The Mind Isn’t Hot

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John Foon once told the story of when he was out meditating in the forest. He had set up his umbrella tent in the evening, about this time of night, as things were getting a little bit dark. Before setting it up, he checked around to see what weather he could anticipate that night, because part of setting up your tent as a forest monk is that you make a vow that once you’ve set it up, you’re not going to move throughout that night. So you have to be careful where you set it. Don’t set it near any ant hills. And check the weather. If it looks like there’s going to be a storm, try to find a sheltered place. But that night, the sky was clear, so he set it up in a fairly exposed place. And sure enough, around midnight, the storm came up out of nowhere. It dumped rain. Not only rain, but wind. And with the wind, it meant that the netting of the umbrella tent was pretty useless. The water was dumping in on him. So he set up, put all of his robes, except for his underrobe, in his bowl to keep them dry, and then sat there meditating. And the theme he settled on was, “The body may be wet, but the mind isn’t wet.” He just repeated that to himself. And after a while, he became convinced that it was true. The mind is what? It’s awareness. It’s just aware. That’s what the mind is. It’s not hot, it’s not cold, it’s not wet, it’s not dry. It’s just aware. The wetness or the hot sensations, the cold sensations, these are all aspects of the body. And if you make a distinction, the mind doesn’t have to suffer with these things. The problem is that we go out and we lay claim to things. And then when they start getting unpleasant, and it starts seeping out, and it starts seeping into the mind, the mind suffers. So, today the weather was hot. Tomorrow they’re promising even hotter weather. And you have the choice. You can lay claim to the sensations of heat and suffer from them, or you can say, “It’s hot.” Not, “I’m hot.” “It’s hot.” Try to keep that sense of distance. Try to maintain your sense of being the observer. You’re watching things. And just this much makes it a lot easier to deal with anything that comes up. One of Ajahn Fueng’s students was a woman who had cancer, and she had to go in for operations many, many times. First, this part of her body. It had to be cut out. Then that part had to be cut out. I visited her one day after she’d had a kidney revoked. This was the day after the operation. I walked into the room. There she was, sitting up in bed, looking perfectly normal. I asked her if there was any pain. She said, “Yes, there is pain, but she doesn’t send her mind there. She stays with her meditation object.” And as long as her mindfulness was strong, her alertness was strong, she didn’t have to jump into the pain, get immersed in the pain. The pain didn’t have to seep into her mind. So she was perfectly fine. She looked cheerful. She looked like a normal person. She didn’t look like somebody who just had a kidney removed the day before. So this is something the meditation can do for you. It helps create a sense of the observer that’s separate from the things that are being observed. The way you develop that sense of being the observer is through learning how to stick with one sensation, even though other things may be bombarding you. After all, meditation is something we learn in the midst of a world with all kinds of sensory input coming in all the time—sounds, sights, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. A sense is a costly thing. We can complain that there’s too much noise or there’s too much heat or too much cold, that we’re getting distracted because of these things. Well, there’s no place you can go that you’re not going to have sensory input. To put you in a place of sensory deprivation, you go crazy. You learn concentration in the midst of what someone once called “buzz and confusion,” all the sensory data that’s coming in all the time. When you practice concentration, you simply decide you’re going to hold on to one sensation, one notion, one idea. And anything else that comes up, you’re not going to go there. So think breath. When you think of the body, when you’re experiencing the body, think of it as breath sensations. That’s your primary experience. The second experience of the body is the fact that there’s energy moving around. If it weren’t for the movement of the energy, you wouldn’t know any of the other sensations in the body. You wouldn’t have a sense of the body. So just think of everything that you experience in the body as an aspect of breath. Try to maintain that perception in your mind, and then focus on whichever parts of the body the sense of movement, the sense of energy seems to be clearest. And allow it to be comfortable. Don’t force it too much. Just let it be comfortable coming in, going out. Whatever it’s going to do, allow it to be comfortable. And then just stick with that. This is the part of the meditation that many of us have trouble with. We get to a certain point and say, “Okay, what’s next? When do I get the insights? Whatever.” It’s supposed to come after the mind begins to settle down a little bit. We forget that one of the main points of the practice is to get the mind to just be willing and patient to stay with one thing. If you’re going to get any insight, it comes from sticking with one thing and watching it for long periods of time, watching it continually, so you don’t miss any of its important movements. So when the mind begins to settle down and it says, “What next?” Say, “There’s no ‘what next.’ It’s just this.” “Well, how about that?” “No, there’s just this. Stick here. Stay here.” Think of the body as a wide open screen, like the screen on a window. Lots of holes, so anything else that comes in can just go right through. You don’t have to set up any resistance. You don’t have to react to anything. You don’t have to make comments on it. You don’t have to catch it to see what it is. It’s just like a breeze coming through the screen. Sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, ideas—they’re just coming through the screen. You stay with the screen and let these other things go through the holes. The screen here is the pattern of breath. It’s in the body. Just stick with that one thing. As long as you’re going to identify with anything, identify with that. That and with a sense of the observer, watching that, immersed in that. This is how you begin to develop that sense of the observer that doesn’t have to go out and stick its finger into fire. You know it’s hot outside. Go get involved with the heat. You say, “Well, because it’s pressing in on me.” But where’s the “you” that’s being pressed in on? What are you identifying with that’s getting pressed by the heat? It can be there. The sensations of heat can be there. But you don’t have to latch onto them. You’ve got something else. You’ve got the sense of breath energy in the body. Make that your focus. Make that the part that you’re identifying with. That’s for everything. Anything else, just let it pass, pass, pass. This is a really crucial step in training the mind, realizing that there are all these potentials in your range of experience. If you stick your nose into some of the potentials, they bite back. So you learn not to go there. There may be sensations of heat in the body, but you don’t have to latch onto them. There are other parts of your experience, and all these things seem to infiltrate one another. The breath is in the same place as the heat, it seems. But actually, if you look very carefully, you see breath sensations are one thing, sensations of heat are something else. Just focus on the breathiness, and the heat will take care of itself. You don’t have to arrange it. You don’t have to adjust it. You don’t have to try to get control over it. You don’t have to get involved with it in any way. It’s not your responsibility. Your responsibility is to develop this sense of the observer that can stay with one thing consistently. Once you’ve done that, that’s called the heightened mind, the mind that’s not a slave to every sensation that comes in. It’s in a position where it can choose what to focus on, what to get involved with, and what not. This is called lifting your mind. So try to develop this sense of the mind that’s above the things that it knows. It’s not oppressed by them because it’s not putting itself under them. It’s not taking them on. It’s not laying claim to them and then getting carried off by them. It’s a mind that’s safe and secure in its own position.

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