Know Your Weaknesses

November 20, 2019

When we talk about the committee members of the mind, there’s a tendency to focus on the bad ones. But you have to remember that some members of the committee want you to meditate, want you to practice. They’re the ones that get you to sit down, focus on the breath. When you wander off, they remind you to come back. The good voices in the mind are the voices of the five strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, conviction that meditation is a good thing to do, that you’re going to understand the forces shaping your life and get some control over them. Then persistence, the ones that encourage you to keep at it, that warn you when you’re beginning to wander off. The voices of mindfulness that remind you what you should be doing, where you should be focused, how you should modulate the breath. The voices of concentration. The voices of direct thought and evaluation that help you drop your interest in sensual things outside, can cut through any things that get in the way and focus you on the breath. The voices of discernment that ask you, “What are you doing? Is it getting the results you want? If not, what could you change?” These are all good voices you want to learn how to listen to. They give strength to your practice. Which means, of course, that their opposites are weaknesses. You want to recognize those voices as being weak. Sometimes they come in and they sound very authoritative, very insistent, very strong, but they are weaknesses. The voice of cynicism, “This is not worth it. Or that you’re not up to it.” That’s a voice that really hinders you. You have to make a distinction. Skepticism sometimes is a good thing. When you’re not sure of what’s going to happen, you say, “Okay, we’ll give it a try.” Cynicism is what says, “It’s not even worth a try.” And that’s a weakness. And, of course, the voice of laziness. It just doesn’t want to make an effort. And it’ll find all kinds of reasons to be lazy. It can sound very authoritative and very much like dhamma. “Don’t try too hard. After all, this is the middle way,” it says. Or sometimes it’ll push you in a way that you end up getting frazzled. And then you say, “See? It doesn’t work.” Or to use the image of the cow, as the Buddha said, you try to get milk out of the cow. If you twist the horn, no matter how much you twist the horn, no matter how hard you do it, you’re still not going to get any milk. And so you give up twisting the horn. Then you say, “See? Not putting in any effort is much nicer than putting in effort.” The thing is, you still don’t get the milk. There’s that voice that sounds wise that says, “Efforting is going to get in the way of the awakening that’s already just waiting to show itself to you.” That’s the voice of laziness. You have to recognize it as a weakness. If you’ve been engaged in a wrong effort, you have to figure out what’s wrong about the effort and where to focus your efforts, where to focus your desires. In other words, in terms of the cow analogy, you finally find the udder. You pull on the udder and there you get the milk. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. But the voices of forgetfulness don’t simply have a lapse of memory. Sometimes they willfully forget. You think, “Oh, I forgot about some unskillful things you did,” and you think about them in ways that get discouraging. In other words, the opposite of mindfulness here is wrong mindfulness. You remember the wrong things and you forget the things you should be remembering, and you remember things you shouldn’t. Or you willfully blot out the voices of the ajahns, the voices of the Buddha. That’s also a voice of weakness. Then there’s scatterbrained voices, the ones that say, “Well, how about this? How about that? What about this over there?” The ones that don’t want to focus on one thing for fear of they’re going to miss out something else. That fear of missing out, F-O-M-O, is a voice of weakness because it gets you frazzled. Then there’s the opposite of discernment, which is basically the voice of impatience. Discernment has to have patience. In other words, it’s willing to wait for the long term. It’s willing to invest. Put in the effort now for a result that’s going to come sometime down the line. Of course, the path doesn’t save all of its rewards for the end, but it saves some of them. There’s that voice that says, “Well, let’s go for it the quick and easy way.” In other words, it’s the voice that wants to have pleasure right now. It says, “Well, I’ll just content myself with being here with the right now, present moment, because that’s all we’ve got is the present moment, so I’ll learn how to accept what it is.” That’s the opposite of discernment. So you have to recognize these voices for what they are. They are weaknesses in the mind. They get in the way of the practice. They sap the strength of your practice. So watch out for them. At the same time, watch out for the wrong versions of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. The wrong conviction is being convinced there’s somebody out there who’s going to be able to do the work for you. Or there’ll be some teacher who looks at you and can give you exactly what you need to know. There was a sad story years back. There was an American who went to Thailand, got ordained, went to see Ajahn Mahaprabhu and asked Ajahn Mahaprabhu, “What technique is going to get me to awakening?” And Ajahn Mahaprabhu said, “I don’t know.” And the monk took that as a statement on Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s part that he didn’t know the way to awakening. So he gave up, left, disrobed, came back and became a professor of Buddhist studies here in the States. Of course, what Ajahn Mahaprabhu was saying was that you have to find out for yourself what’s going to work. Some people find that breath meditation works. Other people find contemplation of the body works. And you can’t expect the teacher to do all the work for you. A large part of discernment is going to be the willingness to try things out on your own. So wrong conviction is actually a weakness. Wrong effort is also a weakness. Wrong mindfulness is remembering all the wrong things. Wrong concentration is getting obsessed with little details that are not related to the practice. Getting obsessed with greed, aversion, and delusion. As the Buddha points out, it is possible to get into a kind of jhana of anger or a jhana of greed or a jhana of lust. They’re all wrong concentration. And then wrong discernment. When you gain insight into the world out there, the world’s this way, the world’s that way, the insight that points out where all the sources of your suffering are outside, all of this saps your strength that you need in order to look inside, because that’s where the real problem is. So just as it’s important to recognize the voices of strength inside the mind, it’s important to recognize the weakening voices. Because sometimes they can sound very authoritative. There are a lot of Dhamma teachers out there that are basically spouting wrong conviction, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration, wrong discernment. They make it sound very sophisticated and very right. So you have to use your discretion. When you listen to any Dhamma, compare it to the Four Noble Truths. Remember the message of the Four Noble Truths. Suffering is something you do. It’s caused by other things that you do. But the potentials for putting an end to suffering also lie inside. And there are potentials that you can develop. So try to get a good sense of who’s who in your mind. Because all those different voices, they have been you at some point in the past. That’s why they’re there. You tried a particular approach to finding some pleasure, and it seemed to work. It worked well enough that you filed it away. And whether it really worked well enough, at least it appealed to some part of the mind. So you learned how to identify with it. This is why it’s so difficult to sort them out. It’s because you’ve identified with all these different voices at different times, and they all sound like you. Which is why the process of disidentification is an important step in the practice. As the Buddha said, “Discernment lies in seeing things as separate.” This, too, goes against what you’ve probably heard in some places, that wisdom is all about seeing the oneness and interconnectedness of things. But to see something clearly, you have to be able to step back from it, to see where it comes from, where it goes, what it leads you to do, and whether what it leads you to do is satisfactory or not. You’ve got to step back. You’ve got to see it as separate from your awareness. It’s potentially something that you would not want to identify with. That’s how you sort out what’s going on in the mind. And you can get the discussion in the mind on the right track. Sometimes you find you should sit down and meditate. Everything is all ready to settle down. You tell yourself to focus on the breath, and there you are. Other times you have to think your way around to being willing to settle down and having the right attitude. John Sowett would often preface his meditation instructions by saying, “Put the mind in the right mood.” Develop a sense of conviction. Develop a sense of confidence in what you’re doing. Even before you focus on the breath or before you focus on bhutto, think things through a little bit to make sure you’ve got your values right. Any thoughts that would come in that would get in the way, give them a good karate chop. That way the mind will be ready to settle down. So remember, there are different approaches for different states of mind as you’re about to meditate. And in the days when the mind is not willing to be with the breath, don’t be disappointed. Just remind yourself, “Okay, there’s some other work that needs to be done first.” And as you work through and sort out all the different voices, what is that? Well, it’s direct thought and evaluation. And as you learn how to evaluate things in a way that gets rid of the unskillful voices, that leads to direct thought and evaluation of the breath. Then you pick up your theme and you run with it. In the forest tradition, they make the distinction between concentration fostering discernment and discernment fostering concentration, saying that different people find different methods suitable for them. But sometimes it’s also a case simply of what mood you are in that particular day, which means that you have to learn both approaches so you can apply them when needed. It’s in this way that the meditation becomes a skill and your path acquires strength.

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