Traveling Well

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The mind is like a professional traveler, the kind of person who goes all over the world and can tell you all about this place and that place, but very rarely knows anything about himself. The type of person who, in order to avoid dealing with issues inside, spends all his attention looking at the world outside, going from place to place to place, afraid to settle down, for fear of all of the unfinished business that’s right here, right now. So what we’re doing as we’re meditating is teaching this professional traveler how to settle down, to gain some real knowledge. Because a person who spends his life traveling all over the place, never settling down, on the one hand, doesn’t really know that much about the various places he goes. He doesn’t know the sort of things that come from settling in and staying ten, fifteen, twenty years in a place. So whatever knowledge he does have is very superficial. It lacks depth. And as for knowledge about himself, it’s practically non-existent. So you have to ask yourself, “Do you want to go through life with that kind of knowledge, superficial knowledge about things outside?” The kind of knowledge that comes not from really knowing anything or settling down to getting to know things, but the knowledge that comes from running away from the big issues. And the big issue is this, the fact that the mind is causing itself suffering, creating suffering all the time. And the way that it handles sight, sound, smell, tactile sensations and ideas, the way it handles the emotions that come up in the mind. And it’s possible to avoid these things to some extent, but they keep catching up with you, catching up with you. So the question is, how much longer do you want to keep wandering on? When are you going to be ready to settle down, turn around, and take on these issues to solve them? It’s not easy. It goes against the grain, because there are a lot of things that we discover about the mind when we sit down and really look at it. There are a lot of things that we really don’t like about it. Because, after all, what are we learning as we practice? As the John Lee one said, “When you practice, you learn about your cravings.” You learn about your defilements. You learn about your ignorance. These are things we don’t like to see in ourselves. But if we don’t deal with them, they’ll constantly run our lives. So when we make up our minds to practice, it’s making up our minds to settle down and turn around and face these things square on. Unfortunately, the Buddha doesn’t have you face these things without tools or without skills. This is what the path is all about. We follow the precepts so as to gain a sense of self-esteem, self-worth. So we can have a sense of mastering the issues that come up with restraint. We know how to say “no” to certain impulses in the mind. The really gross impulses that would go against the precepts. And as we gain more and more skill in dealing with that, then we can start dealing with the more difficult issues, the more subtle issues that come up in the mind. We don’t have to wait until our precepts are perfect. But it does help to have a foundation in our day-to-day life. So when the time comes to meditate, it’s not a too violent shifting of gears. A lot of the meditation is, again, saying “no” to impulses. There’s the impulse to think of this, the impulse to think of that. As we get close to some big issue in the mind, we tend to veer off. We’ve got to learn how to say “no.” If we’re just saying “no,” the mind will get awfully dry after a while. This is why we focus on the breath, to have the sense of well-being that comes as the breath gets comfortable, as you find that you can really settle down and get into the breathing, feel good about the breathing, breathe in such a way that feels gratifying, coming in, gratifying, going out. As Ajaan Foon used to say, the sense of rapture that comes with dealing with the breath is the lubricant that the meditation needs. So it doesn’t seize up, like an engine that’s run out of oil. You have the lubricant to keep it running. So it feels good meditating. There’s a sense of well-being, even when you’re dealing with issues like pain in the mind, pain in the body, distraction in the mind, the impulse to go out and think about this, think about that, when you have to say “no.” You’re coming from a position of strength. You’re coming from a position of well-being. So the mind doesn’t feel like it’s constantly being inflicted. So the concentration is an important tool. Look at the steps in breath meditation. After you get acquainted with long-breathing and short-breathing, the Buddha has you breathe in and out, aware of the whole body. Calming the breath and then being sensitive to rapture and pleasure. These are important parts of the practice. You can’t overlook them. Concentration without pleasure, without rapture, can feel awfully clamped down. So you learn how to adjust the focus of your mind so that it does have room for a sense of well-being as you breathe in and breathe out. So it feels good deep down inside, just to breathe in and breathe out. So you have the steadiness you need in order to see things at the same time, a sense of well-being. So as you learn the lessons that wisdom has to point out to you, that discernment is going to be pointing out to you, you’re in a mood to accept them. If you’re feeling harassed by the meditation, if you’re feeling at your wits’ end and all of a sudden you’re learning that it’s because of your greed, anger, and delusion that you’re suffering, that you can’t lay the blame on somebody outside, your first impulse is to say no, is to refuse to listen. If you are suffering through the meditation and on top of that you’ve got to accept the blame for your suffering, the mind’s not going to accept it. But if you are coming from a sense of well-being, when you’ve learned how to breathe in in such a way that the whole body feels full as you breathe in, it feels full as you breathe out, there’s no pulling the breath in, there’s no squeezing the breath out. Every nerve ending is allowed to feel open and full and stay that way for a while. Because it feels healing, it feels nourishing. When the body’s been healed and nourished in this way, then it’s ready to understand how defilements come into the mind, how they take over the mind, how they cause the mind to suffer. Defilement is one of the more unpopular words in Western Buddhism. We don’t like to think that our minds are defiled. But they are. Greed is a defilement. It clouds the mind. Anger clouds the mind. Delusion clouds the mind. We’ve got to learn to see through these things, to see where they come from, to see how they take hold, to see how they insinuate their ways into our intentions so that we act on them and then later come to regret them. We want to see how this happens. So we watch from the vantage point of a concentrated mind. So as we’re analyzing them, it’s not through aversion. It’s simply through a sense of having outgrown them. The word is nipita in Pali, which means having a sense of a disenchantment, having had a sense of enough, being disillusioned with these things. These things used to seem to be your friends, they used to give spice to life. But as you’ve learned the greater sense of well-being that comes from concentration and then turn around and look at the pleasures that come from following greed, anger, and delusion, you realize that you just don’t want to have anything to do with them anymore. You’ve outgrown those activities. So when you’ve had that sense of having outgrown them, you let them go. But this is a process that takes a lot of time because they’re so deeply entrenched in the mind. It’s not the case that you see through greed once and that’s going to be it, because there are lots and lots of tricks to greed, anger, and delusion. And it’s learning how to see through all the possible tricks they have, all the possible ways they have of influencing your actions of coming into the mind and clouding it. This is why the meditation takes time. But again, we’ve got the nourishment from concentration, the sense of well-being that comes from practicing the precepts, that gives us the strength to keep at the practice. It gives us the nourishment we need in order to keep the practice strong. Even though many times these are issues we’d rather not deal with, who wants to look at his greed? Who wants to look at his lust, his anger, delusions, fears, in a way that takes responsibility for them and takes them apart? It’s only the person who realizes that if you don’t do this, you just keep on being a slave to these things. They’re going to drop in front of you on and on and on. And so, in order to make the work palatable, in order to make it possible, manageable, we work at the precepts. We work at the concentration in such a way that the work is not tiresome. It’s nourishing. It feels good to do this work. So we have the solid foundation that puts us in the mood to deal with these slave masters that we have had running the mind for who knows how long. So eventually we can come to the point where we can settle down in the present moment and there’s no problem. There are no hidden places in the present moment. There are no unknowns. There are no unresolved issues in the present moment. When we’ve reached that point, then there’s no need to keep wandering on. We can stop traveling and traveling and traveling and settle down in a place that really does give true nourishment to the mind, where the knowledge has a depth, a sense of pleasure has a depth to it that you can’t get through the traveling. We’re often afraid, “Well, if I don’t go there, if I don’t go here, what? I’m going to miss out on something really good.” Well, when you actually go there, what is it? You discover a lot of the things you thought you were missing out were really not all that special at all. So you go to the next place and then the next place. When is the time going to come when you’re ready to settle down and look at the possibilities right here? Once you’ve explored these possibilities, you discover that you don’t really miss anything out there. All the really fascinating issues out there, you can’t compare at all with the fascinating issues that you find as you start taking the mind apart and seeing how the mind plays tricks on itself, seeing how greed, anger, and delusion can slip in when we’re not looking. It’s a fascinating process if you only turn around and look. And it’s a very liberating process as you learn how to pry yourself loose from these things so that wherever you go, you’re not going through compulsion. You’re not going because you’re running away from something. Once all the issues in the present moment are taken care of, the Buddha guarantees that there are no really bad issues out there at all. Everything gets resolved right here. From that point on, everything you do is a gift. As he says, it’s an ornament for the mind. In other words, it’s a natural expression that you give to the world. Not because you want anything out of it, but because it’s simply a natural expression of that state of mind. When they talk about sukha, someone who goes, well, it’s not the sort of person who goes through compulsion. It’s the sort of person who’s going as a gift. John Fuhring always made the point that when a Jon Mun would go wandering out in the forest, it wasn’t because he was irritated about the place he was staying or simply wandering for the fun of it. There were places he knew that he could serve a purpose when he went. That’s why he’d go. So that kind of traveling around is really worthwhile. But it requires that the mind be trained to have taken care of the business right here, right now, first. Then you’re free to go wherever you like. Not out of compulsion or out of hunger, but simply as an expression of your inner well-being. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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