The Unamusement Park

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One of the first things you learn as you start meditating is how much the mind doesn’t know what it’s doing. You make up your mind to stay here with the breath. And then you don’t know how it happens, but you find yourself someplace else, sometimes after a long time. So you come back to the breath. And you stay here for a little while, then the mind slips off again. It makes you stop and think how much that happens in the course of the day. When you’re not trying to meditate, things come in and take over, especially when a strong emotion comes in, sweeps you along. And sometimes it seems to come out of nowhere. People who study brainwaves say that many times the brain has made a decision before you even know about it. And from that they conclude that you’re not in charge of your thoughts at all. The mind is just a side effect of having a body, or there being a body. But that just shows that people are making decisions on a subconscious level. And for most people, they’re not aware of what’s happening. There’s a slight bit of knowledge, but then we cover it up. And one of the things we do as we meditate is learn how to get quicker and quicker at seeing how the mind is making these subtle decisions. Basically one part of the mind says to another part of the mind, “As soon as the chief is distracted, or as soon as there’s a lapse in mindfulness, we’ll go where we want to go.” And the part of the mind that just waits for the opportunity. And when you have a slight slip of mindfulness, it’s off. It takes over. And you get swept along with it. So there are two problems here. One is not knowing what’s going on on these subtle levels. And the second is that once you’ve gotten swept along by it, train ride like this, you feel that you’re committed. So you have to solve both of those problems. The first one, of course, is solved by trying to be more and more alert to what’s going on. Being alert to the fact that this can happen. Be on the lookout for it. Remember, mindfulness, to get you into concentration, has two activities. One is to focus on say, the body in and of itself. And then the other is to put aside any greed and distress with reverence to the world. Any place in the mind where you detect that, you’ve got to pick it out, kick it out, take it out, whatever verb fits. And be on the lookout. You can’t be trusting that once you’ve got a couple of good breaths going, the mind will be happy to stay here. Because sometimes it’s already made up its mind. As soon as you get a little bit complacent or a little bit heedless, it’s ready to go. So try to be alert for those little decisions that get made. And you find that you’re more and more on top of things. Then there’s the problem. Once you’ve gotten swept along, you feel committed. Mindfulness are like rides in an amusement park. You get on the ride and just go with the ride as long as it’ll take you. But then as you begin to meditate, you begin to realize these amusement rides are not all that amusing after all. Especially the ones you go over again and again and again. It’s like those amusement parks that are kind of run down. And it turns out that Jack Nicholson is running the park. So the rides can get pretty vicious sometimes. It starts out as a fun ride, and then it turns. As you get older, the rides get more clackety. And you get more and more limited to the number of rides you can go on. And you begin to realize this is the amusement park from hell. So you have to have the knowledge that you are not committed to these rides just because they sweep you along a little bit. It doesn’t mean that if they’re going so fast that you would get hurt by jumping out. Think of that riddle they tell. You’re dreaming that you’re in a boat. There’s one evil guy in the boat who has a gun. The other people on the boat are the living members of your family. And the evil guy asks you, “Okay, which member of the family do you want me to kill?” “At least one of them.” And you say, “Well, go ahead and kill me.” And he says, “No. If I kill you, I’m going to kill everybody. You have to tell me which one to kill.” The question is, what do you do? You wake up. After all, it’s just a dream. So you have to remind yourself of these trains of thought that the mind gets into, especially when they’re fired by greed or anger, fear, jealousy. They’re just states of becoming in the mind. And when you’ve gotten into one, you’re not committed to stay there. You can step out. This is the whole purpose of the Buddhist description of this-that conditionality. It sounds like a very abstract principle, but it’s really very simple. And the upshot of it is that even though events from the past may have an influence on the present moment, they don’t totally shape the present moment. You have a say. You have some choices. And it’s always possible to do the skillful thing. It may involve some difficulty. It may involve some sacrifices. But there is a skillful choice, and you can do it. That’s not too much to keep in mind. You have the choice to step out. So you begin to realize that these amusement rides aren’t very un-amusing. You’re in an un-amusement park. You’ve got to remind yourself, the way they get started is in your mind. And they picked up the force of habit, and that’s all it is. It’s the force of habit. We tell ourselves, “Well, this must be what I really think, because it’s coming on so strong.” Well, yeah, you think it. But it’s just a habit, just fabrication. Your true nature is not good or bad. The Buddha very rarely talks about true nature at all. He mentions how much the mind is capable of anything. He says, “Look at the animal kingdom. All the different kinds of animals, from the little bugs all the way up to the whales.” He says, “That comes from the mind.” Like that story in “Whence the Future Came,” where the badger tells the story of creation, where God creates little embryos and gives them choices as to what tools they want to turn their bodies into. You look at the animal kingdom, and there are some pretty wild choices. It all comes out of the mind. And so your mind is capable of anything, too. So why don’t you make it capable of something good? Why let it be stuck in its old bad habits? That’s another point that the Buddha makes. The mind is very quick to reverse itself. In fact, it’s so quick that even he, a master of similes, couldn’t think of a simile that could convey how really fast it can to turn its direction around. A lot of times that’s a bad thing. You get started on a good project and suddenly you destroy it. And this happens again and again and again. But you can turn it around. You suddenly find yourself going down the amusement ride of greed or the amusement ride of anger. And you realize it’s going to take you to a bad end. You can change directions. You can reverse. Why is it that we feel so committed to our unskillful habits, but so hard to commit to our good habits? It’s because the mind likes to lie to itself. It will give itself all kinds of false reasons. Once you got started on this train of thought, you’ve got to stick on it, stay on it all the way to the bitter end. That’s what it tells you. But why believe it? Wake up. Get out of the bad dream. The Buddha’s giving you something more skillful to fabricate here. The breath coming in, going out. You start directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath so it feels good. You’re ardent, alert, mindful, keeping watch over what you’re doing. Use perceptions to help you stay here. Use the feeling of ease to make it attractive to stay here. This is a good use of your ability to shape the present moment. It may not seem quite so natural yet, but with time any habit can seem natural. So work on developing some good ones. As for the bad ones, tell yourself, “I may have thought those things in the past may be habitual, but I don’t have to keep doing these things. I’m not committed. And it’s not really me. I’ve taken it on as my identity, but I can always change my identity.” Let your mind be a shapeshifter and wiggle out of whatever the ride is. Years back my older brother and I were talking with a German woman who was interested in what it was like to be a little kid growing up on a farm in America. And I happened to mention the fact that basically my older brother and I were basically played hunter and hunted. I was the hunted all the time. Whether it was cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians, I was always the one being chased. And he said his main memory of me was that I was able to slip out, slip away very easily. He’d have me pinned down to the ground and I was able to wiggle out. That’s why I’m still alive. So have that same attitude toward the thoughts that come in and take over. They may seem to have you pinned down, strapped into your seat on this unamusement ride, but you can wiggle out. And it’s a habit to be developed, a good one. So you don’t have to keep going around and around and around on these unamusement rides. And you have a chance to get free.

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