Coming to Your Senses

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The mind is a very fickle sort of thing. It craves excitement. It gets worn out from the excitement, so it craves peace. It gets bored with the peace. If you were to follow its wants and likes, it would drive you crazy, i.e., the normal state of mind in most people. Running around here, running around there, what you need is a place where you can step back and just watch it. It’ll learn not to take its likes and dislikes so seriously. This is why we meditate. Why do we try to develop a good, solid place for the mind with something neutral but pleasant—the breath coming in and going out? Of course, the mind will complain about that. Either the breath isn’t as comfortable as you’d like it to be, or it’s just not as comfortable as you’d like it to be, or even when it is comfortable, you start getting bored. You take the boredom seriously, or you start feeling confined. “I guess I have to spend my whole life being with the breath.” In other words, you can’t really trust the mind. So you’ve got to ask yourself, “Who can you trust?” The idea of trusting somebody outside, well, you don’t really know who they are or where they’re coming from. That’s why the Buddha recommended that you learn how to look at cause and effect, which means that you have to build certain states of mind, like concentration and mindfulness. So you can train yourself to be a reliable observer of cause and effect, keeping in mind that until you’re a reliable observer, you’ve got to learn how to take whatever comes up in the mind with a grain of salt. When the mind starts getting obsessed with something, ask yourself, “Is that really true? What if the opposite were true?” And learn how to sit in the middle and see which type of thinking is most useful. Remember, when I was first ordained, I really chafed under all those rules. Life would be a lot easier without this rule or that rule. It would be a lot nicer if monks could get the weekends off. But then the thought came into my mind, “Well, maybe these rules are actually liberating. Maybe they’re not confining.” Because, after all, when you adhere to the rules, people support you. You don’t have to go out and slay for your wages. People put food in your bowl. They give you a place to stay. And you’ve got all that time to meditate. Of course, there were times when all that time weighed heavily on me. I’d be meditating, and I wasn’t getting the results I wanted. And the idea of spending my whole life doing that drove me crazy. Fortunately, I began to realize, “Well, not my whole life will be spent doing things so awkwardly.” And for when you have time to practice with the meditation, at least you’ve got the chance that you’ll start getting better at it. And so I found that questioning my thoughts and learning to look at the opposite, i.e., seeing the rules as liberating, and seeing all that time as an opportunity rather than an onerous burden, was a more skillful way to think. It was going to have better results. But I don’t think I would have been able to think in that way if I didn’t have the breath to fall back on, because when you’re with the breath, you’re in a better position to entertain the opposite of whatever it is you’re obsessed with at that particular time. Because the breath is yours. It’s not some foreign cult being imposed on you, not some ancient hidebound system of rules or beliefs. If you can’t be on good terms with your own breath, you’re in really bad shape. So start from there. Learn to be friends with the breath. What kind of breath would feel good right now? Each time it comes in, ask yourself that question. How about now? What would feel good now? And allow yourself to play with it. Experiment and listen carefully to it. It takes time to become friends with the breath, just as it takes time to become friends with a person. You have to be with that person in lots of different circumstances before you can really trust that person. And it’s the same with the breath. You have to be in a lot of circumstances with you before I can trust you. You find there are parts of the breath energy in the body that seem resistant to experimentation. You try to force them to be the way you think they should be. They react in a very opposite way. So you’ve got to be patient. Patient doesn’t mean simply putting up with things. It means learning how to put up with things in a way that’s as unburdensome as possible. So if one part of the body proves recalcitrant, are there other parts of the body that might be more amenable to experimentation? So look around. Learn how to listen. Because this is how you’re going to start seeing cause and effect. Start seeing cause and effect. First with the breath. Then it expands and becomes the ability to see cause and effect in terms of your own thoughts. Things that you believe 100 percent, if you really acted on them and held to them, where would they lead you? Then you can start entertaining the opposite. What if the opposite is true? Or when is the opposite true? Because many times the things that we believe are true are true some of the time. And the trick lies in seeing when they’re true and when they’re not, when they’re timely and when they’re not, when they’re beneficial and when they’re not. As the Buddha once said when he spoke, it wasn’t simply a question of, “Is this true or not?” The question is, “Is this also beneficial? And is this the right time and place for it?” Take the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. There are times when they’re beneficial to think about, and times when they’re not. They’re true. It is true that conditioned things are stressful and inconstant. But there are also times in the practice when you emphasize their potential for being constant and pleasant, like when you’re trying to develop a state of concentration. You want to focus on the pleasant side of the breath and your ability to make the state of concentration last as long as possible. You want to gain some control over the mind. The sense of self basically comes down to a question of control. When the Buddha talked about self and not-self, he was talking about self and not-self. It’s not so much a question of defining a particular type of self in metaphysical terms. It came down to the issue of control. Do you, in ultimate terms, have control over the five aggregates? Well, no, not total control. So in ultimate terms, you really can’t claim them to be yourself. But you do have some. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been able to walk here, based on a desire to come here. There’d be no ability to get the mind to settle down. You’d be simply sitting here waiting for a spiritual accident to happen. But that’s not how the Buddha taught things. There are skills you can develop in the meditation. You can exert a certain amount of control over the breath. It’s learning how to do it intelligently, sensibly. So you push against those three characteristics. You find an element of constancy among what’s inconstant, pleasure in the midst of what’s stressful, and your range of control in these things that ultimately you’ll be looking at as not-self. For the time being, you’re looking at the other side. This is why it’s so important to see things from both sides, because there are times when a particular truth may be beneficial and timely, and other times when it’s not. Even though it may be true, it’s not beneficial at that time. It’s not the right time for it. So right now, as you focus on the breath, focus on the areas that you can make constant, that you can make pleasant, that you can bring under your control. Not in a control-freak kind of way, but in an intelligent control. Because you need to put the mind in a good place where it can observe things dispassionately, watch cause and effect, see things as they’ve come to be and as they pass away. Not just randomly, but you see the patterns in their coming into being and their passing away. That requires skill. It requires that you’re able to bring the mind to a place where it’s not pulled this way and that way by whatever comes in. In other words, your own mind becomes a mind that you can begin to trust, because you’ve trained it. It’s not that thinking is bad and it’s not bad to figure things out. I shudder every time I hear people say that you don’t want to figure things out. Having ideals is bad. Thinking is bad. These things are not bad. They have their uses. They have their time. They have their place. The skill lies in learning what that time and place is. So that you can make use of them when they’re timely and beneficial and put them aside when they’re not. That’s when you’re really the master of your thoughts. As the Buddha once said, the ability to counteract unskillful thoughts, either by replacing them with more skillful thoughts or by looking at the drawbacks of following them, or learning consciously to ignore them, or relaxing the thought process, or suppressing them. You can do all these things. Again, it’s a matter of learning which is going to work right here, right now. But ultimately, you want to become the master of your thoughts. If you want to think something, you think it. If you don’t want to think it, you can drop it. So your thoughts don’t run away with you. You use them when they’re beneficial and timely, and you drop them when they’re not. That’s the direction in which we’re trying to train ourselves. And you train yourself through trial and error. It’s to be expected that the mind is going to go running off on its high horse for a while, and then you learn how to pull it back. It may take a while, but it’s going to happen. For some people, it takes years. But it’s better than being a slave to your thoughts for aeons and aeons. Always keep things in perspective. Always try to do it. And you’ll find that over time, you get quicker and quicker at correcting yourself, coming to your senses. Because that’s what the practice is all about, coming to your senses and realizing that until the mind is fully trained, it’s a little bit crazy. And as with every crazy person, the crazy person has some insights. That’s why the mind is so convincing. Crazy people can be pretty convincing. That’s when you realize that they’ve taken something and they’ve run too far with it, or it’s too one-sided. Jon Fung once had a student who was basically crazy. He disappeared for years. We hadn’t seen him until after Jon Fung passed away. He happened to come during a Jon Fung’s funeral. He came up and visited me on the porch of my hut. A few other people were sitting there as well. He started talking about the troubles he’d gone through. His family had repeatedly put him into a mental hospital in Bangkok. He complained about what it was like living in a mental hospital. They wouldn’t let him meditate, they wouldn’t let him practice, he said. Someone sitting next to him, listening to him talk, got very upset. He said, “I was obviously very intelligent, and it seemed a real injustice that he’d been thrown in the mental institute.” So the guy was talking about all the problems he’d faced practicing, like he’d wanted to shave off his hair. He’d been obsessed with the foulness of the hair on the top of his head, but they wouldn’t let him shave his head. So he said, “I did the only thing I could do. I just burned it off.” The guy sitting next to him, who’d been upset, jumped about two feet to get away. So crazy thoughts can be really convincing. You have to listen to them for a long time before you realize these are crazy, because crazy thoughts are not totally deluded. They have their insights. So you’ve got to be careful with them. If you can learn to take the insights and drop the rest, that’s a sign that you’re overcoming your craziness. You’re coming to your senses. Developing a good, sound place to stay with the breath is going to help a lot. That’s your lifeline to sanity. So if you’re not sure about a certain way that your thoughts are going, just come back to the breath. Come back to the sense of knowing that stays with the breath, and that’ll see you through. you

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