The Committee of the Mind

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We have that phrase in English, "to make up your mind." It's an interesting way of saying "to decide." So make up your mind that you're going to stay right here with one thing, with the breath. Make that your intention and try to maintain that intention all the way through the hour. You have to keep repeating it to yourself because other intentions will come in. It's as if the mind is many minds.

That's why we talk about the committee of the mind, or why Ajaan Lee talks about the various consciousnesses in your body.

So let's just look at the committee. There are different voices in there with different agendas, and as you meditate, you're trying to convert them all to this agenda of staying with the breath. One way you can do that is to make the breath really interesting. Of course, the breath is already interesting on its own, but you're learning how to *take* an interest in it, noticing how it comes in and how it goes out, what effect it has on the body, and how the in-and-out breath relates to the other energies in the body.

We here in the West don't have much of a vocabulary for describing this, how the body feels from inside. The Buddha describes it in terms of properties or elements. Wind is his way describing the energy. Then there's earth, which is the solidity of the body. Fire, which is the warmth. Water, which is the coolness. Then there's space: space permeating the body and space surrounding the body. Of these various elements, the breath is the one most responsive to the mind, and it's also the one that has an effect on the other physical elements most readily. So we're focusing here on this sense of energy in the body.

How do you picture it to yourself? This is another way of making the breath interesting. You can think of the air coming in and out through the nose, but when the Buddha talks about breath, he's talking more about the energy flow. And the main energy flow you're going to notice at first is the energy flow that brings the air in and out. When you do that, are there parts of the body that have to tense up? You can question that. That's a perception you're holding in mind and it may not be the best perception. You want to find a perception that allows the breath energy to flow smoothly throughout the body so that the body feels nourished, the nerves feel nourished, the blood vessels feel nourished—everything. So try different perceptions to see what helps.

One that I've found useful is thinking of the body as being like a big sponge. As you breathe in, the air can come in from all directions. The energy allows it to

come in from all directions, and there are openings all around. You're not restricted just to the nose.

One time I had a cold my first year as a monk, and I found it really useful to think about the breath coming in not just through the nose, but also through other parts of the body, all the parts of the body. Another time, years later, when I had malaria, I began to find that breathing was really laborious. The malaria parasites were eating up all my red blood cells, so the muscles weren't getting much oxygen. The ones that were doing most of the breathing were getting fatigued. Then I realized I'd been holding on to one perception of the breath that required one set of muscles to keep on doing the work. I found that if I would hold to different perceptions of the main spot in the body where the breath is coming in and going out, the different sets of muscles could get a rest. Other muscles would move in and take over the job. Then when they got tired, I could change the image again.

That right there, I think, is really fascinating: that the image we have of the breath will have an influence on how we feel the breath. So even something as simple as breathing in and out is not a given. It's something we shape. And as we meditate, we can explore the limits of how far we can shape it. It's not infinite. We can't do anything at all with it. But we do have some leeway that we wouldn't have noticed if we hadn't sat here for a while with the breath and started thinking about how we visualize it to ourselves.

This is what I mean by making the breath interesting, because what's really interesting about this, of course, is what the mind is doing, even with something as simple as this.

One of the Buddha's basic teachings is that we suffer from ignorance, and we're largely ignorant of what our minds are doing. Yet this is probably the most fascinating thing in the world. When Ajaan Suwat came to America, he went around to different cities, he went to some of the national parks. Then when he went back to Thailand, people asked him what he found most impressive about America. He said he didn't find anything impressive at all, because all of our ingenuity went into material things. Very little went into understanding the mind in a way that could put an end to suffering. That's probably the most interesting issue of all. Why is it that even though we want happiness, even though we want pleasure, we end up doing things that cause our suffering and stress? Why is that? What is it that we don't know about what we're doing?

This is why we meditate.

We start out with the breath as our focus, but we're not here to get the breath. We're here to get the mind. But to get the mind, you need one thing to have it

focused on. There has to be something in the present moment that's interesting and comfortable at the same time. So learn how to make the breath comfortable.

This is what the directed thought and evaluation are all about. It's like moving into a house. When you first come in, it's just empty walls, empty rooms. You realize you have to furnish it. You have to make it comfortable if you're going to stay. When you do, then over time it does become a home. And it's the same with the present moment. The more you stay here, the more you understand about it, then the more you find that there are potentials for comfort in the body. The mind can feel soothed and eased, simply by having one thing to think about, not having to worry about issues outside.

That's one way of getting the committee together: by making the breath and issues around the breath a topic of interest. Now, there will be some committee members who say, "Well, that's okay for a while, but after a while you want to change." This is where you have to ask, "Who's talking here? What's the agenda? Where are these voices coming from?"

During my first year as a monk, I found myself up on a hilltop with lots of time on my hands. Voices were going through my head, saying, "This is a waste of time. You're not helping anybody. You should be out there doing something for society"—all kinds of reasons for not being there, sitting on the hilltop, watching my breath. One of the ways I got through that period was to begin identifying the different voices. Whose attitude was that? And whose attitude was that? I began to realize that there were lots of different people from my past in my head. I had to question, "What do they know? Have they ever meditated? Have they ever been exposed to these teachings?" In my case, none of the voices in my head had been exposed but they had a very strong sense of territory. This was their territory.

This is another reason why the Buddha teaches so much about the suffering we cause ourselves: We don't take on new ideas unless we see that our old ideas are not working. The things we think will give us pleasure are actually giving us pain. The things we think are solving problems are actually creating problems. When you can see that, that's when the committee is willing to admit a few new members in. But it's pretty grudging. They admit them for a while and then say, "Well, it's not instantaneous. I'm not getting results right away. This must be wrong." This is where you have to argue. Again, this is strange: one mind arguing with itself. So again, think of not as one mind, but as many states of becoming, as the Buddha would call them. Each of these voices surrounds a desire, takes on an identity around that desire, and has a particular view of the world around that desire.

This is where it's good to think of all four of the Buddha's noble truths. We focus our main attention on the fourth, which is the path to the end of suffering,

because that's what we have to work at hardest. But it's good to keep in mind that the Buddha promises that there is such a thing as the end of suffering.

There was one Dhamma teacher I heard one time saying, "I don't know about the end of suffering, but I've learned that suffering is manageable." She called that the third and a half noble truth, which is rating it too high. It's not even half of a truth, and not at all noble. The Buddha wasn't here just for pain management or stress management. He said it is possible totally to put an end to suffering, totally to put an end to the stresses and difficulties that weigh the mind down.

So hold that out as an option, because the other voices in the mind tend not to believe that. Their idea of happiness is a lot more limited. But we can expand our ideas of what's possible as we admit some of the Buddha's voices into our mind. That's what we're doing as we meditate. He's teaching us new ways to breathe, new ways to talk to ourselves, new ways to apply perceptions to the world—all three of the fabrications that go into shaping the present moment. To really take them on, it's good to keep in mind that it is possible to put an end to suffering. There's something better than the ways we've been looking for happiness in the world so far.

So a large part of the meditation is keeping some order in your committee meetings, learning how to talk to yourself: what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. An important part of making sure that the conversation stays on track is directing it, so that the topic of conversation is always relevant to this issue of, "How can I understand why I'm suffering and how can I put an end to it?" Keep that question foremost. That's the topic for the meeting. And try to keep everybody on topic as best you can.