Keep the Mind from Wandering

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Mind’s tendency is to wander. That’s what the word samsara means. Samsara is not a place, it’s an activity, something the mind does. We think of it mainly as what the mind does as it goes from one life to the next. But it’s a basic principle in the Buddha’s teachings that the larger pattern can be seen here in the smaller pattern. What the mind does from one moment to the next, and particularly how it goes from one bhava, or state of being, to the next. These little worlds in the mind. Why does the mind wander? Because it doesn’t like where it is. But its wandering is pretty aimless. If you were to take a map of your mind today, where would it go? What would the lines look like? They’d be scribbled all over the place. It’d look like a bird’s nest. And what did you get out of your wanderings? A little pleasure, a little pleasure. A little pleasure, a little pain. But the fact that the mind has to keep creating these places where it’s going, that means there’s stress built into the whole process. So what the Buddha proposes that you do is that you learn how to settle down in the present moment. Even though this is a bhava as well, it’s a state of being. It’s one that’s already here. And when you stay right here, you get to see the process in action. In other words, to keep you from floating off in those little worlds, the Buddha has you fully inhabit the world of your body right here. The next process is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out, and then to calm the breath process. In other words, try to make it comfortable. Make this enlarged sense of the mind your home. The sense of the body with the breathing easy coming in, easy going out, whatever the breath is most suited for the needs of the body right now. Experiment to see what that is. If you’re feeling sleepy, you may want to use heavier breathing to keep you awake. If you’re feeling tense, you want to try more relaxed breathing, gentler breathing. In other words, explore the potentials of what you’ve got right here, right now. One of the basic concepts in the Buddhist teachings is of dhatu, sometimes translated as element, sometimes translated as potential or property. Potential is probably the closest meaning. Throughout your sense of the body, there’s a potential to feel movement or energy. That’s the breath or the wind element. There’s the potential for cool sensations. There’s the potential for warm sensations. There’s the potential for heavy sensations. The ones you focus on are the ones that tend to get emphasized, that tend to be stirred up, the Pali word is provoked. The potential is lying there very still or in a subtle form. As you focus on it, you amplify it. We tend to do this in a very unskillful way. We’ve never thought about it systematically. We’ve never really explored what can be done in order to master these different potentials. That’s one of the things you do as you meditate. You start out with the breath element. There’s a potential for breath in the whole body—a sense of movement, a sense of energy that fills the nerves, that fills the body. It’s in the blood vessels all the way out to the pores. What kind of awareness emphasizes that? Try to think of your awareness of the body as all breath. Every sensation is a variety of breathing or breath energy. It might be still breath, moving breath, either related to the in-and-out breath or just something that’s constantly there of its own. John Lee makes the distinction between visiting breath, which are the in-and-out breaths, and the inhabiting breaths, the ones that are there all the time, the potentials that are there all the time. What you do as you focus is you tend to emphasize one potential over another. Try to learn how to fine-tune your focus so that you’re emphasizing sensations that have a potential for ease, comfort. In other words, learn how to make the present moment a good place to stay. This is going to be your home for a while, so clean it up, decorate it nicely. Get a sense of how to inhabit the body in a comfortable way. For once, you’re feeling more and more at ease here, more and more familiar with the terrain, knowing where your spot is in the body. In other words, which points in the body are like nodes in the energy system. You focus on the nodes and you’re in touch with the whole system. The mind can calm down more easily, feel more refreshed, more energized. Once you know those spots, then you want to be able to go there at any time. So you can tap into this sense of ease, the sense of fullness that comes when the presence of breath energy and potentials are all activated throughout the body in a way that feels refreshing, in a way that feels really absorbing. Once you’ve got this sense of being at home, then you can change your relationship to all those other worlds that you’ve tended to wander through. You can look at them and you see them as isolated events, like little balloons going through your head. Do you want to follow those balloons? Because sometimes they land in all kinds of places. I was reading a while back about the people who go ballooning from Temecula. They head up and then they don’t really know where they’re going to end. They actually have more control over the balloons than we have over the balloons in our minds. So when you start looking at the different worlds that you could inhabit, when you learn how to look at them from the outside, i.e., look at them from this position of being fully at home in the body, you’re in a much better position to decide which balloons are worth getting involved with and which ones are not, which ones are worth encouraging. Each of these balloons is also a type of potential. Which potential do you want to focus on and develop, and which ones are not going to be really helpful or useful in any way at all? To put it simply, once you develop a sense of rapture here, as the Buddha said, that’s your food. Not only do you have a home here, but you’ve also got a source of food in your home. You look at all the other places that the mind likes to go feeding, and you realize you don’t really get much out of it. If you’re a homeless person, you end up feeding off of garbage, feeding off of scraps that other people have thrown away. It’s not really good for you. You’re now in a position where you have a better home, better food, and you just lose your interest. Simply having the mind have a good, solid basis of concentration like this is one step in learning how to lose interest in the other things that you used to feed on. That’s what’s meant by nibbida, disenchantment, disgust, however you translate it. Disgust in the sense that it used to be food that you used to like, but now you’ve got something better and you just don’t want to go there. Like the cat I mentioned this afternoon. I had a cat in college. I fed it oatmeal. One summer, when I went home, I left it with some friends. The friends fed it good cat food. When I came back that fall, I took the cat back and tried to feed it oatmeal, and it refused. It knew there was better food in this world. In your mind, when it gets better fed through the meditation, it loses its interest in a lot of those other worlds. This is the discernment that comes through the practice of concentration. Ultimately, you get to the point where you have to learn how to outgrow the food even of the concentration, but until you reach that point, it’s going to be quite a while before you reach that point. Until you reach that point, learn how to appreciate the food you’ve got here, the potential home you’ve got here, the potential comfort, the potential of all these different elements in the body that you can focus on and learn how to maximize. When you need them. Once you’re more purposeful in taking advantage of this potential home here in the body, you’re going to also be more purposeful in your wanderings, the times when you do need to think about other things, plan for the future, recollect the past. As for the thought balloons, just float. Aimlessly around, just let them go. When you don’t focus on those potentials, they just pass. This way, there’s a lot more usefulness, there’s a lot more gain from your comings and goings and your stayings right here. So as long as the mind wants to inhabit something, learn how to inhabit what you’ve got here. As John Lee used to say, you’ve got this field here. It can grow all kinds of crops. So don’t go around trying to grow crops in other people’s fields. Don’t go trying to grow crops in the sky. You’ve got a good field here with good soil. Make the most of it. When you’ve got a good home, got a good food, you find yourself much less inclined to wander aimlessly around. That cuts through a lot of unnecessary suffering right there. It also means that when the time comes when you actually are facing death, you’re going to have practice in not just wandering off at whatever pops into your mind. It’s an important skill. It’s an important thing to remember. It’s this little process of wandering around in your thoughts. It’s precisely what causes you to wander around from one life to the next. So if you master the process now, learn to bring it at least under some control. That skill will serve you in good stead, even in the most difficult situations in life.

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