Fear of Missing Out

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Sometimes, when you sit down to meditate, the whole mind seems ready to settle down. You tell yourself to stay with the breath, and the breath is right there. And nothing seems to be pulling you anyplace else, so you can be very observant of the breath. Think of the breath bathing you on all sides. That’s your horizon. That’s as far as the thoughts seem to go. So you can pay a lot of attention to how the breath feels, how the process of breathing feels in the different parts of the body, so you can settle in fully. Other times, though, the mind is not willing to settle down. Part of it says to settle down, and the other part says, “No, I’m going to go someplace else.” That’s when you have to talk to it. We sometimes think that meditation and meditation involve no thinking. But the Buddha never taught that. As I said, you start out, even in jhana, you’ve got directed thought and evaluation. And the directed thought is aimed at getting you to settle down. You have to think about what kind of thinking would help you settle down right now. Where are your other thoughts going? You need something to counteract them. So it’s going to have to be a dialogue. And you have to get skilled with the dialogue. Otherwise, it gets long and drawn out. Then the skill comes from what? It comes from being willing in the beginning, sometimes, to have some long, drawn-out dialogues to figure out, “Why does the mind want to go there? It’s been to these various places many, many times. Why does it have to go back now? What’s the pull?” Then we need to learn how to recognize the pull for what it is and get past some of the mind’s confusion when it’s lying to itself. Then you can get quicker and more effective. So don’t be afraid to spend some meditation periods just going back and forth like this. This is where it’s good to have some background in the Dhamma and the values of the Dhamma. Not too often meditation, especially mindfulness, is taught as something value-free that anybody with any kind of background or any system of beliefs can come and do it. But to get the best results, it requires a certain attitude, a certain set of values as to what’s really important in life. Otherwise, you get sucked into that old fear of missing out on something. This has become, apparently, a huge issue of people who live online. They’re afraid they’re going to miss out on something. Of course they’re going to miss out on something. You can’t be aware of the entire internet all the time. You can’t see what everybody’s doing. And the internet preys on that fear. When I was in Thailand this last month, someone gave me a smartphone and got me online. It’s a kind of a chat room. I found myself every morning checking lines to see what people’s reactions were to the latest thing that was posted. Then I began to realize, “Why do I need to know this? I’ve lived all these years not knowing this kind of thing.” It’s just that, the fear of missing out. But you have to remind yourself there are so many things out there that are okay to miss out on. What’s more important is the state of your mind right now, because that’s actually creating the world you’re going to experience. And if you can’t control this, then being in touch with everything and being connected with everything is not going to be helpful. It just pulls you away, pulls you away from the center of action, the real center of action, which is what you’re doing and saying and thinking right now. So you need a set of values to remind yourself of that. This is where Right View comes in, to remind you that it is your actions. And where do your actions come from? Your intentions. So it’s what’s actually going on right here, right now, that’s most important. And where are your intentions going? If you can’t control them, it’s like handing the keys to your car over to a crazy person. The crazy person’s going to run off the road or run into somebody. You want someone who’s mindful and alert and has a clear sense of where the road is and where the road is not, and how to drive and how not to drive. That’s what you want in charge of your car, and you want even more in charge of your life, a mind that’s mindful and alert and has a clear sense of what the path is and what the path is not. So a lot of this talking to yourself is developing the right set of attitudes, the right set of values, and being okay with missing out on a lot of things. Because after all, what does the world have to offer? There’s material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. That’s it. That’s what the world has to offer. Is anything in this lasting? No. Is anything reliable? No. Can you take any of this stuff as your real food? A little bit. Not in the deepest sense, though. We tend to nibble on these things. We like material gain and status and praise. But these things turn around, they have their opposite. It goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth like this. And it’s okay to miss out on a lot of that stuff. Whatever stuff does come to you, you try to make good use of it. Material gain comes. How are you going to develop the perfection of generosity around that? Because otherwise it’s going to go. And you have not developed any perfections out of it, there’s not going to be much left. When material loss comes, you can learn a lot of lessons. Who are your real friends? What are your inner resources? It’s when people are poor that they learn how to get ingenious. Similarly, with status and loss of status, when you have status, how can you use that for the common good so it does become part of your perfection? Practicing your character. When loss comes, again, you figure out who your real friends are. When praise comes, you have to realize that people are praising you because they want you to do something. Now, can you trust their motives? In some cases you can, in which case the praise is good. But then it’s not meant to make you feel that you’re good enough already. They’re praising you so you can do better. If you can’t trust the person’s motives, you’ve got to watch out. When I was with Ajahn Fu, he made a point, “If you heard anybody praising me in my presence, I was sure to get lambasted that night, sometimes right in front of the person.” So I became allergic to praise. If people criticize you, you can learn either what your real faults are, or if you look around and what they’re saying about you is not true, you’ve learned something about that person. So there are ways of getting uses out of these things, but we can’t make them the center of our lives. The center of our lives has to be an issue of what our intentions are right now. And when you can think in these ways, it pulls you back. So whatever you’re afraid of missing out on, well, it’s just gain, status, praise, pleasure, news about other people’s gain, status, praise, and pleasure, or their opposites. But how much of that do we really need to know? I mean, you can live your whole life in the adrenaline of a lot of things in the world, and it doesn’t really harm the goodness of your mind. And even when you’re just out walking around, there’s a part of the mind that wants to see this, look at that, afraid of missing out. And you have to remind yourself, “I’ve got something inside here I’ve got to protect.” When the breath gets good and the mind can settle in with the breath, you want to protect that in all circumstances and see that as the most important thing. If you’re going to be afraid of missing out on something, be afraid of missing out on that, missing out on the path, missing out on your ability to protect yourself, protect your own space. So watch out for any thoughts that pull you outside. We tend to think of the world pushing in on us, and to some extent it does. But we’re also there, just ready to receive it, because we’ve bought into a lot of the values of the world. And so when you’re meditating, you have to learn how to buy out. So again, that requires some thought. When you find yourself tempted to go for something that’s not in line with the path, ask yourself, “Why? What are you going to gain out of it?” And the little goody-two-shoes inside will say, “Nothing.” But that doesn’t get down to, “Well, what does the mind actually think it’s going to gain because it’s been doing this? What has it thought in the past?” It’s not simply a matter of imprinting or cloning the Dhamma. You’re trying to dig up where your unskillful thoughts are so you can see them for what they really are, where their motivation is. What they think they’re getting. Because everything the mind does is for the sake of pleasure. There’s just a lot of its ideas about pleasure that are really ignorant. So you’ve got to figure out where the allure is and compare it with the drawbacks until you can see that the allure isn’t worth it. So you’re willing to let go, not letting go just because you’ve been told to. So learning to talk to yourself well is an important part of the meditation. Getting the right set of values. Exploring the parts of the mind that don’t want to meditate to figure out what makes them tick. And to learn to look through a lot of their fears. The fear of missing out on possible pleasures out there. That’s a huge one. All these pleasures out there just waiting to be picked, and if you don’t pick them, someone else is going to, or they just may go unpicked, and it seems like such a shame. You have to realize that the fruit of these things is pretty rotten. Why do you have to pick it? Just leave it there for the world. And the part of the mind that feels deprived, look into that. What is it deprived of? And think of the pleasure that can come when the mind really is settled in. If you haven’t had that pleasure yet, you have to take it on other people’s word. But if you have had that pleasure, keep reminding yourself of it when you find yourself tempted to go someplace else. If you’re sitting down meditating and only thinking about the pleasure you’ve had in the past, that becomes a mistake. Learn when to pull these things out to use them and when to put them back. That way, this talking to yourself becomes part of the meditation. This is where the Buddhist teachings on verbal fabrication, direct thought and evaluation, move into concentration. You’re still talking to yourself in the first jhana. It’s just that you’ve finally gotten so you can talk about one thing, because you’ve had your dialogues and the side that wants to settle down is one. And you’re ready to talk to yourself about the breath and have good conversation. To the point where the breath gets so good that the conversations can trail away, and the mind then can go deeper into concentration, because its thinking has accomplished its purpose. Otherwise, our thinking just goes from one train to another like hobos hopping from one train to the next without ever coming to any location or any goal. Or if you do get off, you find yourself in some pretty miserable places. For this, you follow the thoughts through to the point where you don’t need the thinking anymore because there is a sense of genuine well-being inside, where it matters. That’s where the trains can stop.

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