Away from the Herd

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One of the features of modern life is that we live lives of continual distraction. There’s always something going on in the background, at least two or three tasks that we’re taking on at any one time. The mind very rarely has any time to be by itself, to get to know itself. And John Lee mentions this. He says there are a lot of really fascinating potentials in the mind, even in the body, that can be known only by sitting with the mind and sitting with the body. There’s a potential for a rapture. There’s a potential for a sense of well-being that’s there. But we don’t give it the time. We give it the space, and as a result we don’t get any advantage from it. So it’s important that we do learn how to take time and do have space for ourselves—physical space, psychological space, room for the mind. The mind has to show what it’s got, what it’s capable of. And it does take time, and it takes dedication, because the first thing you see when you settle down is a lot of confused notions, ideas we’ve picked up from who knows where, ideas that we’ve never sorted out about what’s important and where happiness lies. What gives meaning to life? And these ideas tend to pull in all sorts of directions. So the first obstacle is learning how to sit with them and not get pulled by them. This is why we hang on to the breath. It gives us something physical, something immediate that we can latch on to. As all sorts of ideas and emotions swirl around in our heads and our bodies, we’ve still got the breath. And not only does it give you a safe place to stay, but it gives you a place of well-being. As you get to know the breath, you begin to realize there are ways of breathing that can feel really refreshing, really fulfilling. That’s a potential that’s there in the body, that potential for rapture. If you make a survey of the different parts of your body right now, you’ll find there are some places where there are some pains, and some places where there’s a sense of blockage. There are a few aches here and there. But there are also places where things are actually okay. And the trick is letting them to stay okay as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Because we do have this subconscious tendency to squeeze the breath out and pull the breath in. It doesn’t give space to those okay parts of the body to stay okay. But what happens if they stay okay? They get better. So think of them just floating here in space, not being affected by the movement of the breath at all, not being affected by the movement of the body. See how many of these portions of the body you can find, and then let them connect. So you breathe in with a sense of fullness, and even when you breathe out, there’s still a sense of fullness. This is one of the benefits of getting to spend some time with the body, getting to spend some time with the mind. You get a greater appreciation of what you’ve got here and the potentials that you can depend on. And then you learn that you can get in touch with them not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through life, different events, different activities, you can still have this sense of well-being inside. And you go through life a lot less hungry—not just physically hungry, but emotionally and mentally hungry. The problem with being hungry is that you grab anything that comes by and gobble it down—good, bad, indifferent. This is what a lot of that distraction is. We’re hungry for something. It’s like the coyotes who, if you look in their scat, sometimes you find the strangest things. Bits of plastic rope, whatever’s on the ground. When they’re really hungry, it just goes right in the mouth. And it’s the same with the human mind. It gobbles down everything. And if we have some time for peace and quiet, our friends and family get concerned because we’re not eating along with them. They’ll send some plastic rope our way. That’s one of the advantages of getting to know the body. Getting to know your breath, getting to know the body and the mind from within. You should have a sense of inner food, something you can depend on. So you can be more discriminating in your palate as to what sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, what activities, what relationships, whatever, you really want to get involved with because you’re not so hungry anymore. And you begin to see some of the disadvantages of your old ways of feeding the mind. And it’s liberating. This is the part of meditation that some people actually find fearful. There’s a lot of freedom that comes with meditating. You’re perfectly self-sufficient. You can be independent in ways that you couldn’t have been before. And part of the mind is scared, shrinks away from that independence, from that freedom. But there’s another part that’s really nourished by it. There’s a story in the canon of a bald elephant who’s got a herd, lots of cow elephants and baby elephants. And if one of the elephants first liked having the herd, but then after a while he began to realize that there were a lot of drawbacks. He’d go down to drink water in the river, and they’d already gone down and muddied up the river. If he didn’t go down to bathe, the whole herd would go down and they’d bump up against him. They trampled his best grass. So he finally decided to leave the herd. He goes off and finds a place where there’s clean water, clean grass for him to eat. So he goes down and bathes. He comes out and he feels an itch, so he breaks off a branch of the tree and scratches himself with it. The lion isn’t gratified. He allays his itch. The Buddha said this is like a meditator who gets tired of living with a crowd, goes off and meditates. And as he attains a sense of pleasure and rapture that comes from the practice of concentration, that’s how he allays his itch, with a sense of gratification. Our culture really pushes against this kind of freedom, against this kind of independence. But it’s so important that each of us has time to find this. Because otherwise you never really get to know your mind, the good corners, the bad corners, what you can depend on when you need it. So realize there’s a lot to discover here. So many people say, “Well, my mind gets quiet and then nothing happens.” It’s because you’re not looking carefully. You’re not asking questions. You’re looking inside. Breathe in different ways. Focus in different ways. Take the time to get to know yourself. Don’t let distractions eat up your life.

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