Your Default Settings

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When you get into a computer or electronic device, you find that it comes with default settings. And if you’re afraid of electronics, you allow yourself simply to live with the default. But if you know something about how these things work, you can change the defaults to something that is more suitable, more usable, more comfortable for you. It takes your fallback as normalcy. And it’s the same with the mind. Each of us is born into the world with certain default settings based on our past karma. The mind, when it settles down, is either provoked by what it likes or by what it dislikes. Some people’s default is pretty blah. Some people’s default is actually unpleasant. Others’ default is more pleasant. And part of the Buddha’s news is that you don’t have to put up with the default. You can adjust it. This is what we do as we meditate. Think of those three forms of fabrication—bodily, verbal, mental. These are the things that in previous lifetimes set our defaults. But now that we’re here meditating, we can work directly on them. Change the default so that our normalcy now is a better one to be in. Look at the breath. That’s bodily fabrication. How are you breathing right now? There are ways you can breathe. Think of a sense of lightness to the body, energy when you need energy, calm when you need calm. So explore for a while. John Lee recommends that you start with some good long breaths. Deep breaths. Allow them to calm the body down, calm the mind down, and then adjust things so they feel just right. In other words, “just right” might mean that you feel a need for a little bit more energy. Other times it means calming things down even further. If deep breaths feel too energizing, I’ll make the breath more shallow. Look at verbal fabrication. How are you talking to yourself about the breath? Being with the breath, of course, is calming, but you have to learn how to evaluate it. This role of adjusting here is something where you have to learn the right touch. Some people, when they adjust the breath, get very aggressive, and they can end up with headaches, backaches, and so on. So try to figure out what kind of adjustment is good, what kind of evaluation is good. It’s best to start with the idea that you simply hold a thought in mind, like longer, deeper, going in here, going out there, opening up the whole torso so there’s no break off between the head and the torso. Then adding the arms and the legs so you’ve got the whole body encompassed. It feels like one single energy field. See what that does. In the course of doing this, of course, you’re engaging in mental fabrication, too. The perceptions that you hold in mind, the image you hold in mind of where the breath can flow or where it should flow, and then, of course, other feelings that come up. And you find you can tap into a feeling of pleasure with the right perceptions, the right evaluation, so that all these forms of fabrication, when you do them with knowledge, can give you a new normalcy. This is your new default. This is the one that you want to protect. The more you understand the workings of fabrication right here, the better. The more you can take advantage of them so that your fallback is good. It’s not simply just a blah, neutral, gray feeling. It’s a real sense of satisfaction. As the Buddha said, when you engage in direct thought and evaluation, there should be a sense not only of ease and pleasure, but also of fullness, rapture, refreshment. You want that to be normalcy for you as well, your default. Then learn how to maintain that as you get up and do a walking meditation. Try to maintain it as best you can as you go through the day. If you find that you’ve lost it and you have a free moment, stop. Try to get back in touch with the breath. Know where your center is, the spot where you feel most at home, and you’re most sensitive to any tensions that come up. They’re well up from the mind and go into the body. Try to release them as best you can. This way you create a new relationship between the body and the mind, and a new normalcy. A normalcy that feels really satisfying, one that really is worth protecting, so that when unpleasant things come up in the course of the day, you know that you want to make sure that your first thought is, “My mind or my heart will not be altered.” The place where you are that you want to keep unaltered is a good place to be, a satisfying place to be. It feels like your home, with a strong sense of well-being. I was reading a passage the other day of someone complaining about having been a meditator, and it turned him into a blogger. He flattened out his emotions and decided that he preferred himself by the ups and downs of his moods, the ups and downs of his thoughts. He presented it as basically an aesthetic choice. It was more enjoyable to take the rollercoaster ride than just the plain flat train ride. But you have to remember that the altered mind is an unreliable mind. We’re not here just for whether we like neutral states better than extreme states. It’s not a matter of aesthetics at all, or pleasures. It’s a moral matter, because the mind, when it’s solid, is a lot more reliable and a lot more harmless. It really is good for you and for the people around you. So if you can make the mind at normal state, a mind where it feels really good to be, you get not only the moral side, but also the aesthetic side, the things that are good for you and taste good, too. Those are the kinds of foods that are easiest to come back to. That’s the kind of food that meditation gives you. When you do it, as the Buddha taught, not simply as a mindfulness exercise or a bear awareness exercise, but as an exercise in fabrication. After all, the whole noble path, from right view on through right concentration, is a fabricated path. It’s something you learn to put together. And you put it together with knowledge. So it does become a path. You’re going to be engaging in fabrication anyhow. But as the Buddha pointed out, if you do that with ignorance, there’s going to be suffering. If you do it with knowledge, it leads away from suffering. So get to know the innards, the workings of your mind, so you can reset the default. The mind has a good place to come back to again and again and again. Ease, rapture, refreshment. You want that to be your normalcy. You want that to be your default. And it’s a default that you’re perfectly free to set. So do your best to figure out how you change the default settings so that your normalcy is good for you and good for the people around you.

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