Eeeels

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John Ferguson once made a comparison. When you’re meditating, he said it’s like trying to catch hold of the mind. It’s like trying to catch hold of an eel. If you just jump down into the mud and try to grab hold of the eels, they’ll slip off for every which way. The trick is you have to find something they like. The analogy is not a very pretty one, but he said one of the things that eels really like are dead dogs. So, find a dead dog someplace and you stick it in a big jar and you put that down in the mud and the eels will come into the jar. Then you put your hand over the mouth of the jar and there you are, you’ve got your eels. The analogy was with the breath. You want to make the breath comfortable. Give the mind something it likes. If your mind likes dead dogs, give it dead dogs. If it likes a comfortable breath, give it a comfortable breath. Pay close attention to how the breathing feels, because it’s a real shame how we let the breathing process go to waste. You can get so much out of the breath. There are ways of breathing that are good for your heart, ways of breathing that are good for your lungs, your liver, all the different organs of the body. If you were to stay and pay attention long enough, you could begin to see that. You can get a lot of use out of the breath. As a medicine, it’s ideal. It doesn’t cost any money. You don’t have to send to Canada for cheaper versions. It’s here all the time. You can take it with you wherever you go. All it requires is you take some time and watch. Be observant. See connections. As you get more interested in exploring the breath and it gets more comfortable, the mind will be more and more likely to settle down. The next question is, what do you do with it when you’ve got it settled down? In other words, once you’ve got your eel, what are you going to do with it? Well, you want to observe it. To be observant, you have to stay very, very alert. This is one of the problems that people often encounter as the mind settles down. The quality of alertness begins to get a little bit blurry. The breath may get very subtle and you can’t follow it, or the sense of comfort may be so nice that you just want to wallow in the comfort. We’re here to observe this eel because the eel has its uses, but can also… I don’t know much about eels. Imagine a dangerous eel. This is not just an ordinary eel. This is a moray eel that caused damage. So you want to watch it to see exactly how damaging it can be. Sometimes it’s a greedy eel. Sometimes it’s an angry eel, a deluded eel. If you understand why it acts that way, you’ve got to be very, very alert. Our problem many times is that greed, anger, and delusion take over the mind. The mind has its warning signals before greed arises, before anger arises, before delusion takes over. They can arise in very subtle ways, very weak ways. There are stages to their arising, and you want to be alert enough to see that. Once the mind has begun to settle down, it gets very still, the breath gets very refined, you’ve got to give it work to do to keep it alert. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha recommends right concentration as a whole-body awareness. Oftentimes we hear, “Concentration means one-pointedness of mind.” You try to think, “Well, we’ve got to get it to one point.” And yet if you’ve got one-pointedness on a very subtle object and the object disappears, you’re gone. If you’re trying to hold on to that one point as you walk around throughout the day, you find that you lose it very quickly because you’ve got to pay attention to other things. But if, once things get comfortable with the breath, you can start spreading the breath around to different parts of the body. Because the breathing process is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s a whole-body process. It can engage your entire nervous system. In fact, ideally it should. All your nerves out to the pores of the skin. Think of them all opening up. So the current of breathing energy can go all the way through the nervous system. It’s going down if that feels right, coming up if it feels right. Then learn how to maintain that whole-body awareness. It does take a certain amount of effort, and just that amount of effort is enough to keep you awake, to keep you alert. You find it’s something you can maintain in all your activities. When anything comes into the mind, it comes within that range of your whole-body awareness. And as you open up the nerves, open up your awareness in the different parts of the body, you begin to realize that there were sections that were cut off. And you open up also to the areas where thoughts begin to form. Because the formation of a thought starts as a little kind of disturbance or a little wavering, wiggling, whatever. And at the very beginning, it’s hard to tell whether it’s a physical or a mental sensation. It’s kind of on the borderline between the two. And then the mind scouts, “What is this? Ah, it’s a thought about x, a thought about y.” And it’ll grab hold of it, if it looks interesting, and then fashion it into something more and more elaborate. And at some place in this process, it becomes conscious. What you’re doing as you open up your body to your awareness is that you push out the range of consciousness so your subconscious gives way. And you can actually see these incipient thoughts, these nascent thoughts, as they begin to wiggle, as they begin to form. And you can catch the process before it takes over. These are some of the advantages of having a whole-body awareness. It feels good, it’s stable, and it enables you to see a lot of the hidden nooks and crannies in the mind. You can watch all the subtle behavior of this ego. You can look at the meal you’ve got here and figure out where it’s going to begin to get dangerous. And then you can train it not to be dangerous. Get it more and more under your control. Because all the dangers in life ultimately come from the mind. Things come from outside, and they may seem threatening, but the big threat is how your mind reacts to them, what it makes of them. And if you don’t have it under control, who knows what the reaction is going to be. So many times we do and say and think things that we say, “Why did I do that? Why did I say that?” That’s especially sad when there’s regret, the regret that comes from the fact that you know you could have done it in a different way. You should have known better, but you didn’t act on what you knew better. Then you’ve got to deal with the consequences. This eel we have can cause lots of problems in that way. When you keep watch on your eel here, you find that there are really no other dangers. Things may happen outside. All kinds of catastrophes can happen outside. But as long as the mind is clear of greed and anger, anger and delusion, you really have nothing to worry about. But the only way you can keep it clear, the only way you can uproot these patterns of behavior, is to be very, very, very alert. One of the activities we’re doing here as we meditate is testing the Buddhist teachings. But before you can really test them properly, you have to become more alert so you can really watch and trust your observations. It’s like those expert tasters they have. They hire various food companies. It takes them years to train their tongues, train their vocabulary, so they can detect really subtle differences in tastes, so that their opinions are worthwhile. It’s the same as meditators. We’re learning to be connoisseurs of the mind, expert observers of the mind, which means you have to watch and compare. Try to get very, very precise in noticing the movements of the mind. It’s only then that you can begin to trust your powers of judgment, your powers of perception. So in your quest to get the mind still, don’t go over into the other extreme. Make it so still that it’s not really observant anymore. You can drift off to nice, peaceful, quiet places and feel really nice, but then you come out of it and you say, “Well, that was nice. That was pleasant. It was restful. Great stress reduction.” But you miss the chance to develop and get even more engaged. You relax the eel, but that doesn’t guarantee that the eel isn’t going to come back and bite you at some other time. So relax. It’s not just for stress reduction or relaxation that we’re meditating here. We really want to observe the mind and train ourselves to be good observers. So we can detect where the mind can cause trouble, and we can also detect ways that we can prevent that with enough alertness. Ultimately, we get to the point where there’s no chance that any trouble will arise, so that this eel of ours will hold no dangers.

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