You Contain Multitudes

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A famous poet once said that he contained multitudes. But he’s not the only one. We all have lots of voices inside, lots of different versions of us inside. Sometimes they get together and act like a committee. Sometimes they’re a mob. Sometimes they talk reasonably with one another. Sometimes not so reasonably. Sometimes one of them takes over the microphone and just drones on and on and on. So even though this multitude inside can be a problem, you can also use it to your advantage. The problem, of course, is when you decide to get on the path. And not everybody inside is on board. You throw up obstacles, roadblocks, so you have to learn how to get around them. You try to convert the ones that you can convert and push out of power the ones who are in power but are planning something else aside from the path. That’s one of the reasons why you shouldn’t get discouraged as distractions come up. You’re here with a breath and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. But you come back, come back, come back. You strengthen the good committee members. At the same time, you learn how to breathe in a way that feels really good. This is going to convert a lot of them. You’re buying them off. Because every voice inside the mind wants happiness of one kind or another. Some of them have some pretty weird ideas of happiness, the ones who want to prove to you that, “No, you can’t do this,” because they’re basically lazy. They would rather that you lower your sights. But that’s a miserable kind of happiness. But it’s their version. So what you want to do is show the independent members, the ones who are not committed yet, that it really is good to be meditating. This is why we work with the breath, or to find some way of getting the mind to find pleasure here in the present moment. The Buddha notes that there are times when you’re trying to focus on the breath and the mind is not quite ready yet. In his terms, there’s a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. It makes it hard to settle down right here, right now. So you give the mind something else to think about. Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It’s one of the reasons why we have those chants at the beginning of the meditation. Think of the fact that the person who found this path is a really inspiring person. We’d like to model ourselves on him. That may seem somewhat superhuman sometimes, but he’s kept on saying the secrets to his awakening were on the one hand, a strong effort and an unwillingness to rest content with what skillful qualities he had, but also qualities like heedfulness, ardency, resolution, heedfulness, seeing the dangers in not practicing, but also realizing that your actions can make a difference. You can avoid those dangers if you act skillfully. If you couldn’t avoid those dangers, then heedfulness wouldn’t have any meaning. So think of both sides of heedfulness. The side that warns you that there are dangers in your greed, aversion, and delusion. They’re like little animals you keep around. Again, they’re part of the mob in the mind. There’s something in the mind that thinks that greed is cute and anger is fun. Delusion is fun. You have to realize that these little animals can bite you and do you a lot more damage than they can do you any good. Ardency is when you try to put your whole heart into this. Find the members of the community who’ve said, “I’ve suffered enough in this lifetime, and who knows how many other lifetimes I’ve been suffering? Let’s really get it right this time.” I have a student who was in a car wreck. He was knocked unconscious and didn’t come to until after they’d operated on his leg. His leg had been pretty much smashed, but they reassembled it for him. While he was in the hospital, his ex-wife called him up and as he put the receiver back down, an artery burst in one of his legs and he lost consciousness again. So they wheeled him into the elevator to go in for another surgery. Apparently, he regained consciousness just enough. He turned to the doctor who was putting on his surgical coat and said, “Okay, let’s do it right this time, okay?” That much was to remind her that she had to be really careful about how she sewed him back up again. So you shouldn’t have that same voice inside you that says, “Let’s do it right this time.” And then there’s resolution, the willingness to stick with this over time. This requires endurance. And the secret to endurance is not to focus on the things that are hard, but to focus on the strengths that you have. And you do have strengths. We all have strengths of various kinds. We wouldn’t be human beings if we didn’t. It’s simply a matter of finding them. This is again where the committee of the mind comes in. Sometimes the parts of the mind that are doing the meditation, that are following the practice, get discouraged. They’re putting in a lot of work, they seem to be making progress, and then the progress just erodes away. You have to ask yourself, “Who else is in here?” Who has some strength? Who’s able to pick up the slack? When you challenge yourself this way, you find there really are parts of the mind that have some strength. I remember the first time I sat up all night meditating. At first I didn’t think I would be able to do it, but somehow around 1 a.m. I got a second wind. I had no idea where it came from, but I realized, “Okay, there’s more in terms of my abilities than I think.” All of us find that a lot of the obstacles in the path are things that we put up, or members of the committee put up. But there are other members that can take them down. So as you get discouraged in your progress, remind yourself, “I’m not taking advantage of all of my capabilities.” As the Buddha said, “This path is a path that you can do.” He said, “If you couldn’t do it, you wouldn’t have taught it.” And he wasn’t talking to superhuman beings when he said that. He was talking to human beings just like us. You think of Ajahn Mun encouraging his students. Most of them were sons of peasants. At the bottom of the social ladder in Thailand, he kept reminding them, “What do you need to meditate? You need a body. You’ve got the body. You need a mind. You’ve got the mind. The fact that you’re a human being means you’ve got the capabilities. It’s just a question of finding them and not underestimating yourself. As the Buddha said, you get the best results out of listening to the Dhamma when, one, you don’t despise the Dhamma, two, you don’t despise the person giving the talk, and three, you don’t despise yourself. Because it’s so easy to say,”Well, I can’t do that,” and then you just stop. But whose voice is that? Do you have to identify with that voice? No. That’s just a voice in the mind. And how do you know that you can’t do it unless you try? And you try and you try and it doesn’t seem to get you anywhere. Well, ask yourself, “Who else in here can help me?” Look back on your strengths. You’ve made it this far as an adult. You’ve obviously got some strengths. Think of the various skills that you’ve mastered, the subjects that you’ve mastered. How did you do that? There had to be some persistence. There had to be the desire to do it. You had to pay careful attention. And you had to use your own powers of observation to think things through. We can apply those same qualities here. If one way of working with the breath doesn’t work, try another one. If the breath doesn’t work, try yet another one. Think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—something that gets you inspired. Think about the Sangha. You can think about the people who’ve had lots of problems on their paths. This is one of the reasons why we have those verses of the elders. Sometimes comparing yourself to the Buddha seems a little bit much of a stretch. So you can compare yourself to the monks and nuns who talked about how they got suicidal sometimes, how they got depressed, how they found themselves sick and were able to pull themselves together again and come out with awakening. As Venerable Ananda kept saying, “If they can do it, you can do it.” There are people who’ve attained these attainments. It’s not just a storm. It’s not just a story, or a myth, or an archetype. It’s an account of what human beings can do. They’re human beings. You’re a human being. They can do it. You can do it, too. So look for who inside has got the talents, got the strengths, has the patience, the endurance, and whatever other qualities are going to be needed. You may find that you’ve got different committee members who have different strengths. Well, work together as a team. It’s in this way that having multitudes inside turns from being a problem to being part of the solution.

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