

## *Train Hopping*

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Normally we spend our lives like hobos, hopping from one train of thought to another. We can cover a lot of ground, just as trains can go all over the country. But can you imagine what it would be like if you spent all your life just on trains? You'd never really arrive anywhere in particular and you'd get very strange ideas about reality in the meantime. Mountain ranges would move. Houses would move. You'd watch them move past and you'd think that there's no really stable place at all in the world, because everything seems to run past, rocking back and forth, back and forth. If you really wanted to understand anything, you'd have to get off the trains.

This is why we meditate. This is why we focus on the breath, to give you some place to stay inside this combination of body and mind that's a little bit outside of the mind. That allows you to get some perspective on your thinking. Even though you may still be thinking about something—you are thinking about the breath—at least the thinking stays in one place. And you've got a point of reference. You can focus on any spot in the body. As soon as you feel solid and secure in that spot, then you can spread your awareness to fill the whole body.

This is useful in a lot of ways. To begin with, the mind doesn't like to be constricted. This is one of the reasons it likes to hop trains. If it stays with one train of thought for a while, that gets boring or unpleasant or whatever, so it hops on to another one. It doesn't like where it is, but it doesn't necessarily like where it's going, either. It just doesn't like to be hemmed in by any particular train of thought.

But here you have an alternative way of not being hemmed in. You can fill the whole body with your awareness. Stay at one point as your primary focus, but be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, in the same way you'd look at a picture. Your eyes are focused on one spot in the picture, but you can see the whole picture. Try to see the whole picture the body; inhabit the whole body. One of the advantages of whole-body awareness is that it makes you too big to hop on any trains. Trains go right through. As long as your awareness is enlarged like this, you can't hop onto any of them. You see them, you can watch them come and go, but only if you make your awareness really small can you jump onto them.

So try to keep your frame of a reference as large as possible. In this way, you can observe the trains of thought from outside. In other words, instead of looking

at them in terms of their content, you look at them simply as events in the mind. How does a thought form? At what point do you get interested? And when you get interested, what happens? What are the steps that lead you to suddenly finding yourself inside the train, going off in a whole different frame of reference?

The first step in seeing these things is learning how to pull yourself out of trains of thought as soon as you can when you suddenly find yourself sucked in somehow. There are lots of ways of doing this. You can simply note that “Hey, this is a thought.” Just that much can be enough to get you out. “Why do you have to think this?” Sometimes just that much is enough to get you out. You’ve got something better to think about.

Or you think about the drawbacks of the thought. Once you’ve noticed that “Hey, this is a thought,” and you find yourself pulled back again and again, you have to remind yourself, “Why would I *not* want to think about this thought? Why would I not want to inhabit this thought?” Try to look at it and see what kind of thought it is. It may be a voice in the mind. Do you believe what that voice says? Why would you believe what that voice says? Because at some point in your past somebody said something with authority and you believed them. It may be that they were worth believing at the time, but you don’t have to believe them now. Or see if you can identify the particular defilement that’s fueling that thought. It maybe greed. Look at greed. What does greed lead to? All the corruption that we hate in the world comes from greed. If you don’t like it in other people, why do you want to let it take over your own actions?

Or lust. We tend to really like lust. But remember, all kinds of horrible things happen as a result of lust. Most murders happen between people who’ve had sex with each other in the past. If lust were really good, why would that happen?

Then there’s fear. Remind yourself, fear can make people do all kinds of evil things. Again, all you have to do is look in the newspapers. People are promoting fear, trying to make other people afraid so that they’d be happy to do stupid things, do things they wouldn’t do in their right minds if they were in their right minds.

When you can see the drawbacks of these different thoughts, remind yourself, “If I give in to that thought, I’m giving in to these things as well. Do I really want to go there?” Often that question can help pull you out from there.

Then there are the traditional meditations on these topics. When there’s lust, you can think about the different parts of the body. Exactly which part of the body are you lusting for? The liver? The lungs? Some people complain about this meditation of taking the body apart and contemplating its parts, saying that it leads to a negative body image. Well, there are times when it’s healthy to have a

negative body image. The unhealthy negative body image is when you tell yourself that you have the only ugly body in the world, and all these other people have beautiful bodies. But even the beautiful bodies that are promoted in all the pictures in the newspapers and magazines and movies and TV: What are their livers like? What are their lungs like? What are their intestines like? This meditation reduces everyone all to the same level.

So when you see that lust has drawbacks, you realize that this is a good way of counteracting it.

When your thoughts are motivated by anger, look at all the harm that anger does in the world. And when you're angry, who's suffering right now from your anger? You are. Do you want to suffer from that? Do you really wish yourself ill, that you're willing to waste so much of your life giving in to anger and then doing the stupid things that people tend to do under the power of anger?

As the Buddha says at one point, when you act under the power of anger, you're often doing precisely what your enemy is happy to see you do. You look ugly when you're angry and you do stupid things. You destroy your belongings sometimes, or you destroy other people's belongings and get fined for that. You destroy friendships. You get confused as to what is really in your own best interest. On a very shallow level, you can simply say, "Do I want to give my enemy the satisfaction of seeing me do that?" On a deeper level, you can say, "Why do I want to destroy myself? Don't I have any goodwill for myself?" Then, when you can begin to develop some thoughts of goodwill for yourself, you can begin to think about having goodwill for the person you're angry at. Especially if the person is close to you, you don't want to focus on that person's negative points all the time. It's bad for the relationship.

The Buddha gives an interesting analogy for when you're dealing with people who do or say or think things about you that you don't like. He says it's as if you're walking across a desert—hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You come across a little puddle of water in a cow's footprint. Now, you realize that if you put your hand into the footprint to scoop up the water to drink, you'd get the water all muddy. So you very carefully lean down and suck up the water with your mouth. It may not look dignified, but it's what you've got to do.

The image here points to the fact that we don't have so much leisure time and well-being that we can just sit around and very casually entertain ourselves with thoughts about why we don't like other people. We're walking across a desert. We're hot and tired and trembling with thirst. We need the goodness of other people as our water, our nourishment. So try to find whatever nourishment you

can get out of other people in terms of their good words, their good deeds, and learn not to focus on their negative actions.

This doesn't mean that you don't admit that they do negative things, that you deny those things, or that if they're really doing something harmful you're not going to work to change it. But you don't want to work for change under the power of anger. You want to change someone else's behavior? Try to have goodwill toward that person. It'll be a lot easier to change their behavior than if you hate them.

So these are some ways of looking at the drawbacks of your trains of thought, so as to pull yourself out.

The Buddha gives other ways as well. One is simply consciously to ignore that train of thought. You're sitting here with your full-body awareness. The trains of thought can go through and you don't have to focus on them. Focus on the body side of your awareness and keep that as comfortable as possible. There will be these little thought trains going through like the cosmic rays that go through the Earth and don't run into anything. They go right between the atoms. Think of your awareness as having lots of atoms with lots of space in between, and thoughts can go right through the atoms. You don't have to catch them. You don't have to inspect them. You don't have to get involved with them at all.

Or if you really are sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you'll begin to notice any time a thought forms that there will be some tension in part of the body. If you notice where it is—in your leg, in your arm, in your elbow, in your stomach, whatever—just consciously breathe into that spot, relax it. The thought won't have a place to stand and so will go away.

Or if you still find yourself really obsessed with a particular kind of thinking, then, as the Buddha says, grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and make up your mind to crush your mind with your mind. In other words, you make up your mind that you will not go there. You won't think those thoughts. Just keep that idea in mind. That's the method that requires the most force. But think of it as one of your tools. You may need a sledgehammer sometime, so keep a sledgehammer in your set of tools just in case. You don't have to use it all the time.

Then again, your choice of tools is not based on which tools you *like* to use. It's based on which tools work for a particular job. If you're a carpenter who has a real fondness for hammers, and no matter what comes up in the house, you attack it with a hammer, it's not going to work. You end up smashing things that you actually should be using, say, a screwdriver for, or a chisel. So you use whichever tools works so as to maintain this enlarged sense of awareness.

When the mind can settle down, you really see things for what they actually are, like the hobo who finally jumps off the train when it stops and then looks around and says, “Oh, this is what life is like when you’re not on trains. Things look very different.” You can be a lot more picky about which trains you hop on to next when you actually need to, because now you have the skill of knowing how to hop off whenever you need to. And you find there are a lot of good things around you in the world. There’s a lot of a food, a lot of shelter, all kinds of good things when you stay off the trains.

So you make an enlarged awareness of the breath your home. You can travel on the trains when you need to, but you’ve got a good solid home where you can stay when you don’t need to go anywhere. You’re no longer a slave to the erratic schedules of the trains. You’re in charge of where you want to go, and you have a good place to come back when you need it. That puts you in a much better position. You find that you learn and know for yourself a lot more.