Second Wind

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If you’ve ever walked or hiked for a long distance, you may have had the experience where you start out and you begin to run out of steam. But you’re determined to keep on going. And suddenly you catch your second wind. The body adjusts and you can go for a much longer distance than you thought you could have. The meditation can be like that too. You start out and get the mind to settle down. And after a while, after it’s been quiet, peaceful for a while, it begins to unravel. Though it is possible to give up right then and say, “Well, that’s as far as my concentration goes.” Or you could remind yourself that you’re not here just to rest. You’re here to understand your mind. And by sticking with the concentration, you’re going to learn about it. In the beginning, you’re going to learn how things fall apart. But then you begin to get a sense of what you can do to keep things going. And part of it is just that, reminding yourself you’re here to understand, not just to rest. So try to take an interest in what’s coming in to disturb the mind at that point. A thought may come in and say, “This is boring.” Or another thought may come in and say, “I’m running out of steam.” But then you have to remind yourself to think that other thoughts also require energy. And put it back into the concentration. One way you can do that is to get interested in what’s going on right now as the mind is sitting here. The body is sitting here. They’re sitting together. What keeps them together? There’s got to be some mindfulness. In other words, you keep reminding yourself, “Stay right here. Stay right here.” There has to be that message that gets passed on from breath to breath to breath. And sometimes the unraveling happens because the messages have stopped. You’ve forgotten. So be very careful to remind yourself. And be alert when there’s a little stirring in the mind. Actually, you’re going to be learning about how distraction happens. So don’t go into the distraction. Don’t go into the stirring. Step back from it. Watch it. That’s how distraction begins. And where did the Buddha learn all about clinging, and craving, and becoming? All those factors, independent arising, came from watching what was going on in his mind as he was trying to keep it in concentration. And there were other things that would come up. How would they get put together? You may not have the sophistication and the precision of his vocabulary, but you can notice for yourself how a little world appears in your mind based on some desire. And then you go into that world. You allow the world to form and then not go into it. And see what happens. When you go into it, it’s like blowing a bubble and then getting inside the bubble and traveling with it. And then it’s going to pop someplace, and you drop down. You’re off someplace else. But here you can watch the bubble go away. And when you don’t go with it, it doesn’t go very far. Then you find that the framework of your concentration is still there. This is why it’s so important that your concentration be a full body awareness. That’s one of the things you can work on to make sure you don’t go floating away. Is there any part of the body that you’re not fully conscious of? You might take a survey. Make a very detailed survey down to the spaces between your fingers, the spaces between your toes, all the little muscles in your face. Don’t be fully aware of every square inch. Think of every cell breathing in, breathing out together. It grounds you more firmly. That’s one way of catching your second wind. Another way is to ask questions. I’ve been going through the Canon, trying to find all the passages where people gain Awakening while listening to the Buddha, or one of his disciples give a Dharma talk. And it’s amazing how many of those talks are in the form of questions. Trying to get the listener to look into his or her mind from a different perspective. They can play with the perceptions that are holding you here right now. One way of perceiving the breath is most helpful for staying here. You can perceive it as coming in from the outside. In which case you might want to think of it coming in and out through all the pores. Or you can perceive it as starting inside. You might want to have it start one spot or two spots. Think of one spot in the head, another spot side down. Down at the base of the spine, or down at the soles of your feet. And think of a line connecting all those spots. Think of the breath coming in and out of that line. What does that perception do? Or you can ask yourself about front and back. Sometimes a pain will come up located in your stomach, say, or in your chest. In the front. You can ask yourself, what if that’s actually a pain that’s in the back? And how would that relate to your sensations of the back, if it were? And your sense of the mind looking in a certain direction. It has that sense because the body is looking in a certain direction, your eyes are focused out front. But does your mind have to be focused out front? Does it have a front? Does it have a back? Can you think of it looking out in all directions? One of the epithets of the Buddha was the all-around eye. It has a lot of meanings, but this is one of them. This mind was in concentration, it was not focused just in one direction, it was focused in all directions. Aware in all directions. As you play with this, you begin to see how you put things together in the present moment. And you begin to ask questions about it. Do they have to be put together in that way? When you’re dealing with pains, it’s especially useful. Because ordinarily, when we’re dealing with the pain, we want to know precisely where the pain is so we can have a sense of what’s going wrong where in the body. But when you’re sitting here meditating, you don’t need to know. You just need to know where the pain is. So you can ask yourself, “Is it really where I think it is? Or could it be someplace else?” In other words, start asking questions about what’s going on. There’s a famous Zen teacher who taught what was called “Just Sitting,” Dogen. And some people think that’s all he meant, just sit there. But actually, there’s a passage where he talks about, well, what is going on as you sit? Is the body sitting in the mind? Is the mind sitting in the body? Where is your mind in relationship to the body right now? In other words, be curious of what’s going on right here, right now. Begin to take things apart so you can see how you put it all together. Because what we’re doing is we drift off in other places to create a little state of becoming. And you might ask yourself, what the Buddha says, what goes into becoming, what clinging starts the becoming. So you might decide, “I want to see what I’m clinging to right now.” You can cling either to sensuality, you can cling to habits and practices, you can cling to views, you can cling to your sense of self. Those are all the raw materials for becoming. The views are the world of the becoming. You sense yourself as you in that world. And habits and practices have to do with how did that world function. There may be too much to see these things as they form around a distraction, but they’re very much there as you create a state of concentration. You’ve got the body here that you’re trying to inhabit as the world. You can be curious about the spotting, as I said, you can ask different questions about the perceptions of the breath, of pain, of front and back. And you want to create a sense of well-being. The Buddha says there is the potential for rapture here, there is the potential for ease and pleasure. Where is that potential? Where are those potentials? And how do you develop them? And John Lee gives a lot of recommendations for dealing with the breath. You can take those as a jumping-off spot, and then come up with some observations and questions of your own. Because after all, you do want to make this your meditation, your concentration, so that you understand your mind. And then secondly, where are you in the body? Right now. And to what extent can you control things? How do you control things? Some people, when we talk about adjusting the breath, get very tight. And it’s better to think of allowing things to happen, allowing things to dissolve, allowing blockages to dissolve. Allowing patterns of tension to dissolve. Make that part of your skill set as the identity you’re taking on here. When you come to the body and the breath and the mind with these questions, you find that you can go for a long distance, much longer than if you just want to rest for a bit. And then when you have a sense, well, I’ve had enough rest, what can I do? What can I do now? Remember, what you can do now is to try to understand the mind as it’s in concentration. So whatever is needed to maintain that concentration. And often it’ll be a sense of interest. Boredom is what kills concentration. So start thinking about questions you can ask about what’s happening right here, right now, as the mind tries to settle down, as your awareness tries to fill the body. As you want to get the breath to fill the body, a sense of ease to fill the body. How do you do that? Take an interest. That’s what allows you to become a long distance meditator.

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