

The Open Committee

March 7, 2005

The mind is like a committee with an open membership. It seems that anybody has the right to say anything at the meetings. No one ever checks credentials to see who's coming in with what kind of intentions—because if you sit and watch the thoughts that go through the mind, you begin to realize that a lot of them don't come from you at all. They come from outside. Ideas you've picked up from who knows where: your parents, your friends, TV, teachers, radio, magazines. You never can really be sure that the places where these voices came from really meant you well, and yet there they are now, inside you, in the committee.

A lot of the voices have different desires behind them, like people who wield political power and don't show themselves publicly. That makes the voices very strong and often very difficult to deal with. Because their arguments go underground, the real issues are very rarely brought to the surface.

And it's our task to change the committee.

Fortunately, you can take advantage of that open membership by bringing new members in, members you want on your side. The desire for peace, the desire for true happiness: That's buried someplace in you. You can bring out that desire and arm it with concentration, you can arm it with all the techniques you need to help strengthen it. As that desire get stronger, you can begin to set down some rules, some parliamentary procedures. One: that you're not going to listen to any voices in the mind that really don't lead to happiness. That's an important one. That's the beginning of wisdom. And then, two, you make a rule that when anything is proposed in the mind, you want to know what the consequences are going to be.

Then you learn how to strengthen the committee members that are on your side. This is important. This is why we have this practice of concentration, so that we can take the observing part of the mind and really strengthen it, creating a place both in the body and in the mind where you can simply stand and watch things so that you don't easily get fooled by moods, fooled by desires as they come in and pretend to be pushing this, when they're actually pushing something else. Or making a really poor argument, but making it with a lot of force.

All the tricks that you hear and see in outside committees really come out of the tricks the mind plays on itself. This is one of the reasons why people who are very greedy, very angry, or very deluded can be really slick debaters, because that's the kind of debate that goes on in their minds all the time. What you've got to learn how to do is to be more slick yourself, on the side of true happiness.

And practice a concentration that's good, one that creates a sense of ease. That way, you can show the mind that practicing the Dhamma is not all hardship. In fact, there's a sense of ease that goes really deep down inside. If you allow it to seep through the body, let the breath work through the body, around all the knots of tension, it feels really good to be right here.

At the same time, you've got a place where you can observe things as they come, watch them as they go. You come to realize that there really is a committee in here. There are lots of different perspectives. Often one thought seems to consume the entire mind. But as you develop your concentration, you begin to realize that you've got at least one little spot to watch events without having to get involved. That's your strength.

So try to develop that strength and keep it going: this observer that it doesn't get swept up with passions, doesn't get carried away by fancy oratory, just watches what's going on. And when you regard this committee just as that, a committee, it helps to dis-identify from it. No matter how strong a feeling is, you don't have to identify with it. This is one of the Buddha's most important teachings. If you had to identify with everything that came up in your mind, you'd go crazy. You've got the choice. Learn how to exercise that choice wisely. This is why we practice concentration.

And if the mind has trouble settling down, do your best to look and see, okay, what are the actual problems that are getting in the way? Don't let them sneak around and stay out of sight. When you want to meditate but the mind doesn't settle down, ask yourself: "Why won't you settle down?" And then wait and watch to see what the answer is going to be. The mind will be quiet, it'll pretend like it hasn't heard, or that the other desires are not there. But you make a rule: "If I don't hear anything, I'm going to go ahead and meditate." At some point they've got to come out. Then you can see them for what they are, and then deal with them as they are. Is this a desire that really is in your own best interest? Where is it going to lead? Then use the powers of your concentration, the powers of your discernment to make sure you're not swayed by any desires that are really contrary to the Dhamma, contrary to your own true happiness.

In this way, you bring some order into the committee. You've got some parliamentary procedure. You check credentials. And when you can bring some order into the discussion, you find that it really does start getting more and more in line with your real aspirations, more and more in line with your real happiness. The committee can start getting united, not united in some crazy passion, but united with wisdom, with concentration, with mindfulness. All the good qualities start working together.

So this is a process you can do both while you're meditating and in the course of your day. Don't think that when you meditate you can't think at all. Many times there are issues that have to be dealt with. And in dealing with them, you're getting the mind in better and better shape so that it finally can settle down. And don't think that training the mind is something you do only when you have your eyes closed. The training is to be used all the time, so that you can learn good habits, try to maintain those good habits, no matter what you're doing. Even in situations that seem very far away from meditation, you find you've got to maintain your proper form.

There's a book on the swimming technique that says even when you let up in your practice, the important thing is that you maintain good form all the time. That's the same with the mind. These rules of parliamentary procedure have to be followed no matter what. Any voice that recommends things that don't lead to real happiness shouldn't be allowed to speak in the meeting, shouldn't be allowed to have any force, any influence. That has to be your basic law. Just articulating that law and applying it again and again can make a huge difference in your life.