Work on Your Mind

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In Thai they have a phrase, “tam jai,” which literally means “to work on your mind.” They use it usually when you’ve suffered a loss or a setback, and you calm the mind down, so you’re not too upset, so you can actually think straight, figure out what to do next, not let the loss or the setback get to you. This is an important principle in the practice, working on your mind. Because we don’t just accept the mind as it is. We realize that the mind can be shaped. You can sit here and make yourself happy, you can sit here and make yourself miserable. It all depends on the skills you bring and the attitude you bring. The right attitude, of course, is that you realize that whatever comes up, you can’t let the emotions of your mind overcome you, because then you’ll start doing things that are not all that skillful, and they will lead to more setbacks. So you’ve got to train your mind, you’ve got to fix your mind when it’s not thinking right. Develop the right attitude, that just because an emotion comes into you doesn’t mean that it’s your real emotion or it’s the real you, it’s just a force of habit. It’s one of your old habits to rule your life. This is why we meditate. To figure out some way to sit here with a sense of ease and well-being, you start with the breath. Try to make the breath comfortable. Ask yourself, “Where do you feel the breath most clearly right now?” Focus your attention there, and then ask yourself, “What would feel really good right there?” And the word “feeling good” here can mean anything from energizing to soothing to relaxing. In other words, what would you like right now, given the state of your body? What would bring things into balance? What would be satisfying? What would be gratifying right now? Focus on doing that. And if you’re not sure, you can explore, experiment. At the same time, learn how to talk to yourself. That’s the main problem in the meditation, which is that they don’t know how to talk to themselves properly. You have to give yourself encouragement, but you also have to be honest with yourself. When things are not going well, you say, “This is not going well.” Realize there’s a problem to be solved. Then you work on solving that problem, confident that it can be solved. There’s no problem that’s going to come up in your meditation. Somebody hasn’t solved someplace in their own mind, so the solutions are there. It’s just up to you to think them up. So you use your powers of observation, you use your ingenuity, and over time you find that you get more and more skilled at putting the mind in the right frame. When you learn how to do it with something simple like this, learn how to sit still for a while with a sense of ease and well-being, then you can also work on your mind in other situations. Realize what the problems are, how you breathe, how you talk to yourself. Sometimes the problem is the image you hold in mind, like with your breath. When you breathe in, where do you think the breath is coming in? And what is the breath? Is the breath the air, or is the breath the movement of energy in the body? Which perception is more helpful? Usually it’s the perception that we’re dealing with energy in the body, because then you can move that energy around. With the air, it comes in the nose, goes to the lungs, and that’s it. With the energy, you can feel it down at the tips of your fingers, the tips of your toes, all around the body, sometimes extending outside the body, like a cocoon. Then you can ask yourself, “What can I do?” What can I do to make that energy flow smoothly, flow easily, to give a sense of well-being? Well, there you are. The way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the images you hold in mind, the feelings that you’re able to create. Those are the things that go into creating any emotion, which means that when a strong emotion comes up, you can ask yourself, “How am I breathing? How am I talking to myself? What images am I holding in mind?” “What feelings am I focusing on?” And if the emotion is the sort that would lead you to do something unskillful, you say, “I’ve got to change this. I’ve got to work on my mind.” And then you use whatever skills you’ve learned. For example, with grief, we live in a world of loss. When we’re first born, we seem to be gaining this, gaining that. As we go through childhood, and early youth, things seem to be getting better and better. But then we start losing things. We lose the people we love. We lose certain of our own abilities. Sometimes we lose our belongings. We have to be prepared for that. We have to learn how to work with the mind in cases like that. There’s a case in the Canon where King Vasenade comes to see the Buddha. He’s a king who’s liked to come and see the Buddha every now and then. Apparently he didn’t meditate much, but he liked to talk to the Buddha. One day he’s talking to the Buddha, and one of his courtiers comes up and whispers into his ear that one of his favorite queens has just died. And so he just breaks down. His shoulders are drooping, morose, at a loss for words. And the Buddha asks him, “Since when has it ever happened that something that is subject to aging, illness, and death doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die?” Once you’re born, you’re subject to these things. Is there anybody anywhere in the world who has been born and is going to be free from death? No, you’d think that’s just adding the sorrows of the world on top of his own individual sorrow. But that kind of thinking is actually a useful way to think. Because you realize the world is not something on you alone. You’re in this with a lot of other people. And this is the natural way of the world. There’s nothing unnatural, nothing abnormal about it. We have that chant, “I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death.” The Thai translation is that aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal. And when we see these things happening to other people, yes, it’s normal. But when they happen to us or to people who are close to us, it seems abnormal. We have to get the right perspective. When you get the right perspective, it’s a lot easier to deal with these things. This is one example of working with your mind. Then the Buddha recommends that you take some opportunity to express your sense of loss, eulogies for the person who’s passed away, showing that you recognize that you really have lost someone important, someone who’s really good. So you have the satisfaction that comes from expressing your appreciation for what that person has meant for you. Some people think the Buddha says, “Well, just accept everything and don’t have any reaction.” He says, “No, you’ve got to express your appreciation.” But then you have to remind yourself that you can start getting self-indulgent. And so when you’ve expressed your appreciation, you’ve made gifts and dedicated them to the person who’s passed on. But there’s work to be done, whatever work you have in your life. If you just sit around being morose and moping, as the Buddha said, your enemies will take the pleasure, your friends and loved ones will be upset. So loss is not the end of the world, because it’s part of the world. We have to learn how to live with it and then pick up the pieces and move on. You do that by working with your mind, the skills you’ve learned about how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, what images you will hold in mind. And that gives you the strength in order to have the right attitude. So you’ve got the attitude and the skills working together. In the case of a loss, you remind yourself, talk to yourself about how this is something that’s universal. As I was saying earlier this morning, there’s that belief when you look at what’s happening to a person, that you’re seeing the running balance in their karma account. It’s as if they have one karma account in the bank. Whatever’s happening to them right now shows you the sum total of what they’ve got. So people have bad karma, they’re suffering from bad karma, well, that’s all they have in the bank. But that’s heartless. And it’s also inaccurate. As the Buddha said, it’s more like a field. We have lots of different karma seeds in the field. Right now some bad seeds may be sprouting, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have good seeds. This principle applies to you, it applies to everybody else. So we’re all in the same boat. So learn to talk to yourself in these ways. Remind yourself, just because a severe loss has happened doesn’t mean that you’re a bad person. It means just that you have that karma in the past. But you also have the potential for good karma in the past. Focus on those potentials. That’s the work you have to do. So as we go through life, we have to learn how to work with our minds so we don’t inflict unnecessary suffering on ourselves. Because that’s the suffering that weighs down the mind. This is the essence of the Buddha’s Fourth Noble Truth. The cause of suffering is not things happening outside. It’s our own craving, our own clinging. We hold on to things, we thirst for things that are wrong, and as a result we suffer. We can learn how not to do that, again, by working with the mind. So here is where there’s hope. You don’t have to wait for someone else to come along and help you. You have your own inner resources that you can draw on right now. Simple things. How do you talk to yourself? We talk to ourselves all the time. They say that speech is cheaper. Your inner speech is even cheaper. Because it goes on all the time. Your mind is full of your inner speech. So learn to make it some good inner speech. Your mind is full of perceptions, the images you hold in mind. Learn to focus on some good ones. And you’re strengthened by learning how to breathe in a way that feels really soothing, grounding, expansive. As I said, if you think of the breath simply as air, you can expand that air to the different parts of the body. But if you think of it as energy, it can go in every part of the body, all at once, all around, inside and out, to create a sense of well-being, a sense of strength. Because the mind needs a sense of strength in order to do the work it needs to do on itself. Otherwise there are cases where you know what should be done, but you just don’t have the energy. So working with the breath helps give you that energy. So you can actually put more energy into talking to yourself in the most skillful way, holding the most skillful perceptions in mind, focusing on the best feelings you can manage right now. And that way you can, at the very least, reduce the amount of suffering you cause yourself. If you get really good at this, the Buddha says, you can get to a point where there’s no suffering at all. Things unfortunate may still be happening outside. Fully awakened people still experience loss, but they train themselves so they don’t have to suffer from it. That’s the kind of skill we want to develop.

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