

## *Negotiating with the Committee*

*September 3, 2009*

The Buddha made an important distinction between physical seclusion and mental seclusion. You might be sitting alone under a tree, alone in the sense that there's nobody else around you, but there can be a lot of people in your mind. He said, all your cravings, all your thoughts of past and future, all that conversation going on in the mind: It's as if you had a lot of people there. You have to learn to find some peace among them, so that you really can be alone, one in the present moment, so that you can get into concentration.

Now, there are several ways of doing this. One is to banish all the unskillful members. That's what you have to do in the beginning: If any unskillful thought comes up, you just say, "No, no, no. I am not going there." Sometimes you have to reinforce that determination with reasons. As the Buddha said, one of the ways of dealing with unskillful thoughts is to look at their drawbacks. Tell yourself you've been watching these old movies many, many times. You know exactly what Humphrey Bogart is going to say. And often your movies don't have Humphrey Bogart anyhow. Your family, your friends, play horrible roles, and not very well either. But they're all in there. You have to remind yourself that these thoughts don't go anywhere. They do go someplace, but they don't go anywhere good. And for the sake of concentration practice, that's often enough. Just put them aside.

While you're practicing concentration, you're developing a really important skill, so that you can learn how to negotiate with all the voices in the mind. That requires learning how to give rise to a sense of immediate pleasure, rapture even, here in the present moment, using very simple materials: the breath, your ability to stay mindful of one thing over time, the ability to stay concentrated on one thing over time, so that the mind has a chance to rest, settle down, and so the physical elements in the body can become balanced, giving rise to that sense of ease, well-being. As things get more and more still, there comes a sense of rapture, a fullness. It's almost as if every little cell in your body is full; all the blood vessels are full. As for any parts the body where you tend to carry tension, you can allow them to relax so that they get a sense of fullness as well, so that you're not constantly starving yourself.

Because the mind does like to feed, and it likes to feed on pleasure. So as you negotiate with all the unskillful thoughts and voices in the mind, it's really good to be able to throw them a little pleasure. What this comes down to is that every voice in the mind, every identity, every self, you've ever created, is created for the

sake of happiness. So when you want to bring them to the table, you can get everybody together so that you can talk about things, reason with the different parts of the mind, a lot of them don't like listening to reason because they want instant happiness right now. Yet you're going to train them to see that it's important to respect cause and effect.

Before they're willing to listen to that, you have to be able to show them that it is possible to attain a sense of ease and well-being right here, right now, in a skillful way, so that whatever their unskillful demands for pleasure are right now, you can say, "Look, here's a better pleasure. It's right here. We're not talking about something far off in the future." All you have to do is breathe in a comfortable way, allow the breath energy to circulate around the body in a comfortable way. Think of the blood, say, flowing through your hands, flowing through your feet, relaxing whatever tension may be there in the hands and feet. Then working up from there, you can go up the arms, the legs, into the torso, so that whatever the sense of being on edge, of being unable to stand the tension, of wanting some pleasure right now, you can say, "Look, here it is, right now."

As you perfect this skill, you can start bringing those unskillful thoughts to the table and learn how to inspect them. Because as the Buddha said, you don't really see things simply by pushing them away or by just seeing their drawbacks. You have to see: What is it about this particular idea or this particular inner persona that has appeal? Why do you like falling into that old habit? What gratification does it provide?

You see that there's part of the mind that likes even the habits you generally don't like. Part of the mind must like them because otherwise it wouldn't be going for them. So you've got to be able to see both sides: What do you like about this unskillful behavior, and what do you not like about it?

You see that what you like about it is that it does give a certain sense of pleasure, and what you don't like about it is that it's obscuring other possible pleasures. There's a conflict in the mind among your different desires and among the different identities that form around these desires. As the Buddha says, craving takes a location. It's focused right at something. One of the six senses is where the seed of an identity gets planted, and gets watered, nourished.

There's not just one sense of identity. There are lots of different identities that you develop over time. Each one is related to a particular skill set. Some of the skills may be really skillful and others are very crude. They may give a little hit of pleasure right now, but then there's pain down the line. So it's hard to really call them skills, but there was one point in your path where you got results from them, so you tend to keep those particular identities in your menagerie and bring them

out whenever you feel like it. And because a lot of this stuff goes on in a very unskillful way, we don't like to admit to ourselves. We hide it from ourselves. This is ignorance. So to end ignorance, you have to look at what's the pleasure that comes from this? And is it really a healthy or useful pleasure? Or is it something that ends up causing more trouble than it's worth?

This way, you learn how to negotiate with all the different voices in the mind. Instead of pushing them away and hiding them, once you've got a good state in concentration, you can bring them out. You're more in control of the situation now because you do have that sense of immediate pleasure that you can draw on when you need it. You can sympathize with the various identities that you didn't like before, because you can see them, you can understand them. They're all based on some idea of pleasure, sometimes very benighted, sometimes very ignorant. But that's the basis for negotiation: Everybody at the table wants happiness. It's simply that some desires for happiness are wiser than others.

Remember the Buddha's definition of the beginning point of wisdom, those questions you ask somebody who knows: What when I do it will be for my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will be for my long-term harm and suffering? These questions are wise because you see that your actions are responsible for your happiness or your suffering, you realize that long-term happiness is better than short-term, and you realize also that you can learn. You're not just stuck in your old ways. That's the beginning of wisdom right there.

So you try to apply those principles to all the various voices, all the various desires you have. See what pleasure they offer; see what drawbacks they carry. When you have a better sense of pleasure, a better way of bringing about pleasure and well-being—in other words, a wider set of skills—you begin to see that some of your old skills are just skills in quotes—in other words, not part of the toolkit you want to keep with you.

So when you see their allure, when you see their drawbacks, that's when you begin to see the escape from them, as you develop a sense of dispassion, as you see that your old skills really are not skillful, they're not worth encouraging, they're not worth keeping around, because you've got better skills. And you can learn how to apply those better skills for a wider and wider range of your interactions. That's when you begin to create peace inside, and that sense of mental seclusion grows even deeper. It's not just the enforced mental seclusion of concentration. It's the seclusion of a mind that's not carrying a lot of unnecessary baggage.

The word *upadhi*, in Pali, means essentially that. *Upadhi* is that whole pile of paraphernalia you carry around, as if you lived in a nomadic household. When time comes to pick everything up, you pick up your big tent, you pick up all your

belongings, and carry them with you. All those belongings: Those are your *upadhi*. Most of us have a huge pile of internal luggage, filled with straw and old garbage, weeds, all kinds of stuff that has no real use or value at all. So as the mind begins to settle down, you have to begin sorting through your old baggage, see what you can throw away so that you can travel a lot lighter, until you really are totally without a companion. In other words, everything in the mind is on the same page.

Those are just some of the steps in how seclusion becomes complete and goes deep. It's not just physical seclusion sitting alone here, but with all sorts of voices clamoring your mind. The voices calm down. The desires behind the voices calm down. Especially when you reach the experience of the deathless, you say, "Oh, there's a happiness that doesn't require feeding and doesn't require any of those other skills." In fact, it can be found only by letting go of your skills, compared on the range of skills, although it's in line with the skills of the four noble truths.

We talked today about that Dhamma wheel out front, the one that has too many spokes. Well, the one inside here has the right number: twelve spokes. Each of the four noble truths has its duty, which you have to master as a skill. You want to learn how to comprehend stress, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path to its cessation. Those are the skills we're working on here. Those are the Buddha's real skills. The skills that fall outside of this, he says, are not going to help you on the path. Many of them can actually get in the way.

We were talking about the various emotional strategies you use to find some pleasure and satisfaction, but anything that doesn't fall in line with the four skills of the four noble truths, you've got to learn how to set aside.

That way, you can finally complete all three rounds of spokes on the wheel. The first round is knowing the four truths. The second round is knowing the duties that have to be developed with regard to those truths. And ultimately, you get to the point where everything is completed. All the skills have been fully mastered. That's when the twelve spokes are complete and they all meet at the hub: knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be.

When you get there, that's when things open to the deathless. That's depicted rightly both here in the wheel inside the sala and in the wheel outside. The middle of the hub of both wheels is empty: the happiness that doesn't require feeding. When there's no feeding, you can't be traced. They talk about the person who's gained this total seclusion, that even devas who can read other beings' minds can't find where the mind of that person is established. The peace is that great.