

Mediator, Mediator

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The spellchecker on my computer doesn't recognize the word "mediator." It always wants to change it to "mediator." And as you think about it, it's got a point. As a mediator, you've got to learn how to mediate among the various voices in your mind. You can't just push things out. If we could just push out our defilements and put them on an ice floe and let them float off into their death in the Arctic Ocean, meditation would be a lot easier. But they don't go away that easily. You've got to learn how to listen to them, bring them into a neutral place where you can actually hear what they have to say—because occasionally what seems to be a defilement has a good point, and sometimes our own attitude toward the practice has some problems as well. If we stir up the defilements, it's actually a sign that we're doing something.

So we have to have a space where everybody can listen to everybody else. It's the same with society. If you've got everybody polarized, just yelling at each other, trying to decide who's a true American and who's not, claiming that only a small group of people have the right to make decisions, the society falls apart. Or with juvenile delinquents: Often they get branded as troublemakers but they've actually got a point. They're not being treated like human beings, so they start acting out. If you treat them like human beings, they start acting like human beings. Give them a place to talk, listen to them, and start reasoning with them, have a sense that they're coming from the same place, and you can actually be in a dialogue.

The same with in your mind: Remember that every impulse in the mind is aimed at happiness. So that's common ground. It's not as if there are evil impulses and good impulses. Every impulse starts out neutrally: You want happiness. Some of the impulses tend to be more skillful than others in some areas, but they may still have a few skills they have to learn, especially if you just try to push everybody else out, go straight for awakening, throw everything else overboard. The stuff that gets thrown overboard is going to come back and attack you.

So this is one of the things we have to learn how to do: how to get into a dialogue inside. The first thing that's required is a safe place to talk. That's why we practice concentration. Try to develop a sense of ease in the body, ease with the breath, ease being in the present moment. When you feel physically at ease, it's a lot easier to be in a good mood and not feel so desperate, not be so impatient, because it's our desperation or impatience that makes it difficult for us to talk. It makes it easiest for us to make snap judgments, throw our weight around. What

happens, of course, when we throw our weight around is that other parts in the mind throw their weight back. If you don't have a sense of ease and well-being in the meditation, you start getting desperate after a while.

Someone once called mindfulness hell: All you can do is be mindful of whatever comes up, and you don't have any skills in dealing with it. You're not allowed to create a sense of ease, because you're not supposed to be attached to anything. That is hell. Of course you're going to be attached. You want and need a sense of ease in the practice. It's part of the path, something you develop. Right concentration is part of the noble eightfold path and what's the duty with regard to the noble eightfold path? You develop it.

So even though there may be a germ of attachment in there, it's a skillful attachment, a useful attachment. It creates space, creates a sense of having some time, having patience, being in the mood to want to get into a dialogue and not feel so threatened by everything all the time.

When issues do come up in the mind, you've got to check: One, are you in a position where you can have a dialogue? If you're not in position, you say, "Wait a minute, let's get a space where we can both talk." Then sit down and say, "What's the problem? Do you have any ideas for solution?" See what comes up. If the solution is bad, throw it away and try further dialogue. Give reasons for why that particular solution doesn't work and say, "Can you think of another one?" The part of the mind that hasn't had a chance to talk will start talking. The part of the mind that has never learned how to negotiate, never learned how to deflect controversy, will start learning to be in dialogue.

Remember, you've got this basis for conversation—the desire for happiness—it's just that you're coming at it from different directions, with different assumptions. If you learn to reason with wrong assumptions, after a while you see what grain of truth they may have, or what appeal they may have. The Buddha once said that you can't really get past something until you see its allure. And part of its allure comes from the fact it does have a little bit of truth to it. So look for that and try to take that as your common ground.

And as with any mediation or negotiation, there's not a clear right or wrong. Sometimes it's a murky process as you work things out. Part of the mind that likes to deal in absolutes is going to get impatient. You've got to look at that: that all-or-nothing state of mind. Remember: We're working on skills. Skills are not all or nothing. You gradually develop skill over time, and it's in learning how to be patient that a skill can develop.

Look at the Buddha's teachings on ignorance, the very beginning of dependent co-arising: Ignorance of what? It's not ignorance of a thing, or a state, or a

principle, something that you either know or don't know. It's ignorance of the skillful way of looking at things, a way of dividing up your present experience or pointing out four things in the present moment that you might want to look for: stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Each of these categories has a duty, and the duty is something you master as a skill. That takes time.

It's this kind of knowledge we're working on: the kind of knowledge that comes from learning to be skillful, learning how to learn, which means making mistakes, then coming back and learning from your mistakes. It's something that a lot of us would rather not do, but it's the only way you're going to learn anything of any use. It's the only way you're going to take these aggregates we have and turn them into a path.

So accept the fact that on the path there are going to be mistakes, that you're going to figure things out as you go. The principles are there, but actually applying them to whenever an issue comes up in the present moment requires skills. It's going to take time to learn strategies. Sometimes it's good to see strategies that other people use, learning how to deflect the defilements, for instance, if they're a little too strong for you right now. Distract them a bit, so that you can work on this common space where you can actually sit down and talk.

When you can sit down and talk, learn how to ask questions in a way that's productive. When anger comes up, if you ask "Why you're angry?" it'll probably get even more angry at you. Then you say, "What's the problem? What's the solution? What do you propose here?" If it comes up with something totally irrational, say, "Well, that's not going to work for this, that, or the other reason. Can you think of something else?"

It's like the way Ajaan Fuang used to deal with spirit possession. He would spread a lot of goodwill toward the spirit. When he did that, he found that the spirit would talk and he could reason with it. He didn't use force. He didn't try to push it out. Instead, he admitted that maybe there's a way we can learn how to live together. You can live together with the person you're inhabiting in a way that you don't disturb that person's life, and both of you actually benefit. That was his approach.

And the same approach works in the mind. If you can teach your anger to be more reasonable, you'll discover you have an ally where there used to be an enemy. It's going to have its ups and downs, as you sometimes find that the anger sneaks in and takes over and you can't totally trust it. But again, how else are you going to learn the skills unless you're willing to make a few mistakes and then learn from them?

So remember, the knowledge we're working on here is a skill. After all, *avijjā*, is the word for ignorance, and *vijjā*, its opposite, is the word for skill. Mastering it is a gradual process. This is why, in the early teachings, there was never any big controversy about gradual and sudden. If you have the idea that there's going to be this one thing that you need to know and that it's an all-or-nothing affair, then you might think that the gradual approach will get in the way. That's why they had all those problems in Zen and the other teachings where they thought that we should be trying to see our true nature, and that worrying about the path would get in the way of seeing your true nature.

But that's not what the Buddha taught. You're working a path. It's like the gradual slope that goes off the coast of India and all of a sudden, bang, as you follow the gradual approach, it leads to a sudden drop-off. The amount of attention and alertness that you bring to developing the skill: Those are the qualities that you develop gradually that eventually will lead to the sudden breakthrough.

So it's through the path that you find the end of suffering. The qualities of mind that you need in developing that skill are the ones that eventually will reach the point where they really can't see it through on their own. The only way they can see through is by sharpening them through the practice. So you don't just do the practice, biding your time while you wait for something else to come. It's in the process of being very alert to what you're doing that you're going to see through to something that's not done, that has no doing, no intention.

So this murky process of dealing your defilements is the way out. You don't just push them out of the way. You work through them—and that's where release is found.