Animals in the Mind

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As you sit here focusing on the breath, we’re developing what’s called mindfulness immersed in the body. You keep the body in mind and you try to fill the body with your awareness. Allow your awareness to spread out and be filled with the body. Don’t squeeze all the time. Let go of your awareness of the body, which is something we do an awful lot. We want to focus on something we’re looking at or something we’re hearing. We blot out our awareness of the body to focus on the sight or the sound or whatever else the sensory input might be. So as you focus on the breath, you’re trying to reopen that awareness of the body. Work your awareness through the body. Be aware of the body. The body is an interconnected whole, w-h-o-l-e, whole body. Your head’s connected to your torso, your torso’s connected to your arms, your lower torso’s connected with the legs. Things aren’t cut off. The whole body breathes in together, breathes out together. When you do this, you’re giving the body your full attention. And when you give your full attention to the body, it provides a good solid foundation for the mind. It becomes your place. When you fully inhabit your body, nobody else can invade your space. Then you have a good leash for the mind. There’s an image in the texts of six different animals all leashed together. There’s a crocodile that wants to go down into the water. There’s a monkey that wants to climb up into a tree. There’s a hyena that wants to go into the charnel ground to feed on a couple of good corpses. I’ve forgotten what the other animals are, but they’re all heading off in different directions. And what happens is, of course, whichever of the animals is the strongest, that’s the direction you go. The six animals here are symbols for the different senses. The things you want to look at, the things you want to listen to, the things you want to smell, the things you want to taste, touch, think about. And wherever the desire is strongest or whether the impulse is strongest, that’s where you go. Whereas if you’re practicing mindfulness with the body, it’s like taking all those six animals and tying them to a stake. The stake is strong. No matter how strong they are, the stake is stronger. So they end up staying right next to the stake instead of getting pulled off into the river or pulled up into the trees or into the charnel ground. That stake is your space. And you want to make sure your space doesn’t get invaded and doesn’t move off away from the body. Because when it’s off away from the body, it’s like something is tipping over. You’ve left your home. You’ve left your home base. You’ve left your place of security. Because the things that happen up there in the trees or in the river or in the charnel ground can get you into a lot of trouble. As you’re feeding on those things, you get pulled all out of whack. Because this sight appeals to you, that sight doesn’t appeal to you, this sound appeals to you, that sound doesn’t appeal to you, all the way down the line. And the fault doesn’t really lie with the sights or the sounds. It lies with those impulses in the mind that just want to go flowing out, running out after these things. That’s how you create a bridge from your sensory input into the mind, where it can do a lot of damage to the mind. As we’ve seen before, the impulses that come from outside, if you take them in, can do a lot of damage. You feel like you’re being assaulted. But what’s actually happening is you’ve opened the door. You’ve created the bridge for these things to come in. You’ve abandoned your space and you’ve left the doors open. So, of course, it’s going to wreak a lot of havoc. You have to tell yourself, “This is my space. This is my space right here in the body. This is where I belong.” And when you stay in your space, you’re in a much safer position. There’s another image in the Canon of a little story about a quail that has left the field where it’s safe, because it can hide behind clouds of dirt, it can hide behind rocks, and the hawk can’t catch it. But it’s away from that field, out in the open. The hawk can swoop down and catch it. In this one case, the hawk has swooped down on the quail. The quail is being carried off. The hawk says, “It’s just my lack of good luck. I was caught when I was away from my ancestral territory.” The hawk says, “What is your ancestral territory?” The quail says, “It’s a field with the clods turned up and the stones turned up through the plow. If I’d been there, you couldn’t have caught me.” The hawk takes this as a challenge. So he lets the quail go. He says, “Go ahead, but you’re not going to escape me.” So the quail goes down and he stands up on a stone turned up in the field. He says, “Okay, come on and get me, you hawk. Come on, get me, you hawk.” So the hawk swoops down, but this time the quail, just as the hawk is about to get him, darts behind the stone. The hawk crashes its breast into the stone and dies. The Buddha says, if you stay in your territory, you’re safe, like the quail in its field, where the hawk can’t catch you. So try to inhabit your body as much as possible. Remember, when you leave the body, allow your attention to go flowing out after things outside, or thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future. If you leave your space, you’re in danger. If you stay in your space, you’re in danger. You’re okay, because then you begin to see to what extent things outside come invading your space and to what extent you’re flowing out after them. It’s the flowing out that causes the problem. But to see that clearly, you not only have to have your space, you have to have a sense of protection. We talked today about creating this sense of energy shield around your body, around your mind, right here in the present moment, around your breath. Use the breath to create that shield. Try to be sensitive to when things outside invade. Have a sense that you can repel them. It’s like a turtle. The turtle’s body is very sensitive and very tender, so it needs a hard shell in order to stay alive. Meditators are the same sort of thing. As you meditate, you get more and more sensitive to things. Especially as you’re staying with the breath like this, parts of you seem to be more open and exposed than they were before. So you’ve got to compensate for that by creating this sense of the breath shield. As long as you’re with the breath, think of those sensory contacts as something happening outside. Things come and they slide off your shield, slide around you. They don’t come right in and invade your heart. Actually, they don’t do the invading. You’re the one who opens up, allows them in. Of course, you’re going to hear things and see things and smell things, but the extent to which you let them invade you, that’s something you do. That’s part of your intention. And it’s become such a habitual attention that you hardly even notice it. Sometimes you go running out after things because you like them. Sometimes you go running out of them because you don’t like them. You’ve got to have a strong sense that this is where you belong. Out there is out there. You can know about those things as much as you need without running out after them. Because when you run out after them, what you’re actually doing is you’re feeding on them. You’re feeding on them out of lust, out of anger, out of possessiveness, out of pride, whatever the motivation might be. But as you feed on them, you’re exposed, like any animal going out to feed. Animals know that when they’re feeding, they’re in their most exposed state. So they tend to be very wary. Now, we may not like to think about the fact that we have to be very wary, even among people that we trust, among people that we love. But it’s true. We have to have a strong sense of our space. And this is not selfish. When you’re secure in your space, you can see a lot more clearly what other people need because you’re not trying to feed off them. You’ve got your sense of nourishment, your sense of inner food right here with the breath, a sense of well-being, a sense of being settled, secure. As you stay in your space, that’s the way you create healthy boundaries. And as for your desire to help other people, the extent to which you can put your mind in good shape like this, this is a good example for them. You want other people to practice, you have to let them see the benefits of the practice in your behavior. The fact that you’re more secure, less disturbed by events, less stirred up by things. When they see that, they’ll want to practice of their own accord. As you’re doing this, you’re helping not only yourself, you’re providing a good example for others. As Ajaan Sawat used to say, “Each of us has one person.” You’re responsible for ourselves. You can’t be responsible for other people, but you can provide a good example. This is what the Buddha did. He showed that a human being can, through his or her own efforts, find freedom from suffering. We didn’t go out and release other people from suffering. But he did show them that there’s a way, and that was enough. That opened people’s minds to new possibilities. That, in and of itself, is quite a gift. Otherwise, we go through life thinking, “Well, this is as good as it gets, so we might as well learn to contend ourselves with fighting over what’s out there.” The image of the Buddha is of a pond that’s gradually growing drier and drier. It’s just becoming a puddle, and the fish in the pond are now fighting over what little water is left. As long as you think that the only happiness there is in life is getting that water, you’re going to resign yourself to fighting for it. But if you realize that if you develop your sense of inner space like this, become more secure here, more solidly here throughout all kinds of events, all kinds of situations, remind yourself that no matter where you go, you still have the breath, you still have the body. It’s all right here. Then you can find happiness wherever you are. You don’t have to fight other people, fight the other fish for that little bit of water remaining. So the focus of the practice keeps coming back here, back here, back here. So you don’t get distracted by thinking that the solution to your problems lies outside. Actually, the causes of the problems don’t lie outside. The causes lie inside as well. You’ve got all these conflicting desires for happiness. There’s all these different animals inside you. In terms of another analogy, there’s a big committee inside, and they’re all trying to pull in different directions. But if you can leash everybody here to the breath and say, “Here’s where you’re going to find your happiness,” then they’re going to pull for a while in their different directions. But if you stay right here, you get to see everybody. Then you can converse with everybody, train everyone, negotiate. Because what every member of the committee, what every animal here in the mind wants is happiness, a sense of well-being. In the beginning stages, you can provide that with the breath. Then as the different members of the committee become more inclined to look at you, they find that there are deeper and deeper levels of happiness that can be found right here. Ultimately, everybody’s on the same page. So even though they may be tied to the body, there’s freedom that comes from looking deeper inside. So tell yourself, “This is my space. This is where I belong. I want to have it as it is. I want to take it fully, protect myself, protect others from my going out from this space, to feed on them.” This is how we live with one another, in peace and harmony, because we’re not invading other people’s spaces. We learn that we can find everything we need right here. you

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