

Using Your Many Minds

January 11, 2010

You've probably noticed as you meditate that the mind has lots of minds, lots of different opinions on things, lots of different desires, often in conflict. It's a major problem, but you can turn it to your advantage. After all, suppose that you did just have one self, one that was all confused and basically corrupt in its motives. You couldn't do anything to straighten yourself out. A self like that couldn't trust itself to straighten itself out. You'd have to wait for some help from outside, and even then, you couldn't trust yourself to choose the right help. But if you look around in this committee you have in the mind, you find that you have all kinds of selves in here, some of which are skillful in one area, while others are skillful in another area. So you want to learn how to train them to work together. Take advantage of the strengths of the individual members.

Years back in high school, I read the *Iliad* for English class, and the English teacher made an interesting point. She noted that the *Iliad* has no one hero. It has lots of different people working together, and each of them has a different strength. Some of the members of the Greek army are physically strong. Others are intelligent. They're not so strong, but they are intelligent. And the strong members learn how to listen to the intelligent ones, and the intelligent ones learn how to, assist the strong ones. That's how they come out ahead, recognizing that each member of the army has his strength and you want to take advantage of all the various strengths together, instead of running off at cross purposes.

And it's the same with the mind. You've got the part of the mind that likes to imagine. You've got the part that likes to stick to facts. The part of the mind that has desires. The part of the mind that goes more with anger. And what you want to learn how to do is train them.

For example, the issues of craving and conceit: We all know that craving and conceit can cause a lot of trouble. But there's a passage where Ven.e Ananda points out that you do need a certain amount of craving and a certain amount of conceit in order to practice at all. The craving comes from hearing that there are other people who have been able to put an end to suffering, and you want that end of suffering as well. That's a healthy craving. You want to encourage it. As for conceit, you hear that there are other people who are able to do this, and you say to yourself, "Well, why can't I?" There may be the selves inside you that tend to be detractors and say, "Oh, you can never do this," but you don't want to listen to them. You want to listen to the one that has a little bit of conceit and says, "Yes, I can do this." That's the voice inside you want to encourage.

So you want to take advantage of all these different identities that you've learned how to take on. But you also have to be careful, because it's very easy when you slip into a particular

identity that you're going to bring along its weaknesses as well. This is why you want to create a good forum where the different members can sit down and talk to one another and observe one another, and where they can show themselves for what they are. In other words, you have to get the mind quiet. Teach it how to settle down with just one object. Then, when issues come up, bring the mind to that quiet spot. Pose the question: whatever the issue may be and the decision you want to make. Then just put that question aside and go back to that quiet spot. Settle in as much as you can. At the end of the meditation, when you come out, you might give yourself five minutes, ten minutes, whatever, to contemplate whatever the issue may be.

That way, you put the mind in a much better position to figure out which voice is actually the voice you want to listen to. Because it's not just the content of the different voices in the mind that matters. It's also the tone of voice. And the more quiet you've had, the more clearly you can hear that tone. It's like the difference between listening to a old recording with lots of scratches and a very narrow frequency range, and a much more modern recording where you've got a much wider audio range and much less noise.

So meditation is not just a matter of getting the mind to be quiet. It's also a matter of learning how to listen to these voices, so that you can start to figure out who you want to trust—and which particular voice you can depend on for which particular problems.

This also means that you're not going to wait until your powers of concentration are fully developed before you start developing the potential for discernment and wisdom in your practice. The two—concentration and discernment—go hand in hand. The more quiet you get the mind, the more clearly you can see things. The more clearly you see things, the more skill you can have, the more you begin to notice this quiet in different places in the mind.

So you want to work on these two qualities together. And, of course, life doesn't allow you to just say, "Okay, I'm going to put all my issues aside until my powers of concentration are fully developed and then I'll entertain them." Life brings up certain issues unscheduled, without asking your permission. Issues come up dealing with this person and that, these choices and those choices you have to make.

So you have to make use of what you've got. It's like going down to the gym. You want to be nice and strong, but you can't say, "Well I'll wait until my body's nice and strong and then I'll go to the gym. Or wait and trade in my body for different body before I develop it." You've got to develop what you've got. And it's in developing what you've got that you get what you want, or get to the place where you want.

So the concentration improves the chances of making a wise choice, but that in and of itself is not going to guarantee wisdom. You also have to know which questions to ask. A really basic question that the Buddha recommends is, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long term harm and suffering?" The

wisdom in those questions lies on many levels. To begin with, they show that you realize that happiness and suffering will depend on your actions, your choices. So you've got to be careful. They also show that you know that the long term is what matters, and not just the quick fix. So if an issue comes up and you're trying to decide what to do, you might ask yourself, "Suppose I were on my deathbed, looking back at my life and thinking about the decision I made at this particular juncture. Which decision will I wish I had made?" That helps you see things in the long term.

Then you can develop that question about "What can I do that will lead to my long term welfare and happiness?" a little bit deeper. Listen to those terms: my, long term, welfare and happiness.

They correspond to the three characteristics. "My" brings up the question of self and not self. "Long-term" brings up the question of whether things are constant or not. "Welfare and happiness" brings up the issue of suffering and happiness, suffering and pleasure, stress and ease. And the question gives you a context for employing those perceptions.

The Buddha never talks about three characteristics. The actual term does not appear in the Pali Canon. It's there in the commentaries, it's all over Buddhist writings, but the Buddha himself never mentioned it. He talks about these things as three perceptions. And basically there are three questions you ask about anything you're going to do.

"This action I'm about to do. What kind of results does it lead to? Are they long term, or not? Are they stressful or pleasant?" And the other question is, "If they're short-term and stressful, why would I want to do them? If they're painful, why would I want to do them?"

That puts those questions on an everyday basis. As you get deeper and deeper into the mind, you begin to see that there are certain things that you identify with. And you ask yourself, this identification I have, is it lasting or is it short term? Is it stressful? Or is it pleasant? And is that stress long-term or is the pleasure long-term?

For instance, you start looking at the different pleasures you have in life and you begin to realize that some of them are conflicting with your peace of mind. Which pleasure would you rather go with? Peace of mind is something lasting and deep—we're speaking in relative terms. The concentration is a longer lasting, much less harmful form of pleasure than the usual pleasures that we go around indulging in. It doesn't take anything away from anyone else. It doesn't leave us intoxicated or bleary-eyed. After all, there are a lot of pleasures out there that require that we close our eyes to the harm we're doing, if we're going to continue pursuing those pleasures. But this isn't that kind of pleasure. You can be clear-eyed when you enjoy it.

So you ask yourself, "Which of these two pleasures will I prefer?" As you decide to pursue the pleasure of concentration, you begin to realize that there are different levels of concentration. Which ones do you want to pursue? Do you want to get deeper and more solid? Again the question is, which is more lasting? Which is more pleasant? You go with the

one that's more lasting and pleasant. And ultimately you reach the limits of concentration. At that point, you don't throw it away. You simply ask yourself, "Is this a good a thing as it gets? Or could it get better?"

As you realize that even the pleasure of concentration is inconstant, you start looking for something that goes beyond that. This is the point where you stop identifying with the concentration. And if you've handled it well up to that point, you realize that you don't have anything else to which you could hold on. That's when you totally let go. So that question—What when I do it would lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?—as you pursue it, leads to these questions around the three perceptions: perceiving the inconstancy in things, perceiving the stress, and perceiving that because they are inconstant and stressful they're not you, not yours, nothing you would want to hold onto.

And that insight goes to deeper and deeper levels. As your concentration gets stronger, you begin to see more refined levels of pleasure, more lasting levels of pleasure than you've known before. That helps you let go of the types of pleasures that interfere with that, that are not as satisfying.

Ultimately, you reach the point where you can let go of any form of concentration, because concentration contains the most subtle levels of the aggregates that we chanted about just now: form feeling, perception, mental fabrications, consciousness. They're all there in the concentration. When you learn how to let go of the most subtle levels, then you're totally free.

But you can do this only if you've mastered them. It's not the case where you say, "Well I've had a taste of concentration, so now I'm beyond that, I'm not going to get stuck on that." That's not letting go of the concentration. The strategy of the path is to get you focused more and more on higher levels of pleasure, more subtle levels of pleasure. You get more sensitive, and doing that you're not only sensitive to the pleasure, but you're also more and more sensitive to the movements of the mind. You begin to see what you're doing as you deal with sights, sounds, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas. And in that heightened sensitivity is where you detect really subtle things that are going on. You see the intentional element there and when you see the intention in action, that's when you can let it go.

So the Buddha doesn't teach us to be afraid of concentration. He said that this is the path you've got to follow. And he doesn't say, "Well, keep following just the path of concentration and we'll worry about insight later." You develop all the factors of the path together. As he said, the more subtle the insight, the more subtle your concentration. The more subtle your concentration, the more subtle the insight. These two qualities help each other. It's like washing your hands. Your left hand washes your right hand, and your right hand washes your left hand. That way they both get clean.

And as you use your concentration—even just dealing with everyday problems, try to use your concentration. Get the mind as still as you can and ask yourself, "How do I handle this

particular issue?” The decision that comes out of a still mind is more likely to be a wise decision, a more clear-eyed decision, than one that comes when the mind is running around and can't make up its mind about things. It's because as the mind settles down that all these different voices in the mind can be heard more clearly.

With time, you begin to sense which of the voices you can trust with different matters. You hear the comments that one voice will make on another voice. Then you'll be in a better position to decide which one you believe. And if you can get them to work together, so much the better.

As Ajaan Lee once said, the sign of a wise person is that he or she can take anything and get good use out of it. So look at the Buddha: He says we can take our conceit and craving and get good use out of it. Be careful of the drawbacks, because conceit and craving can cause a lot of problems. But if you learn how to use them, then they're helpful. You're that much further ahead.