SF Slowing Down to Look

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If anything I say is relevant to what you’re doing, it’ll come into your awareness without you having to direct your thoughts out to the words. And if it’s not relevant to you, it may be relevant to someone else, so just let it pass. There is a tendency in mindfulness practice to slow things down, to be more deliberate. And some people are afraid that this is going to squeeze the spontaneity out of their lives. Because there’s a part of us that wants to trust our feelings. And there’s a part of us that doesn’t trust our feelings. We’re caught in the middle. Remember what we were talking about last night? People who have intuitive responses to situations, sometimes very quick, and many times the situation requires a quick response. Something comes up in your life and you can’t just say, “Noting, noting, noting.” You’ve got to do something right away. And the question is, how do you know when you can trust your intuitive responses, your immediate responses? And this is a lot of what the meditation is for, is to slow you down for a while. That’s what those psychologists were talking about. They would take video clips and then they would slow them down a great deal to watch very carefully to see what was going on, the things that they might have missed otherwise. And then when they began to see precisely which expressions, which measurements were the really relevant ones, then they were able to speed things back up again. Because they had trained themselves to notice things that they hadn’t noticed before. This is precisely what we’re doing in the meditation. One of the things that struck me about my time in Thailand, first with Ajahn Phuong and then when I came back to the States and studying with Ajahn Phuot, was there were times when they made extremely quick decisions about things. And I come to realize it was because they had been able to slow down and look at their feelings, look at their intentions. And begin to see precisely which ones are the ones that were skillful, which ones were not in terms of what the intended action was going to be. When an emotion would come up, of course I didn’t know which emotions were coming up in their minds, but I could see that they would react very quickly and with a lot of precision. And the precision comes from this willingness to slow down for a while and watch. This is why you need mindfulness practice, why you need concentration practice. To put your mind in the laboratory. You’re going to stay right here at the breath. Can’t wander off, can’t go any place else. And like the elephant, it’s going to have its forest memories and forest desires. And it’s going to strain. But after a while, if you treat it right, you feed the elephant properly, play nice flute music in its ears, after a while it’ll like being next to the post. And then when it settles down to the post, then you can train it. This is what the training is for. To learn to recognize your intentions, recognize your emotions as they come up, and be able to parse them. And this enables you to deal not so much in abstractions, but in direct perceptions of what’s going on. One of the things you have to watch out for as you practice is dealing in huge abstractions. Like the question, “Is Buddhism in favor of this?” “Is it against desire?” The answer is, “Well, it’s in favor of skillful desire and against unskillful desire.” Someone once accused the Buddha of being a nihilist in the sense that he wouldn’t come down clearly on one side of a question or another. They made this accusation to Ananda. Ananda’s response was, “Well, the Buddha is in favor of skillful things and he’s against unskillful things.” And so just because an emotion comes on and is very strong and seems very true is not the sign that you can trust it. It’s also not the sign that you have to distrust it. You have to learn how to parse it, take it apart. What exactly is going on in this desire? There are some desires that we talk today are desires that are part of the path. There are other desires that are very much against the path. And you have to learn how to read them. The same with any other strong emotion that comes up in the mind. One of the questions today was about grief. I noticed as we were going through the papers you all signed yesterday how many people here have relatives who have just passed away or family members who have been diagnosed with extremely serious diseases. Grief is bound to come up. And it’s not that this group is any different from any other group. We have these problems all the time. So how do you deal with grief? The Buddha said, “As long as you see that the grieving process is performing a useful service, continue with it. But keep an eye on it.” Because there comes a point where grieving becomes self-indulgent. This is what the mindfulness is for. We resist that. We want to have the pure emotion. We want to have the intense emotion without some sort of commentary. But we have to remember that our actions are part of a causal process. They come from causes but they also have effects. And if we simply indulge a feeling because it feels good, many times the results are going to be things that we’re going to later regret. So you have to be willing to watch yourself. If you try to deny the emotion, of course what happens to it? It goes underground. It becomes the thing. You saw that movie, didn’t you? The thing that looked like three million octopi. That’s usually what seems to happen to our emotions when we deny them. They go underground. Mindfulness is very much against denial. You want to be present to things as they arise. Instead of being judgmental about them, you want to be judicious. It’s an important distinction. Learn how to look at the emotion as it comes up. The results of indulging in the emotion. Sometimes it’s important. The process you have to go through in order to get in touch with exactly what the emotions are. And sometimes they have important messages for you. But then there can also come a point where it gets indulgent. I had a student years back who had gone through psychotherapy at one point and had been able to retrieve a memory of a time when she was three years old and her parents had gone out of the house for an hour while she was napping. She happened to wake up in the middle while they were still away. She went through this extreme terror. She thought her parents had abandoned her. She was convinced that there was still some of that grief left in her system and she wanted to get it out. So she came to the monastery and asked for three months in order to go through a grieving process. Try to get back in touch with that grief. I tried to convince her, “I think you’ve probably already worked through it.” It took her three months to decide, “Yeah, she had already worked through it a long time ago.” Sometimes grief is self-indulgent. You have to look at it. From the Buddhist point of view, grief has a strong side. There’s going to be a strong sense of “I” in there. The “I” that is wounded. The “I” that is upset. The “I” that feels unfairly treated. An important way to deal with that is to open yourself up to the pain of other people as well. See that you’re not the only person who’s suffering. You’re not the only person who’s meeting with events like this. Events that cause sorrow. As you take the idea that you have been unfairly treated, you realize, “OK, this is the way the whole world is.” There’s death and dying. There’s disease. People being separated from their loved ones happens all the time. Apparently 250,000 people die every day. So it’s all over the place. Try to keep that perspective in mind as well. What you’re doing as you’re meditating is trying to put the mind in a position where it can actually look at these things as they arise. After you begin to parse them, take them apart bit by bit by bit, you get quicker at sensing where the skillful thought processes are and where the unskillful ones are. You start dealing in real time again. Again, what you do is you don’t take abstract memories of one thing being good or one thing being bad, but you get a more and more intuitive sense of what’s skillful and what’s not. You’re able to read your intentions as they arise. That way it’s not a question of going with your feelings or having to analyze things. It’s learning how to put both of those processes together. So that you’re quick enough to sense your feeling and you’re also alert enough to see which parts of the feeling are actually skillful things and which parts of the feeling are not. That makes it a lot easier to make your decisions in time, in real time. So the insights that arise from meditation, it’s not a matter of memorizing things. This is one of the problems of translating the word for discernment as well. We tend to think of wisdom as being wise sayings. You can memorize lots and lots of wise sayings, but then the question is, when are they relevant? The discernment is actually seeing what things as they arise and seeing what’s skillful and what’s unskillful as they arise. That gives you the ability to act more quickly. So again, it’s learning a problem-solving method and learning a decision-making method. This is what the meditation is for. I have a friend, a student back in California, who had been to a retreat. The issue at the end of the retreat, as it always does on a retreat, is how do you take these teachings back into real life? The teacher had said to everyone, “Learn to view your daily life as an interaction, as an interplay between the absolute and the relative.” That’s about as abstract as you can get and as unhelpful as you can get. She tried for a whole week to see her life as an interplay of the absolute and the relative. She had a question for me at the end of the week and the question was so convoluted that I couldn’t follow what it was. But I could see what the problem was as she was dealing in abstractions. So in a roundabout way I tried to point this out to her. The more the mind is dealing in abstractions, the easier it is for the mind to lie to itself. You always have that uneasy relationship with abstract teachings. There are times when we want to hear a convenient abstract teaching that we can carry into our lives and then there’s part of us that rebels, goes back and forth. Wanting an outside authority and then not wanting any outside authority. And so the best gift we can get from the retreat is learning the skill so we can recognize what’s a skillful choice, what’s an unskillful choice as we’re faced with these things. Learning how to look at the particulars, learning how to sense the little things going on in the mind that are signals that say this isn’t a skillful choice, we’re coming from a skillful place or we’re coming from an unskillful place. This is why a good state of concentration is so valuable because it puts you in that position where you can see for yourself and you don’t have to depend on anyone’s abstractions. You don’t have to depend on your own abstractions. Because you’ve learned to take the present moment apart to the extent where you can begin to sense the signs of what’s a skillful intention, what’s an unskillful intention. So keep your mind to yourself. This is why we’re practicing. We’re practicing to see ourselves in the same place where the Buddha was. Mind settled in good strong concentration where mindfulness and equanimity become pure. We have the alertness and the mindfulness. The mindfulness to keep in mind that you always want to do the skillful thing, always want to go with a skillful intention. And the alertness to see what are the signs so you can tell which is skillful and which is unskillful. The insight to see things as they arise and the mental stability that you don’t have to go flowing along with them. Because if we’re always going in a flow, we never know what’s moving and what’s not. John Lee had a good analogy one time. He said it’s like being born in a train. And you ride in the train all your life and you look out the windows and everything moves. People move, cars move, houses move, trees move, mountains move. And you can’t tell what’s not moving because you’re moving. If you want to see what’s not moving, you have to make the mind, you have to make yourself still. In other words, stop the train, get off, stand still on the ground and then you can see clearly. When you have that, when you’re in that position, then you can see for yourself which desires are skillful, which ones are unskillful. The question doesn’t matter whether you like them or not. But you see them clearly as part of a causal process. You see where they’re coming from, you see where they’re going. And you’re the one who gets to decide, “Do you really want to go there?” You can make a comparison with the story about the goose that lays the golden eggs. A good, stable mind, clear and alert, is the goose. And the insights are golden eggs. And it’s like, well, it’s like a fairy tale. You know what happens when you try to keep gold in a fairy tale? You stash it away and it turns into feathers or it turns into coal. So if you try to keep your insights, make abstract rules for yourself, after a day or two you look at them and they’re feathers and coal. But if you try to maintain the state of mind that gave you those insights, then you’ve got gold all the time. The situation comes up, you see what’s going on, you can make the right decision, and that’s it, you drop the insight. Maintain that state of mind for the next decision, and then the next, and then the next. So you’re always producing gold instead of hoarding feathers and coal. There are basically two kinds of teachers. The teachers who like to tell you what to do all the time, and the other teachers who like to throw you back on yourself. And the Buddha was the kind of teacher who said, “OK, he throws you back on yourself, but before he does that, he’s going to give you some training so you really can rely on yourself.” He says, “This is how you do it.” Focus the mind in the four frames of reference, that’s another term for the foundations of mindfulness, that formula that we went through this morning. Staying focused on the body in and of itself. Ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress for the world. That’s one of the four frames of reference. And you develop that in such a way that you also develop concentration, a unification of the mind, stability, steadiness. And that stays in the mind as the goose that lays the golden eggs. Or to follow a John Lee’s analogy, it’s like you have four acres of land. And instead of having to run around and asking other people for food, you can just cultivate your land. The food comes up and then it grows, and then you find that you have more than enough food for yourself. And you can also give advice to other people on how they can cultivate their land. So instead of running around with a lot of abstract notions, and this is what they’re getting at with the issue of beginner’s mind. Beginner’s mind is one who’s clearly ready to see each situation as it arises, with a lot of preconceived abstractions getting in the way. But if you were a total beginner, you’d be really in bad shape. You also want to be the kind of beginner’s mind who has a training. This is where it differs from the Zen teaching. You have an approach. You have a state of mind from which you can see things clearly. I had a friend one time who was learning pottery in Japan, and she got to study with one of those living national treasures they have in Japan, a potter. And she was getting quite depressed. She would put her pots into the kiln, and the next day they would take out the pots, and some of them were nice, and a lot of them were broken and burned or unfired properly. And she’d look at her teacher, and every day he’d come in and his pots would come out perfect, perfect, perfect, every day. Until one day, she came in early, and that particular batch had been ruined. And so the teacher was in the kiln trying to figure out what had gone wrong. That’s why he was a living national treasure. It wasn’t that he was always perfect, but when things didn’t come out perfectly, he was always willing to learn. So it’s that combination of knowing the right approach, learning to be more and more sensitive to the right things in the present moment, and always be willing to learn. Always learn something new that you haven’t quite mastered yet, so that when you do make a decision, and it comes out wrong, you want to learn. It may have been you were sensitive to the wrong things. It may have been your mind wasn’t quite as concentrated as it should have been, or you weren’t as alert as you could have been. But you don’t regard a mistake as the end of the world. It’s another opportunity to learn. It’s interesting that the term for someone who has reached dream entry, the first glimpse of nirvana, the person is called a learner. Someone who is finally really willing to learn, and in the best position to learn. If you look at the meditation practice as a process of developing a skill, and in the course of this training, in the course of mastering the skill, you will have to slow things down. Look at things that you would rather not look at. Look at your impulses, look at your ideas, and really try to put yourself in the proper position where you can gauge them accurately. When there is an impulse like this, the reason it’s coming on so fast, is it fast because it has an immediate understanding, or is it fast because it’s trying to pull one over your eyes? A lot of quick decisions are like that. They’re trying to get something, push something past you. Think of your mind as a committee. It’s not an ordinary committee, it’s like the Chicago City Council. Sometimes these impulses will say, “We know this is the right thing.” That’s because Karl Rove is behind it. Or the Chicago equivalent. And other times you know because you know. But it’s only when you go through the training like this that you can begin to sort it out. Put the mind in a position where it can step back and look at your thoughts, as the Buddha said. See which ones are skillful, see which ones are unskillful. Learn to recognize the signs. You learn from trial and error, and then you can speed things back up to real time again.

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