Train Your Selves

July 30, 2023

The Buddha never uses the phrase “the committee of the mind,” but he does talk about how there are different voices in the mind, different opinions in the mind, and there are conversations that go on. One steady conversation is what’s called verbal fabrication. Technically, it’s directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a topic, and then you make comments on it. And there can be lots of different comments. When we do this process in ignorance, it’s going to lead to suffering. If we do it with knowledge, especially knowledge in terms of the Four Noble Truths, it can actually become part of the practice. That’s the first factor of jhana. So it’s good to learn how to talk to yourself in a skillful way, because it will make a huge difference in the path. There’s that passage where a layperson comes to see Ananda and says, “How can it be that monks, even young monks, are ready to give up sensual pleasures, give up sensuality?” And Ananda says, “This is an important topic. Let’s go see the Buddha.” And so the Buddha talks about his own practice. When he realized that he would have to give up sensuality, he said his mind didn’t leap up at the prospect. But then he talked to himself, pointing out the dangers of sensuality and the advantages that would come when he was able to give up sensual thinking. And it was through that conversation that he was actually able to get the mind into concentration, the first jhana. But then he found that he was addicted to his direct thought and evaluation. So he had to talk to himself again, say the mind would be better off if it could be quiet. And so we see in the Buddha’s own autobiographical accounts, there’s a fair amount of conversation that went on. Questions he asked, answers he proposed. When we look in the texts, we find that this commentator in the mind plays an important role. It’s the part that reflects on what other things you’re doing. In fact, it’s one of the three roles of self that are actually useful in the path. There’s the role that is going to be doing the actions that are needed to be done. There’s going to be the self that’s going to enjoy the results. And then the commentator basically checks on how well the results are coming out. And if they’re not coming out, we’ll have advice to give. So these three different roles have to work together well for the path to grow. And our problem is that we already have these three roles, but they’re not very well trained. Sometimes the doer is lazy. Sometimes the enjoyer or the consumer is impatient. What results right now? And the commentator can be all over the map, be hijacked by any defilement that comes along, like a politician who can be swayed by any donor. The commentator can be really harsh or can be very lackadaisical. They have to train all three aspects. The self that’s useful is the self that has a sense of urgency, a sense of heedfulness that we’ve really got to get the work done. We don’t know how much time we have, so we don’t have much time to fool around. But it also has to be patient, because a lot of the work that we do as meditators is very detailed work. Each breath, one at a time. And John Fuehring had a student one time. He was teaching her contemplation of the body. And he told her to imagine pulling out all the hairs in her head and then replanting them. And so she sat and meditated for five minutes, and she said, “Okay, that’s done.” He said, “What do you mean, it’s done?” When you take the hairs out, you can take them out in bunches, but you’re going to have to plant each one back one at a time, because that’s not going to be done in five minutes. But it trains you in being very precise, which you have to be to be a meditator, because they’re precise defilements that come up. And sometimes they hide behind other more skillful states of mind. And you have to ferret them out. It’s like two radio stations whose frequency is very close. You require a radio that can tune out the station you don’t want so you can hear the station that you do. So the doer has to be trained to be precise, meticulous. But at the same time, heedful. You don’t waste your time. It’s a difficult balance to make, but it is possible. This is part of my training with John Fuehring. He wanted this head cleaned very quickly, but very precisely. And in trying to meet that standard, I learned an awful lot. So you have to have the same standard in your meditation. You want this work to be done in time, because you don’t know how much time you have. But at the same time, you have to be very meticulous. That’s the self as the doer. The self as the enjoyer has to be taught some patience. This is work that’s going to require time. You can’t get too impatient if you start demanding results right now, right now. Or if you measure everything by how much fun it feels to think thoughts in a particular way. You’re missing an important part of the practice. As this concentration develops, you move through rapture and then more rapture and pleasure. And then pleasure without the rapture. You might think, “Why would I want pleasure without rapture when I could have it with rapture?” But you have to train the mind to learn to appreciate that pleasure without rapture. And then you have to train the mind to appreciate the equanimity that comes when you let go of that pleasure. Because equanimity does have its advantages. You can see things a lot more clearly. The mind is much more solid. It’s not that you’re going to be starved of pleasure, but you’re going to develop a more discerning palate, a more discerning sense of pleasure. You’re going to have more flexibility about what really does feel best. As for the commentator, it has to be circumspect. You listen to Ajahn Man’s students and they will talk again and again about how they would tend to get lopsided in their practice, focusing on one thing and not wanting to do it really well, but missing the fact that they were out of balance. And Ajahn Man would bring them back into balance. This is an important principle in discernment because it’s very easy when the mind gets still and some insights arise that you just want to run with the insight. It seems so convincing that you really have to be trained to stop. And ask questions from the other side. The questions that Ajahn Lee would have you ask is, “Okay, assuming that this is true, how far is it true? And in what areas is it not true?” That’s a lesson that Fugeng got from Ajahn Man. When you see something in the meditation, you’ve got to put it to the test, no matter how impressive it may seem. Even if a deva appears in the vision or the Buddha himself appears in the vision, there’s no guarantee that it’s going to be true. So you have to test it in practice. And you have to measure it against what you know of the Dhamma. So it’s not just your ideas of what works, but you’ve got to raise your standards for what works. Make them in line with the Dhamma. That’s the Mahabhava got from Ajahn Man. When something comes up in your meditation and you’re not really sure about it, just stay with the sense of awareness itself, the knower, and let it pass. Don’t be a part of the mind and say, “Oh, this could be a really great insight. This may be a really great state of mind.” It’s better to be safe than to push things too fast. Weird states can come up as you’re meditating. And just because they’re weird doesn’t mean they’re especially deep or profound. You want to look for states that, one, that you can get under your control. In other words, when they arise, you can make them arise again and then again. And then after they’re under your control, then you test them. What are these states good for? I’ve told you about that state that you can get into, what Ajahn Fu and Ajahn Lee call the state of non-perception, where you totally blank out. And if you’ve read any of the meditation instructions that talk about cessation, it sounds like this must be it. But then you have to realize there’s no discernment in that state at all. And just because you’ve had that state and you come out doesn’t mean you’ve really learned anything. You could talk yourself into thinking that it meant something, but what does it do on its own? So it’s actually a state of wrong concentration, but it does have its uses. Ajahn Fu said that he used that when he was undergoing an operation. They were going to remove one of his kidneys. He didn’t trust the anesthesiologist, so he put himself into that state. And what’s weird about the state is you can determine ahead of time that you’re going to come out at a particular time. And so he asked them at what time the operation would be over, so he sort of set his internal clock. He came out and he found himself being wielded into the operating room. They had sewed him up wrong, so they had to redo part of the operation. So he went back in. So sometimes even states of wrong concentration can have their uses, as long as you’re clear about the fact that they are wrong. They can’t be taken as being something deeper or more profound. So training the commentator is especially important. Some people have a commentator who’s unduly harsh and will say anything to discourage you. Of course, that’s the commentator that’s been taken over by the defilement that doesn’t want to practice. You need a sense of the self as a doer who’s competent. You want the commentator to be encouraging, but at the same time hold you to high standards. And yourself as the consumer or the part that’s going to benefit from all this, you want to teach it to be patient. And to learn how to appreciate the stillness that can come from concentration, the sense of lightness that comes when you gain insights into things that have been holding you down. In other words, you become more and more aware or connoisseur of the happiness that can be achieved by training the mind. So when you train yourself in these ways, you train your many selves in these ways, the conversations that go on inside become more and more useful. You know when to talk to yourself about things, when to be quiet. When you do talk, you know what to talk about, how to talk about these things. This is part of training the mind. This is how you use the fact that you have many selves inside to your advantage, because you get to look at things from many different angles. So learn how to take advantage of that fact, so that you can keep things in perspective. (chiming)

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