Hobo Mind

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We spend most of our days like hobos, hopping from one train of thought to the next. But at least hobos have some idea of where they want to go. And we’re not often all that sure. A train of thought comes along and we just jump onto it before we realize that it’s gone. So it’s no wonder that our minds end up in all kinds of unexpected places. Occasionally we’re lucky and we get on a good train of thought, but a lot of times the trains of thought go all helter-skelter. We can even end up in a train wreck. That’s what we’re doing as we meditate, learning how to jump off the trains and land on solid ground and stay there. This is one of the advantages of having the breath as a meditation topic, because it’s not a thought. It’s a physical sensation. And whatever trains of thought come roaring through our heads, we don’t have to go with them. Hold on to this sensation simply of the body sitting here right now, breathing in, breathing out. You can focus your awareness anywhere you like in the body. The important thing is to stay grounded in the sense of the body and try to find an area where it feels comfortable, where you feel at ease. If you tend to have headaches, you might want to focus further down in the body, below the neck. Then see what happens when you stay there. Try to make it a game if you’re grim about the meditation. You’re missing an important part of it, which is when the mind settles down, you want to settle down with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Think of your sense of the body as a whole crowd of little feeling points, sensation points. And the normal way we breathe, the normal way we run through the body in the course of the day, tends to squeeze these points. But here you give them a chance to open up. To blossom, to grow, all over the body. What you’re actually doing is relaxing the muscles in your blood vessels, those little tiny, tiny muscles all along. Allow them to relax everywhere. Relaxing your nerve endings. What happens here? Your blood is allowed to relax in this way, gain a sense of fullness. These are the seeds for what the texts call “rapture” and “refreshment.” That sense of fullness, where you don’t feel that anything physically is lacking right now. And then you can bathe in a sense of ease. When the sense of comfort arises, you have to be careful to keep your awareness as broad as possible, either going through the body section by section or just thinking whole body all at once. Otherwise, if you get a slight sense of comfort in a narrow, constricted range, the mind tends to curl up around that sense of comfort and basically goes to sleep. Even if you’re not really sleeping, you’re just losing the clarity of your awareness. The clarity of your alertness. This is what’s called delusion concentration. The Pali term is moha-samadhi, which is pleasant, but it doesn’t accomplish anything in the mind. The real sense of well-being comes when you have this full sense of the body because all the senses get frazzled by being tense or being stressed out. When they’re allowed to experience a sense of fullness like this, that’s what nourishes them, energizes them. At the very least, the physical energy in the body is wholesome, helpful, healing. And it can’t help but have an effect on the mind. When you can get out of the chatter in the mind and get down simply to the basic physical sensation of having a body and learn how to relate to it in such a way that it grows more full, more satisfying, this is really an essential skill. It’s for the survival of all the good qualities in the mind, for the survival of your happiness. Without this sense of fullness, everything gets very dry, shriveled up. When you have this sort of dry, shriveled-up sense inside, it’s very difficult to have the strength to do what you know is right in different circumstances, to say what’s right, because the reserves of energy just aren’t there. So this is where we get in touch with the breath, right here, right now, and allow that sense of fullness to spread throughout the body. In the beginning, it may not seem like much, but give it time and it will grow. This is important in the meditation, that you’re not too impatient. Otherwise, you’re like a farmer who grows some corn. You look at the corn and it’s only a few inches above the ground. You know there’s got to be several feet above the ground before it’s going to give you the ripe corn. So you pull it up to make it tall. Of course, what happens is it gets uprooted, and that’s the end of the plant. In the same way, this sense of fullness in the body may take a little time. As you get more practiced, you find you can access it more quickly. In fact, as the mind gets more and more used to being with the sense of the breath in the present moment, you find you can access it at any time when you really need it. In the beginning, all that’s asked is a little bit of patience and a little bit of understanding. The potential for a sense of fullness in the body is there, right now. All those little sensation points. All that’s needed is that you give them the space so they can begin to grow and meld into one another. Then you don’t mess with them. Give them space. The reason they get squeezed out is because we give all our attention to our thought worlds, our things outside. So we have to squeeze off this area of our awareness so that it doesn’t distract us. Now we’re having to turn around and learn how to nourish this part of our awareness. Give it space. You find that when you give space to this part of your awareness, how the body feels from the inside. That provides the foundation that you really need in order to deal with thoughts and deal with outside events from a position of strength, from a position of well-being. So it’s like going back and unlearning some very basic habits we picked up a long time ago, when we decided that the outside world was more interesting than our sensation of the body from the inside. Now we learn a technique where our awareness can embrace both, with the main focus being on this physical sensation. So allow this part of your awareness to blossom. You find when it blossoms, it has all kinds of good things to offer. It gives you strength in all kinds of unexpected areas. It’s simply a matter of giving it some space. When you give it that space, you find that it has a lot more to offer than you might have imagined.

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