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# Introducing Big Mind

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Imagine your being, this very body-mind-spirit, as a company, like General Motors, Ford or I.B.M. You're a company with many employees and not one single employee knows their job title, job description, what the product is, who the CEO is, and what is their function. To make matters worse each employee thinks that he's the boss, the one in charge, and all the other employees are working for him.

To make matters even worse, the company is constantly changing. Employees are being let go; new employees are being brought in. Nobody seems to have a handle on why. The product is constantly changing. One moment it might be automobiles, the next trucks, then ships, then planes, then maybe back to cars, and it goes on and on like this. And they keep changing the company's name. In this particular company, the name has changed many times. First it was called Dennis, then it was called Sebastian, then it was called Genpo, then it was called Sensei, and now it's called Roshi.

The whole company is in flux, it's all impermanent. So what kind of company do we have? It's pretty dysfunctional.

Twenty-six hundred years ago the Buddha called this dysfunction "dukkha." He didn't use the metaphor of a company, but he used similar analogies to make the same point. He said dukkha means that there's something stuck. Dukkha is often translated as "suffering," but actually the root of the word refers to a stuck wheel whose axle isn't rotating. In his day they had carts with two wheels, and when one wheel or maybe the

whole axle wasn't rotating, the cart would be stuck or just spin around in circles.

Basically he said that the cart is dysfunctional.

So, like one of these carts, we are dysfunctional. The worst part about it is that since we've never been completely functional, we don't realize how dysfunctional we really are. If we were once completely functional, completely integrated, completely liberated and free, then we would think, "oh my god, I used to be free, now I'm stuck, I used to be completely functional, now I'm dysfunctional." Although most of us have never had that experience, many people have had a spontaneous awakening experience—some moment when they reach what Eckhart Tolle refers to as the "power of now," an experience when they go beyond time and space and find themselves liberated. These people then realize, "my god, I'm operating in a dysfunctional way 99.9% of the time." But if we don't have that experience, we never realize that there's a better, a more optimal way to function.

What the Buddha discovered is that we are dysfunctional when our understanding gets stuck in one perspective, when the wheel, or the mind, does not revolve. If we can learn to shift perspectives so that our mind is not fixed, so that no understanding is considered the right and only understanding, then we can be unstuck, free. By simply shifting perspectives we can realize that there is an infinite number of perspectives, even in a single room. If you slightly change the angle of your gaze down or up, or if you move around, you'll see that there are infinite perspectives of this one room. Similarly, there are infinite perspectives of reality. Where we get stuck is in thinking there is only one right view. In the Buddha's teaching Right View is the first of the Noble Eightfold Path. In our Zen understanding Right View is *mu*-view, which means no view, holding on to no particular or fixed view.

What we can do with what I call the Big Mind process is learn how easy it is to shift perspectives. Each one of us has an infinite number of views. I like to say we have 10,000 states of mind. Now if a state of mind is out there in the world—like that of Christ or Buddha or Mother Teresa or Hitler or bin Laden—it is also in me. Every emotion that's out there is also within me. As I first learned from Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone and their Voice Dialogue work back in 1983-84, each of these aspects has its own voice, and, in fact, can be viewed as a separate voice which has its own distinctive perspective and function, a voice that wants to be heard, can speak up, and can grow and mature to align

itself with wisdom and compassion. However, some of these aspects of ourselves have been fired. We call those disowned voices. Now, sometimes they've been fired for very good reasons. None of us wants to take food out of a starving baby's mouth, so we disown the possibility that we're even capable of being driven to such desperation. We disown the possibility that we would step on infants to get that last breath of air in a gas chamber. But I remember hearing the Swiss psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross say that survivors of the Nazi concentration camps told her they had witnessed such acts by good, loving people, and she realized that she herself had that same potential.

Knowing that we have the potential for the best and the worst is absolutely essential for doing this work because we are going to run into aspects of ourselves that are disowned. There is nothing wrong with you if you've disowned aspects of yourself. You're just not functioning fully. Often, when we discover a disowned aspect, we'll say, "I don't have that that quality. I never get angry." Or, "I never get jealous, I just never get jealous." Or, better, "I have no ego, I'm egoless. I've been meditating for a long time, I've had great enlightenment, and I'm now egoless." Yeah, right. Those aspects are just disowned or in denial.

When a voice is disowned it also becomes a shadow. When it's a shadow, we don't see it in our self; however, we do see it in others. We see that aspect in others and we dislike it. It actually makes us irritated or, even worse, enraged. When we see somebody acting ignorantly or with prejudice and that voice is disowned in us, we will be outraged. In fact we can hate those people that hate other people so much we will want to kill them. This happens because that aspect of prejudice is disowned in us.

When a voice is disowned, it goes covert. It goes underground, and the only person that doesn't get it when I say that I don't get angry is me. Everybody else is aware of how angry I am all the time, but I don't see it. That's a disowned voice. Or everybody else sees that I'm instantly jealous, but I don't see it. "I never get jealous. I'm never envious. I wish everybody the best." Right. The same goes for narcissism. "I'm not a narcissist, but there sure are a lot of them out there. And wherever I look I seem to see these narcissistic people, and it's all about them. They get into these spiritual practices, like Zen, where they contemplate their navels and they are so narcissistic, and I'm not narcissistic because I'm out in the world and I'm working and I'm doing great things."

However, when we begin to give a voice to a disowned aspect of ourselves we bring it back into the system. It's like it's been laid off and it's out there picketing, out working against the company. We bring it back in; we give it a job description, and now he's a happy fellow. He wants to do his job really well, wants to function at an optimal level. When he's out there unemployed he's pissed off and working against the system. And we wonder why we suffer, why our life is not full of happiness and joy?

You might think that uncovering these disowned voices would be unpleasant, embarrassing, or worse. On the contrary, the process of owning them is actually really exciting. In fact it's one of the most exciting things you can possibly do. I'd guess it's even better than jumping out of a plane, though I haven't done that myself. Now, it doesn't happen immediately, but once we begin to speak from a disowned voice, we begin the process of reintegrating it, and that process can take time. It's like planting a seed that has to be watered and nurtured until it germinates. Still, the reason it's so exciting is that we begin to experience ourselves more completely, and there's no greater joy than experiencing yourself as a fully-functioning human being.

**[DROP CAP]**So we need to find a way to own our disowned voices. Sometimes the way we find out how to voice a disowned aspect of ourselves is by listening to others who have not disowned it. I had a voice that was so completely disowned for so many decades that even when I knew it was disowned I couldn't voice it. It was the voice of pleasure. I had disowned it when I had my first Zen opening in 1971. What I didn't realize then is that when I had my first awakening I disowned a whole slew of voices. It's like I fired half the company.

A year later this idea I had about pleasure was reinforced when I heard my teacher, Maezumi Roshi, say Zen practice is not about pleasure or being happy. I'll tell you some other voices I disowned: competition, jealousy, envy, the whole marketplace mentality—seeking, striving, improving economically, materially (but not spiritually, of course). So everything I disowned went underground and came up in a covert way in my life. Wherever I looked I saw competitive people, I saw ambitious people, I saw people seeking money and fame and fortune, and I was above all that. The only thing that seemed to make any sense whatsoever was knowing oneself better and helping others.

Now, is that a bad thing? No. Did it cripple me? Yes. Did it have a negative effect? Yes.

About five years ago I realized it was time to get back in touch with my own voice of pleasure, but by then I had heard so many teachers—including my own teacher, Maezumi Roshi—say that Zen practice is not about pleasure or happiness that the voice was thoroughly disowned in me. So I turned for help to a longtime student for whom pleasure is definitely not disowned. What I did was very sly and cunning. I asked him if he would mind if I facilitated him. “Sure,” he said, “you can facilitate me.” So I said, “Would you allow me to facilitate the voice of pleasure?” “Oh, sure!” He can take pleasure in any situation, so I asked him to speak as the voice of pleasure at a good meal. “I take a bite of my delicious filet mignon. Oh my, that’s good!” he sighs. “Whew, oh my god, this is so tender, it’s so flavorful, it’s the best piece of steak I’ve ever....” Then he takes a drink of wine. “Oh, what great wine! What is this, a two hundred dollar bottle of wine?!” “No, it’s twenty dollars.” “Oh my god, this is so good!” Then he takes a puff on his cigar. “Oh my God, this is better than any Cuban cigar I’ve ever smoked!” He just went on and on and on, and I listened really attentively.

Then I said, “Now, would you facilitate my voice of pleasure?” So he did, and I went dead. Then I started to remember what he said, and I started to imitate him. I just started to say the same words and pretty soon I got into the groove and I was able to find the voice of pleasure. I’ve been a lot happier since.

**[DROP CAP]**Not only do we have voices within us that have been disowned, but we also have voices have never been owned. In other words, we have aspects within ourselves that have never been awakened. We’ve never opened the door and allowed them out, but they’re there. They’re as much there as anger or fear or jealousy or hatred or joy or pleasure are there. They are just as real. You have within you aspects in your self that go beyond the self, that transcend the self, such as the awakened mind—what I call “Big Mind,” or “Big Heart.”

In June of 1999 I wondered, since I’d been working with speaking to a particular voice or particular aspect of the self that is disowned, if it was possible to speak to aspects that have never been awakened? And what I discovered, really to my

amazement, was that we can. By asking to speak to the awakened mind, or Big Mind, or the awakened heart or Big Heart, or pure awareness, by asking to speak to it, we are actually able to come from that place and experience what it's like to be that mind. Or we could ask to speak to the non-seeking, non-grasping mind (in Japanese this would be translated as *musho toku*, having no goal or aim in your zazen). This allows the student to truly sit *shikantaza*, just sitting. Or when working on a koan, ask to speak to the koan, such as *mu*. "Who are you?" "I am *mu*." Now just sit as *mu*, walk as *mu*, eat as *mu*.

You could say that the Big Mind process creates the opportunity for a facilitated view of the transcendent. In Zen, the term for this view is *kensho*, a Japanese word which literally means "seeing one's own true nature," an experience of enlightenment. But even the most profound *kensho* experiences prior to *daikensho* ("great enlightenment") are still momentary. It's like the momentary opening of the shutter of a camera lens. The Big Mind practice trains us to hold the shutter of the lens open as long as we want to. Instead of a faint momentary glimpse, like a match lit and extinguished in a large room, the Big Mind process allows us to actually hold Big Mind open long enough to look around the room, to really get to know the territory.

The moment I acknowledge and confirm that I am that—I am Big Mind or Big Heart or the True Self—I'm no longer identified with the self. Now all of a sudden I'm identified with something new and fresh, and I can look in and see, well what does it mean that I am Big Mind? What is that? Is there a boundary, is there a limit; is there some kind of edge to me, some kind of beginning? And all of a sudden, once I have identified as, say, Big Mind what I realize is that I include and embrace all things, that there is nothing that's not me.

Now, this is exactly what Buddha said 2,600 years ago, and what many very wise people in many spiritual traditions have been saying ever since. But it was also almost universally believed that it is only possible to see and realize this after many years of study and practice. What the Big Mind process brought to the world is that it offers what the Zen school has always offered: a way to suddenly and immediate awakening. However, even in the Zen tradition, which calls itself the sudden and immediate school, there have always been non-believers, people who think that it's got to take many years, which was the old Buddhist understanding back for a very long time. For centuries, the Zen school has been making the revolutionary claim that any wisdom that is there within

any of us, including the wisdom of the Buddha, is all there in all of us, the wisdom of the ages is there in all of us. It can be realized at any moment or any time, in a flash.

By exploring Big Mind we learn to be fully functioning human beings capable of acting from places of true insight and love. And this is what it's all about. All the Buddhist practices—sitting, Big Mind, and so on—are skillful means, all for the purpose of building character, consciousness, and awareness so that our functioning is coming from wisdom and compassion. This is really the point. It's the point of Zen, it's the point of Buddhism, it's the point of all the great religious and wisdom traditions I know. If more and more of us are not functioning with wisdom and compassion toward all beings, if we're not seeing that everything is really oneself or an extension or manifestation of Big Mind, then we fall into fear, jealousy, greed, and hatred, all based on this illusion of separateness. Seeing ourselves as separate and apart from the great earth, from the mountains, rivers and oceans, we tend to abuse one another and the planet itself. So I think it's critical at this point in time that we wake up and we function with wisdom, compassion, and awareness.

**Dennis Genpo Merzel Roshi founded the Kanzeon Sangha, an international Zen community in 1984, with groups and centers throughout Europe and the U.S., and is abbot of Kanzeon Zen Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, which he founded in 1993. He discovered the Big Mind process in 1999. His newest book is *Big Mind Big Heart: Finding Your Way*.**

## Big Mind Guided Meditation

You can try the Big Mind process on your own. Begin by speaking from the series of voices in the manner described below. After you've completed the series once, you can use the much simpler technique described at the end.

Ask to speak to the voice of the Controller within you. Then identify as the Controller.

“Now I am speaking as the Controller. I am no longer the self. As my name implies, my function is to control. If I could, I would control everything and everyone. I'd control my thoughts, my actions, my emotions, my feelings, my behavior, as well as others'. I would control the whole world if I could. This is my job, and I'm just trying to do my job as best I can.”

Now the Meditator asks the Controller, “May I ask your permission as the Controller to allow me to speak with some other voices within the self? Since you are the best at controlling all the other voices, would you also give me clear, direct access to each voice that I ask to speak to? And I would appreciate it if you would keep all the other voices silent, so they will not block my clear channel to the voice that I ask to speak to. May I now speak to another voice? I'd like to speak to the Seeking Mind.”

“I am the Seeking Mind. I am very valuable to the self. I am the one who brings the self to meditation, I am the one who is always seeking to become quieter, happier, and more peaceful. I am the one seeking to find bliss and liberation. I am never content. There is always further to seek.”

Meditator: “May I now speak to the Non-seeking Mind?”

“I am the Non-seeking Mind. I don’t seek. I am absolutely content and happy with what is. I have no desires or cravings to be other than how I am right here right now. I am pure awareness, emptiness, spaciousness. I witness and observe things just as they are. I have no judgments or problems. I am the mind of nirvana, the mind of complete liberation. When I am sitting in meditation, I have no goals and no aims. I have nowhere to go, nothing to do. I am total peace.”

Meditator: “May I now speak to Big Mind, please?”

“I am Big Mind. I have no borders, no boundaries, no limits. I am unborn and undying, without beginning or end. I am all things, and all things are manifestations of me. I make no distinctions between self and other, you and me. I am the mind of nirvana, absolute peace and freedom.”

Meditator: “I can easily see Big Mind as the antithesis of the self. I can see Big Mind as one end of a line, and the self at the opposite end. If that line becomes the base of a triangle, I would now like to speak to the Apex of that triangle, which includes and yet transcends the self and Big Mind, or the Seeking and the Non-seeking Mind.”

“I am the Apex. I am Big Heart, I am compassionate action. I am that which is beyond seeking and non-seeking, beyond the limited self and limitless Big Mind. As the Apex I have complete freedom to seek or not to seek, I have choice; I have flexibility. I can move freely between these two states of mind. From here I do not seek enlightenment nor do I try to get rid of delusion. I do not try to put an end to thinking and I do not favor not-thinking. I have no preference for one over the other. I am total freedom, and complete peace of mind, functioning perfectly and harmoniously in every moment. I act from wisdom functioning as compassion. I am the True and Unique Self.”

After you have done this for the first time, you can use a simpler practice. If you already have a regular meditation routine, begin by assuming your usual posture. If you’re new to meditation, find a comfortable upright position (sitting in a chair is sufficient), take a few deep breaths, and relax. From your relaxed meditation position, ask the Controller, “May I please speak to the Non-seeking Non-grasping Mind?” Then identify as the Controller by saying, “Yes, I am the Controller, and you may now speak to the Non-seeking Non-grasping Mind. OK, now, sit as the Non-seeking Non-grasping Mind.”

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