Don’t Scatter Your Mind

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We respect the Buddha because he teaches us to have respect for two things in ourselves—our desire for true happiness and our ability to find it. The problem is that we don’t have that much respect for those things. We have the opportunity to find a true happiness and We drop it. We’re interested in something else, something that’s more immediate, because true happiness requires that you work at training the mind. Sometimes it can be a slow process, and sometimes it’s difficult. Then it’s all too easy to just say, “Well, I’ll just drop that and go for something else that’s more immediate.” In other words, the Buddha respects some things in ourselves that we ourselves don’t respect. So it’s time to take a good look at ourselves to see what we can change and how we can change it. A lot of the problem is simply ignorance. And even more basic than that is lack of mindfulness, lack of alertness. Emotion comes up in the mind, and everything in the past suddenly gets thrown away. What the Buddha said is nowhere to be found in the mind at that point. All there is is your desire to do or say or think what suddenly springs up in the mind. So you have to resist that tendency to blot things out. This is one of the reasons why we practice mindfulness of the breathing right here, mindfulness of the body, is that we can learn how to watch the mind as it wanders away. The problem is that you’re here, and then all of a sudden you’re someplace else. And you don’t know how it got there. And when you’re in that someplace else, it’s as if you’ve totally forgotten the fact that you’re here to meditate. You get knocked out for a bit and then suddenly come to your senses. And then when you come to your senses, you have the choice. Are you going to stay in that faraway place, or are you going to come back? When you come back, it’s a good idea to reward yourself for coming back. But at the same time, you have to be firm with yourself and say, “Don’t do that again.” And know, of course, that the mind will do it again. But this time you want to watch for the steps. And the more quickly you catch the mind as it leaves, the more you begin to realize there are several steps in the process of leaving. There’s a little seed that’s planted, and then it gets covered up, and then it begins to grow. And the part of the mind that’s with the breath forgets that the seed was planted. And then the seed grows into a little plant, and then it obscures your awareness and you’re off someplace else. So watch out for the little seeds. These are the ways the mind tricks itself. And when you do have concentration, protect it. In John Lee’s images of having a plate full of good food, you want to make sure the fly flies don’t land on it. The problem is that sometimes we have a plate of good food and we just throw it away. You scatter it all over the place. You’re suddenly off talking to somebody on the other side of the earth. That’s one of the reasons I would rather that people not use their cell phones while they’re here, except for real emergencies. Usually the necessary stuff doesn’t take that much time to talk about. But if you spend the whole day scattering your mind all over the place and then you try to get it gathered together here in the evening, you’re fighting against a habit that you’ve been ingraining in your mind all day long. So it’s going to be harder. So once you get the mind into concentration, try to keep it there. Protect it. Remember that you’ve got something of value in the concentration here. This still mind state may not seem all that intelligent or interesting, but it is solid. So it has the potential to become solid and to lead to something even more solid. So you’ve got to protect it. This is where restraint of the senses is included in the topic of the virtue that supports concentration. We don’t necessarily think of restraint of the senses as a kind of virtue, but it is. The precepts put some restraint on your actions and your words, and restraint of the senses puts some restraint, of course, on your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. If you’re going to go look at something, ask yourself, “Why are you looking and what are the results going to be?” Don’t just go and look at whatever you want, or listen to whatever you want, or smell whatever you want, or taste whatever you want, or touch whatever you want, or just let your mind think whatever you want. Don’t let it come out of your mouth just automatically. You’ve got to have some filters on these things. You’ve got to look at these things, again, in that question of, “What is the long-term result of this going to be? Where is this coming from?” You usually can tell where it’s going to go by where it’s coming from. If it’s coming from greed, aversion, or delusion, fear, or jealousy, it’s not going to take you to a good place. You don’t want these things to be doing your looking for you or your listening for you. You want your mindfulness and alertness to be looking and listening on top of things. Realize that when you act, it has consequences, and you want to keep those consequences in mind. And if you find the mind giving in to the wrong motivations, just stop. Remember, the mind is something you need to protect. The fact that it doesn’t die in the sense that it’s going to be continually aware all through life makes us treat it casually as if it were something that, no matter how badly you mistreat it, it’s going to be okay. I was reading a Western Dharma teacher today saying something about how the Dharma is so resilient that no matter what we do to it, it’s going to come out okay. And so then he just said, “Well, just do whatever you want with it,” which is totally irresponsible. I mean, it can disappear. The same with the goodness of the mind. Awareness is going to be there all the time. It can be obscured and it can head off in all kinds of wrong directions if you don’t take good care of it. It can cause a lot of harm to yourself and other people. So you have to learn how to keep the mind in a restricted area. Of course, it’s going to rebel. The image the Buddha gives us of an elephant that’s been out in the forest and has suddenly been caught and has taken in his tie to a post. It’s going to resist. And so you can’t just give in to it and say, “Well, poor elephant, won’t it let you ride?” You want the elephant to be trained. So you keep the elephant on the post. But you feed it, well, in the old days they used to play flute music for elephants. Talk to your mind in a way that’s encouraging. Feed the mind on the comfort of concentration. But keep it within bounds. Have a sense of how valuable the concentration is. That’s what it means to have respect for concentration. It’s interesting in that verse we chanted just now. The Buddha talks about having respect for the training, which includes virtue, concentration, and discernment. The concentration is already there. But then he goes out and he emphasizes the concentration once more. Because that’s the part that is most immediate and that you have to protect the most. And it’s also the most likely for us to overlook. So whatever concentration you’ve got, whether it’s a little or a lot, protect it. See its value. Have some respect for it. Because, again, as you respect the concentration, it’s directly connected with your respect for yourself and your desire for true happiness. And it’s through mastering this skill that you can find the happiness that you want. So try to keep your mind gathered as you go through the day. Don’t keep scattering it around. Don’t worry when you sit down to meditate, you’ve got something good already that you can work with. You’re not starting from scratch. Every time you sit down, you’re continuing a good run. If you pick up momentum, then you can go far.

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