out breathing. But there are lots of things you can do with this breath element. The more you take an interest in it, the more grounded you’re going to be, and the more you’re going to enjoy being here. It’s not just being comfortable and at ease with the breath. You’re learning something about how the mind relates to the body, how your awareness relates to the body, how simply moving the spot of your awareness in the body is going to change things in the body, how changing your perceptions of the breath will change the way you breathe. There’s a lot to learn right here. Even though you’re saying “no” to a lot of the ways you would look for pleasure in the senses, you’ve got an alternative that’s a lot more interesting, because it allows you to look at the way your senses process things, the way your mind processes sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, creates narratives out of them, creates worldviews out of them, creates all kinds of attachments out of them. They’re actually useful, and in a lot of cases they cause harm. So you’ve got the opportunity to learn a lot right here, as you try to direct your desires for pleasure outside into a different kind of pleasure, a different kind of happiness inside. And if you do this with good humor, you find that you have an infinite capacity to learn. It’s our impatience. We want everything to be just the way we want it to be right now, right now. That gets in the way of a lot of learning. Sometimes you have to sit with something and poke here, poke there, before it’s going to reveal its nature. Maybe you do this with good humor, and that’s the necessary element in this negotiator inside. Then you learn a lot. Negotiations will go a lot better until you finally do arrive at that happiness that everybody wants, everybody inside your mind wants. Whether they know it or not, this is what we all want, a happiness that doesn’t change, a happiness that doesn’t let us down. It can be found through our own efforts, following a path that, as the Buddha said, is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. It’s good all around.

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