Train Hopping

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Normally we spend our lives like hobos, hopping from one train of thought to another. We can cover a lot of ground, just like trains go all over the country. But can you imagine what it would be like if you spent all your life just on trains? You’d never really go anywhere. You’d have very strange ideas about reality. Mountain ranges would move. Houses would move. You’d watch them move past. And you’d think there was no really stable place at all in the world, because everything seems to rock back and forth. If you really wanted to understand anything, you’d have to get off the train. This is why we meditate. This is why we focus on the breath, to give you some place to stay inside this combination of body and mind we’ve got here that’s a little bit outside of the mind, so you can get some perspective on your thinking. If you’re thinking about something, you’re thinking about the breath. At least it stays in one place, and you’ve got a point of reference. You can focus on any spot in the body, and as soon as you feel solid and secure in that spot, then you can spread your awareness to fill the whole body. This is useful in a lot of ways. One is because the mind doesn’t like being constricted. This is one of the reasons why it likes to hop on trains. It stays with one train of thought for a while, and then that gets boring, or unpleasant, or whatever, and so it hops on to another one, because it doesn’t like where it is. It doesn’t like where it’s going. It doesn’t like to be hemmed in by any particular train of thought. But here you have an alternative way of not being hemmed in. You try to fill the whole body with your awareness. Stay at one point as your primary focus, but be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. In the same way, you’d look at a picture. Your eyes would be focused on one spot in the picture, but you can see the whole picture. Inhabit the whole body. Another advantage of whole body awareness is that it makes you too big to hop on any trains. Trains go right through. And as long as your awareness is enlarged like this, you find that you can’t hop onto them. You see them, you can watch them come and go. But only if you make your awareness really small can you jump onto them. So try to keep your frame of reference as large as possible. In this way, you can observe the thoughts. You can observe the trains of thought from outside. In other words, instead of looking at them in terms of their content, you look at them simply as events in the mind. How does a thought form? At what point do you get interested in it? When do you get interested in it? What happens? What are the steps that lead to it? Do you suddenly find yourself inside the train? It’s going off in a whole different frame of reference. The first step in order to see these things is to learn how to pull yourself out of trains of thought, when you suddenly find yourself sucked in somehow. There are lots of ways of doing this. You can simply note the fact, “Hey, this is a thought.” Just that much is enough to get you out. Why do I have to think this? Sometimes just that much is enough to get you out. You’ve got something better to think about. Or you can think about the drawbacks of the thought once you’ve noticed, “Hey, this is a thought.” And if you find yourself pulled back again and again, you have to remind yourself, “Why do I not want to think about this thought? Why do I not want to inhabit this thought?” Try to look at it and see what kind of thought it is. It may just be a voice in the mind, and you believe what that voice says. Why would you believe what that voice says? At some point in your past, somebody said whatever that was, with authority, and you believed them. Maybe they were worth believing at the time, but you don’t have to believe in them. Or if you can identify the particular defilement that’s fueling that thought, it may be greed. Look at greed. What happens with greed? Where does greed lead? All the corruption we hate comes from greed. If you don’t like it in other people, why do you want to let it take over your own actions? Or lust. We tend to really like lust, but remember, all kinds of horrible things happen as a result of lust. Most murders happen between people who’ve had sex in the past with one another. If lust were really good, why would that happen? Then there’s fear. Remind yourself, fear can make people do all kinds of evil things. Again, all you have to do is look in the newspapers at the people who are promoting fear, trying to make other people afraid so they’ll be happy to do stupid things, do things that they wouldn’t do in their right minds, if they were in their right minds. So you look around and you can see the drawbacks of these different thoughts. Remind yourself, “Well, if I give into that thought, I’m giving into these things as well. Do I really want to go there?” Often that can help pull you out. There are traditional meditations on these topics. When there’s lust, you can think about the different parts of the body. Exactly which part of the body are you lusting for? The liver? The lungs? The heart? Some people complain about this meditation, taking the body apart and contemplating its parts, saying it leads to a negative body image. Well, there are times when it’s healthy to have a negative body image. The unhealthy negative body image is when you say you have the only ugly body in the world and all these other people have beautiful bodies. But even the beautiful bodies that are promoted in all those pictures in the newspapers and magazines, in movies and TV. What are their livers like? What are their lungs like? What are their intestines like? This meditation reduces us all to the same level. So when you see that lust has drawbacks, you realize, “Okay, this is a good way of counteracting it.” So when your thoughts are motivated by anger, look at all the danger that comes along with that anger in the world. And when you’re angry, who’s suffering right now from your anger? Well, you are. Do you want to suffer from that? Do you really wish yourself ill, that you’d be willing to waste so much of your life giving into anger and then doing the stupid things that people tend to do under the power of anger? As the Buddha says at one point, when you’re acting under the power of anger, you’re often doing precisely what your enemy is happy to see. You look ugly when you’re angry and you do stupid things. You destroy your belongings sometimes, or you destroy other people’s belongings and you get fined for that. You destroy friendships. You get confused as to what is really in your own best interest. On a very shallow level, you just say, “Do I want to give my enemy the satisfaction of seeing me do that?” On a deeper level, you say, “Why do I want to destroy myself? Don’t I have any goodwill for myself?” Then when you can begin to develop some thoughts of goodwill for yourself, you can begin to think about having goodwill for the person you’re angry at, especially if the person is close to you. You don’t want to focus on their negative points all the time. You don’t want to focus on the bad for the relationship. The Buddha gives an interesting analogy for when you’re dealing with people who do or say or think things about you that you don’t like. It’s like you’re walking across the desert and you come across a little puddle of water in a cow’s footprint. You realize that if you took your hand down into the footprint to get the water and put it in your mouth, you’d get the water all muddy. You’d lean down and suck up the water. The image here points out the fact that it’s not that we have lots of leisure time and lots of well-being that we can just sit around and very casually entertain ourselves with thoughts about why we don’t like other people. We’re walking across the desert. We’re thirsty, we’re hot, we’re hungry ourselves. We need the goodness of other people. That’s nourishment. So try to find whatever nourishment you can get out of other people in terms of their good words, their good deeds, and learn not to focus on the negative part. This doesn’t mean that you don’t admit that there’s a negative part, or you deny it, or if they’re really doing something harmful that you’re not going to work to change it. But you don’t want to do it out of anger or out of fear. You want to change somebody else’s behavior. Try to have goodwill toward that person. It’ll be a lot easier to change their behavior than if you hate them. These are some ways of looking at the drawbacks of your trains of thought and trying to pull yourself out. The Buddha gives other ways as well. One is simply to consciously ignore that train of thought. You’re sitting here with your full body awareness. The trains of thought can go through and you don’t have to focus on them. Focus on the body side of your awareness and keep that as comfortable as possible. There’ll be these little thought trains going through, like cosmic rays that go through the earth and don’t run into anything. They go right between the atoms. Think of your awareness as having lots of atoms with lots of space between them, and the thoughts can go right through the atoms. You don’t have to catch them. You don’t have to inspect them. You don’t have to get involved with them at all. Or if you really are sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to notice that any time a thought forms, there’s also going to be some tension at a different part of the body. If you notice where it is—if it’s in your leg, in your arm, in your elbow, in your stomach, wherever—just consciously breathe into that spot, relax it, and the thought will go away. Or if you find yourself really obsessed with a particular kind of thinking, the Buddha says, “Grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and just make up your mind.” He says, “Crush your mind with your mind.” In other words, if you make up your mind, you will not go there. Just keep that idea in mind. That’s the method that requires the most force. Think of it as one of your tools. You may need a sledgehammer someday, so keep a sledgehammer in your set of tools. You don’t have to use it all the time. Again, your choice of tools is not based on what tools you would like to use; it’s what tools work for a particular job. If you’re a carpenter who has a real fondness for hammers, no matter what comes up in the house, you use a hammer. It’s not going to work. You end up smashing things that you actually should be using, say, a screwdriver for, or a chisel. So use whichever tools work so as to maintain that sledgehammer. That’s a large sense of awareness, where the mind can settle down. You really see things for what they actually are, in the same way that the hobo finally jumps off the train when it stops and then looks around and sees, “Oh, this is what life is like when you’re not on trains. Things look very different.” You can be a lot more picky about which trains you hop onto when you actually need to. Because now you have the skill of knowing how to hop off whenever you need to. You find there’s a lot around in the world. There’s a lot of food, there’s a lot of shelter, all kinds of good things when you stay off the trains. So you make the sense of the enlarged body your home, your enlarged awareness. Make that your home. You can travel on the trains when you need to, but you’ve got a good, solid home where you can stay. You’re no longer a slave to the schedules of the trains. You’re in charge of where you want to go, and you have a good place to come back when you need it. That puts you in a much better position. You learn and know for yourself a lot more.

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