

Training the Committee

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There's a picture of meditation that's been around for a good century or so in some Buddhist circles, the idea being that meditation is totally valueless. In other words, it's a technique that you can do regardless of what your beliefs are, what your values are, and it'll give the same results for everybody. You just have to watch events happening as they arise and pass away without any preference for good or bad, or things you like or things you don't like, and it'll automatically lead you to certain conclusions.

This picture is based on an idea about science, that science is totally valueless, simply observation without any desire for the results to come out one way or another. You're there simply for the sake of knowledge.

Well, that right there, of course, is a value: that knowledge is good. Why is it good? Because you do good things with it, and it really makes a difference whether you know or not. That's a whole series of values. There's the value of the responsible experimenter, someone who can be trusted to design a good experiment, and be held responsible for the results. That, too, is a value.

The same principle really applies to meditation. The fact that we're here training our minds means we value the mind. We believe it can be trained with good results. The more we train our mindfulness, the more we train our alertness, our powers of concentration, our discernment, then the more good we can do, the less suffering we cause for ourselves, the less suffering we cause for others.

So there are values that underlie this practice and it's good to keep them in mind. As we're sitting here focusing on the breath, sometimes there comes a sense of frustration. The mind is not willing to settle down. Or sometimes it's just not simply in the mood to meditate. This is where it's convenient to think about the mind as not being just one entity. There are lots of minds in there. It's like a big committee, a very disorganized committee. The members don't listen to Robert's Rules of Order. Whoever gets there first takes over the chairmanship and runs the committee meeting any way he or she likes. This is something we've got to work with. There's strength here but there's also weakness.

The strength is this: If the mind were a single entity, how could it train itself? If it were already bad, how could a bad mind suddenly develop good motives, develop skills? The fact that we have many minds is actually what makes it possible for us to train our minds. The more skillful members can take the less skillful ones in hand, ideally. And to make that ideal a reality, you've got to strengthen those

skillful members, the ones who want to find a happiness that lasts, who want to find a happiness that doesn't harm anybody.

This is why, when you meditate, it's important that you not have just a technique like staying with the breath but that you also have ways of thinking that strengthen the skillful members of the committee. There are lots of different topics you can think about, and if you find the mind being really obstreperous and not willing to settle down, you've got to sit down and give it a good talk. There's a whole series of meditation topics called recollections. There's another set that are called the guardian meditations, which are used to protect the mind from its less skillful members. These are the topics of that good talk you give to your mind.

For instance, there's the recollection of the Buddha. It's what we chant every evening: *Araham samma-sambuddho*. It's a whole string of Pali words, but they point to the virtues of the Buddha, the primary one being that he was able through his own efforts to train his mind. And he really did understand how to put an end to suffering. You think about that and it gives you encouragement. Here we are, born as human beings. It's not just a matter of eating and having sex and sleeping and then dying. There's more potential to the human mind than just that, something more noble, something more honorable. And it really is possible through human effort to put an end to suffering. That's the message of the Buddha's life and that's what you want to think about.

So when you find yourself getting discouraged or pessimistic about the practice, it's good to think about these things. After all, what did the Buddha do to gain awakening? It wasn't that he was some god who had special hidden talents that no human being could have. He had qualities that all of us have in potential form in our mind. He had them in a potential form to begin with, but he was able to develop them through three qualities he mentioned: ardency, resolution, and heedfulness. The heedfulness is the knowledge that what we do really does make a difference in our lives, so we have to be careful in what we choose to do. The ardency is the desire to do it right, to try to develop as many skillful qualities as we can, and to catch ourselves whenever we find ourselves giving in to the unskillful members of the committee. Resolution means keeping that determination firmly in mind.

Now, we've all had tastes of these qualities in our own lives. We've also had tastes of when we've lacked these qualities. So it's good to remind ourselves to teach the obstreperous members of the committee that this can be done. This kind of recollection is not just an indoctrination where you force the mind to think these things whether you agree with it or not. You can sit down and ask yourself: Do you really think that the mind can be trained? Why would you not

want it to be able to be trained? It's the lazy part of the mind that says, "I just don't want to be bothered." Well, do you want that member of the committee to take over? Is it really in your best interest? Because all the members of the committee want happiness, it's just they have very different ideas about how it should be found, or how it can be found, and what kind of happiness they'll be satisfied with. So, given that all the members have that basic desire, they can be trained around that desire

If you find a voice in the mind that says, "I really don't care, I just want to grab a little pleasure right now," you can talk to it. What if that pleasure means that you're going to suffer for a long time afterwards? Do you really want that? And there will be a voice in the mind that says, "I really don't care. I just want what I want right now." You've got to reason with it. Reason with yourself and all the other members of the committee. Get as many members as you can to team up, until you find that the majority really does want true happiness.

The reason this is called a guardian meditation is that it protects you from the unskillful members of your mind, because these are the things you most need protection from. The scariest thing about having a human mind is realizing how weak your skillful side is, and how given a really bad set of circumstances you could start doing things that you would later be ashamed about, or have a lot of regret about.

So, you want to be able to train the mind to get as many of the members of the committee as you can on the side of what's really wise, and to be really strong in that belief that what you do really matters. If you act on unskillful motivations, unskillful intentions, there will be trouble down the line. Get so that no matter how bad the situation gets outside—civilization can fall apart, you find yourself facing off somebody over one last little bit of food—you can say, "Okay, I can't kill for this. They want that food, okay, let them have it." You find, when you get to that point where you can really trust yourself in a situation like that, that you are a lot more secure. The guardian meditations help give you the right set of values to keep you on the path of practice that will lead you to that point, where you find that you can trust yourself more and more.

Goodwill and compassion, all the brahmaviharas, are another set of the guardian meditations. Think about how you'd like a happiness that doesn't harm anybody, partly because you feel empathy with other beings and partly because you realize that if your happiness depended on other people's suffering, it wouldn't last. They would do what they could to destroy it. So you want a happiness that doesn't impose on people. And because this is a happiness that depends on your own inner resources, you find that your true happiness doesn't

conflict with anyone else's true happiness. So you wish them goodwill. May they be happy too. May they understand the causes for true happiness.

Now, as you do this, you may find that part of your mind says, "Well, there are certain people I would rather see suffer first for one reason or another." So again, think of it as a committee meeting. You're sitting down and you say, "Okay, exactly why? What would you gain from that person's suffering?" As we all know, most people do evil because they're feeling threatened, they're feeling miserable. They say, "As long as I'm miserable, let everybody else be miserable, too." That's what they think. So what would be gained by that person's suffering?

You say it doesn't seem right. They've done so much evil in the past that it doesn't seem right to let them off the hook. But you know the principle of kamma is such that the results of your past actions do not totally determine what's going to happen in the future. It would actually be better for those people to learn in the meantime how not to suffer from bad situations, so that even if bad situations do come up, they can control themselves, they can keep the mind on an even keel. That would be much better for the world.

That story of Angulimala, the murderer who later became an arahant: When you find yourself identifying with Angulimala, it's a really nice story. When you find yourself identifying with the victims or the families of the victims, it's a pretty upsetting story. So, which side do you want to be on? You recognize, okay you've probably done a lot of unskillful things in the past. If you want to believe that you can train your mind so that you don't have to suffer from the results of your past mistakes, you should give the same right to other people. As we've seen over and over, vengeance doesn't really solve anything. When people suffer a lot, it doesn't necessarily make them wise and compassionate.

So, try to sort through whatever resistance you have to the idea: May all beings be happy. When you sort through it, you find it easier and easier to stick with the practice. The next time that you call up those thoughts of goodwill, they really do feel nourishing. You find yourself more and more aligned with them. And when you can have goodwill for all beings, it becomes really hard for you to do anything unskillful because you don't want to harm anybody.

Another way you can protect yourself from the unskillful members of your committee is through contemplation of the body, especially the unattractiveness of the body. It's not to make you disgusted with the body, it's more just to make you realize that the body is not the most important thing in life. After all, what is it? Take it apart in your mind: It's just these different organs. If you think that the most important thing in life is to keep this body alive, it's a pretty miserable life. The purpose of the contemplation is to remind you the body is there to serve the

mind. So you look after it, you keep it strong enough to continue with the practice, knowing full well that there will come a time when you have to let it go. In the meantime, you want to develop the qualities of mind that'll enable you to be okay when it gets sick, when it starts getting old, when you start losing your faculties. There can still be a part of the mind that's clear and alert.

Ajaan Suwat, shortly before he died, was telling me—this was after he had had an accident that caused him a lot of brain damage—that his mind was sending him all sorts of weird perceptions. But the fact that he had been meditating and developed mindfulness and alertness enabled him to recognize that they were weird perceptions. Then he went on to say, “But that thing I got from my meditation, that hasn't changed”: in other words, his awareness of something that was not affected by time, was not affected by the ups and downs of the body, the deterioration of the nerves or whatever. So always keep that in mind. There is something in there that's not affected by the changes of the body, but you really have to train the mind very, very far and very, very carefully, to get in touch with that.

Then there's contemplation of death. I think it was Plato who said that all wisdom begins with the thought of death. A lot of in Buddhist practice begins with the thought of death as well. After all, in the story of Prince Siddhartha, the Prince who later became the Buddha, it was reflecting on the facts of aging, illness, and death that convinced him he had to find a way out of that. That was the beginning motivation for his practice.

Now, recollection of death is not to make you depressed. The Buddha actually says that if you think about death in the right way, it'll lead you to the deathless. In other words, you realize that you don't know how much time you have, and you have to be very careful about how you establish your priorities. The issue of what things you focus on is really important in life, what things you are going to give your time to right now.

One of the contemplations he recommends is—every morning at dawn, as the sun rises—to remind yourself: “This could be the last time I see the sunrise. There are so many easy ways I could die.” People die from too much heat, too much cold, indigestion. There are many strange ways that people die. You hear some people dying from a paper cut. Some weird germ gets in there, and in a few days they're gone. And who knows what kind of surprise the body holds in store, even without the germs? So, given that death is so easy, are you ready to go? The answer usually is no. The next question is, okay, what is the mind still lacking that prevents you from saying yes? What qualities need further development? What things do you need to learn how to let go of that you haven't been able to let go of? Well, today's

your chance. You've got this time now. You've got this in-breath, you've got this out-breath. Make the most of it. It can really be important.

When the sun sets, you think the same thing: "This might be my last sunset." In both cases, the conclusion is the same: "If I'm not ready to go, I've got work to do." You focus on whatever it is that needs to be done. Use that contemplation to establish your priorities, rather than pressure from this person to do that and pressure from that person to do this. Tell yourself, "I've got to take care of my mind. I've got this obstreperous committee in here and I've really got to sort them out."

So, these are some of the guardian meditations. They guard you from those unskillful members of the committee. You don't want those members to come in and take over and ruin everything in your life. You don't want to act on values that, if you really sat down and thought them through, you would reject. You don't want those values to take over your life, to determine your choices.

These contemplations are basically ways of training the committee so that you get more and more skillful members of the committee on your side and you make more of the members skillful, and stronger, so that the mind is less fragmented and chaotic. It becomes more and more unified. And as we all know, the more unified the mind is, the more it can accomplish.

So, this meditation we're doing is not value-free. It's based on some very strong values, but they're all values that when you sit down and ask yourself—Do I really want to believe this? Do I really want to believe that knowledge is important? Do I really want to believe that good qualities in the mind can be trained, and can lead to an end of suffering? —it's hard to say no. But it's funny that the members of the committee who hide out when that question is being looked at fairly have a way of sneaking their way back into power when you're distracted. So keep these reflections on hand where you can bring them out whenever the balance of power seems to be tipping in the wrong direction.

This way, that principle we all want to believe in—that the mind can be trained—actually becomes a reality. You see, yes, it can be trained and it really is true: There is something deathless in here. There's a dimension of the mind that can't die because it's not touched by time or space, and it can be found through our own efforts.

So it's good to recollect these values whenever you need them and to remember that the meditation is not just a matter of watching whatever comes up. It's more a matter of training the whole committee so that it can act with a single voice and a single intention.