

Bringing Peace to the Mind at War

Establishing Ground Rules for Settling Inner Disputes

If a Buddhist community cannot resolve a dispute by establishing consent amongst those who disagree, the community should locate outside help, wherein practitioners from other centers are sought to provide help and resolution. The neutral practitioners should determine how the disagreement arose, by hearing the differing views. Having heard the history of the conflict, the new practitioners will take charge of the matter and reach a decision.

—Buddhist monastic code, chapter 11, Adhikaraṇa-samatha

In the middle of the nineteenth century, formative soccer games—or what the rest of the world now calls football fixtures—were originally adjudicated by the captains of the two competing teams who, in the spirit of sportsmanship and camaraderie, were assigned the additional task of calmly discussing and settling contested events on the field. Alas, this optimistic arrangement didn't last long. It seems that quite a number of situations were not easy to resolve between partisan combatants, and lengthy debates would arise that derailed matches. It was quickly ascertained that if the sport was to thrive, matches would require a neutral referee to oversee the conduct of the players, deciding which activities fell outside the established rules of the sport. This way the team captains could focus on playing, for that is what they were best suited for, while an observer not

participating in the contest would oversee the flow of play and intercede when necessary.

This was, of course, not an unforeseen turn of events. The world is filled with judges, referees, umpires, arbitrators and the like. Contentious issues arising in custody battles, labor unrest, industry ethics, contract settlements and so on are resolved by arbiters. Evidently any human endeavor that can be contested invariably will be. Sensible resolutions often require adversaries to submit their disagreements to a—one hopes—neutral authority, a presiding figure to step in and resolve matters so that life can move on.

And yet, despite our familiarity with the value that neutral referees can bring to conflicts, many of us fail to arbitrate our own inner discords by following this example. Without learning how to establish a neutral, calm observer in the mind, we can lapse into internal debates—*Should I quit my job or persevere? Should I go back to school? How do I broach this relationship issue?* Etc.—that spiral out ceaselessly or argue endlessly back and forth.

The mind's occasional stalemates and ongoing disturbances are largely a result of its stunning complexity. The brain is made up a wide variety of sub regions—fear, reward, attention, higher reason, language centers, pattern recognition, emotional priming, habitually ingrained impulses, subconscious body awareness, sensory data interpretations and so on—all with

primary assignments and responsibilities. Similar to a European parliament, these regions can hastily establish coalitions with other regions, desperately trying to grab our attention, hoping to “force our hand” and dictate our actions. For example, in states of anxiety, we may have the fear region working in tandem with the long term memory to activate painful experiences to create enough stress to force us into action. When we are feeling curious, we have the region that focuses attention working with another region that regulates safe exploration, along with the brain's reward system. Such alliances can be short term, and members can team up regions they previously battled against to push through an agenda.

And so the mind can fall into repetitive arguments that continue tirelessly, at times into the darkest hours of the night. This is a result of impulses that are after conflicting aims. For example, one region seeks a dopamine reward for instituting change, while another region is set up to flood the brain with stress hormones at the first thought or hint of uncertainty. These incompatible impulses are not a mistake of evolution: to thrive requires a constant balancing act between contradictory inclinations. For example, early humans had to weigh staying safe in shelters (omit —hearths, etc.—) versus the risks of heading out into the unknown to hunt and gather food, (omit supplies,) water, material for clothing and fire, etc. Both goals, security and opportunity, are legitimate. These hardwired impulses were not

established with compromise—or throwing in the towel—as a parameter. So, to make a decision in life often requires listening to, considering, then actively overriding some of our core, ingrained agendas. The task can be further complicated by the presiding strength of impulses that arise from older parts of the brain, such as the amygdala, which have significant control over stress hormones and reward neurotransmitters, which influence both the mind and body. Overcoming fear often requires relaxing an array of contracted abdominal muscles, clenched jaws, rigid shoulders and on. In this manner, surmounting addictive habits requires allowing action potential—mental and physical urges to act—to arise and pass.

Fortunately, in addition to the obvious challenges, the mind's assortment of semi-independent regions presents us with a great opportunity because we can develop the ability to detach enough from our running disputes and inner court cases to observe how the collisions of agendas are contested. With practice we can develop a kind of appropriate attention—termed *yoniso manasikara* in early Buddhism—noting which mental habits lead to agitation and which to ease. From these observations we can establish a set of guidelines or “rules of conduct” to help the mind settle its ongoing struggles. We can set aside awareness to preside over our conflicts and render calm judgments; **we can establish an inner referee.**



No matter what (omit we) status or power we acquire in life, no matter how far we travel, we'll always bring with us a mind brimming with potential dissent. (omit and fissure.) As we've previously discussed, the mind was established to both explore and to remain safe, to empathize and disengage, to collaborate and go it alone. When it all goes smoothly, much of the brain works in unison:

- This happens in states of flow, such as creative endeavors that focus us on a task that establishes mutual collaboration of much of the brain's sub regions.
- It also happens while employing one's sense of humor, as jokes and laughter require significant interplay across much of the brain's major lobes, both reason and pattern recognition, language and body awareness.

Of course, when our inner dialogue doesn't run smoothly, disputes arise that set us up for long running, distracting inner turmoil at the very least. To keep the mind running as smoothly and successfully in order to oversee our inner debates, like all courts and contests, we'll need to rely on a set of **ground rules that establish what kinds of activities—i.e. self-talk—are acceptable and unacceptable.** These regulations or statutes can be imported from real world practices, such as the debating practices established in *Robert's Rules of Order*, the Buddhist

Monastic rules or any other forms of successful conflict settlement. Experience in running a Buddhist community for almost a decade, along with consulting with countless practitioners, has established that some of the following guidelines may prove useful:

- Some of the mind's impulses and voices are much louder or more repetitive than others. It's worthwhile to have an enforced ground rule that no matter how much a voice wants to repeat itself, once we've heard an idea twice, it's time to consciously bring to mind an alternative, no matter how bizarre or unlikely. Through practice, we can hardwire the brain to look for options and choices, rather than simply rehashing the same anger or fear story over and over again.
- Any inner voice that seeks our attention by insulting or belittling us will not be tolerated, and any voice that speaks to us in a way we wouldn't tolerate from an actual human being will be ignored. We can agree to listen once or twice to any thought, but only when the view is put in a way that doesn't fuel hatred or low esteem.
- Pay close attention to any inner voice that is not too loud, repetitive, dramatic, or agitated; it's worth the time and effort to establish an awareness that is not goaded and pushed into action by the most dominant impulses present.
- Avoid (omit playing) adding the nuclear threat during our inner debates. For example, threatening ourselves with overly

dramatic, end-of-the-world scenarios if we make the wrong choice in life. (“I’ll never be able to leave that house if I buy it. I’ll be stuck with a mortgage forever, (omit my) etc.”) Reciting a fantasy list of dire outcomes does not result in wiser decisions. It only floods us with additional cortisol, tensing the breath and body, creating a jumpy mind that renders it increasingly difficult to reach calm decisions. Smart decisions are reached when threats and fear scenarios are taken off the table, which is accomplished by reminding ourselves that we are never as constrained by decisions as we believe. As long as life continues, there’s always an opportunity to change one’s mind and establish a course out of circumstances.

- It’s important for one inner voice not to talk down to its adversaries with facile or dismissive reasoning. Telling fear there’s nothing to be frightened of or informing craving everything it wants is empty, doesn’t lead to long term positive results. This kind of self talk leads to a mind that belittles and patronizes itself, but rarely proves useful, as even the most childish inclination or urge will rarely quiet due to humiliation tactics.
- As we practice giving attention to each voice, without treating any voice as “our identity,” and observe whether the competing impulses appear realistic or triggered by older situations that no longer apply. For instance, we may crave to end relationships at the first sign of turmoil, as previous friends or partners were

incapable of compromise or calm discussion. However, such a tendency may lead to avoidance strategies that sabotage us rather than secure deep connections.

- Similarly to court cases, we can urge the disagreeing predilections to settle their conflicts creatively. As the Buddha noted in his (omit his) teachings on appropriate attention (*yoniso manasikara*) and removing obsessive thoughts (*vitakkasanthana*), we can satisfy our basic dispositions toward security and ease by substituting short term solutions—addictions to sensual pleasures, aversion and aggression, attachment to views and opinions, self-centered grandiosity, etc.—with the sanctuaries provided to us by our spiritual practice, otherwise known as the three refuges: the Buddha, dharma and sangha.

- We can remind ourselves that unconditional, lasting peace is not reliant on conditional circumstances such as careers, seeking approval from others, significant bank accounts, creative recognition, all of which is the stuff we tend to wrangle and agitate over. For thousands of years spiritual practitioners have found lasting happiness amidst a poverty and lack of resources that are largely unthinkable even in our darkest fears. Even today, untold numbers of indigenous (omit tribes) peoples (for example in the Amazon basin and Southeast Asia) find great serenity living in huts without electricity, heat, indoor plumbing and other amenities. Many forest nuns and monks continue to

practice without any form of modern conveniences and still managing to cultivate the peace, happiness and security we all pursue.

- Just as the bulk of our suffering derives from the way we allow our minds to operate, so too does happiness derive from (omit our) forces that can be put under our control: by establishing a peaceful, elongated breath and relaxing, where possible, the contraction of muscle groups in the jaw, shoulders, arms, stomach, and legs; by focusing attention on that which is worthy of gratitude, such as examples of kindness and harmlessness we've benefitted from or contributed to others, rather than relentlessly rehashing times of distress; by reflecting how we've known times of serenity, even if for only brief periods, and reestablishing the activities that brought about such states.
- Finally, we attain security by connecting with wise and calm people, wherever we may find them. To do so requires us to drop our preferences and judgments of others, and open to connection wherever it is available. When we share our deepest conflicts with each other, we can receive insights that the warring mind is incapable of uncovering. After all, just as we are not afraid of the circumstances and obligations that can undo a friend's peace of mind, so too others can cut through our fears and cravings, as they don't carry the burdens we do: our self-limiting mantras, our oversized fears, our victimization stories and occasional grandiosity. In a spiritual community we can practice the

undervalued generosity of paying attention to others, rather than trying to fix or improve them, opening to their experiences, providing the deep kinship and support each of us seeks from each other. In this way we can join an ongoing circle of wisdom, compromise and agreement that knows how to observe and intercede in strife, allowing the blocked mind to once again flow with life.