

Mindstorms

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There's a part of the mind that's just aware. No matter what else comes into the mind – greed, anger, delusion, despair, depression, regret, or fear – it's just *part* of the mind. There's also another part that's just aware of these things, but it tends to get blocked out when strong emotions come in. Still, it's always there, like the hum of the refrigerator always there in the background. Or maybe a better analogy would be the hum of the Big Bang, the deep B-flat that's still detectable from all directions all the time.

One of the tricks of the meditation is learning to get in touch with that part of the mind, not to regard it as something exotic, but to have it as the background state of mind, the basis of your conscious awareness. This requires a shift of your center of gravity, because for the most part we tend to live in our emotions, in our creations, in the little worlds we create for ourselves. But as the Buddha pointed out, there's a lot of suffering in those worlds. They all require effort to keep them going. They have to feed off of something. When the Buddha says that becoming is conditioned by clinging, the word "clinging" can also mean feeding or the act of taking sustenance. And the sustenance is the passion of desire – the desire that makes us create these worlds, that pulls us into these worlds, and impels us to take them as far as they can go. There's always an act of feeding going on – and it's stressful.

So you've got to learn how to get out of those little worlds you've created for yourself. Otherwise you can create huge emotional storms that can blow you away. People talk about sitting and meditating and being blown away to the point where they can't even sit anymore, but if you actually look at the wind from the outside, there's no physical wind blowing them off the seat. It's just that they let these emotional storms get blown up in the mind and they put themselves *in* the storms, so of course they're going to get blown around. What's important to remember is that there's always an awareness surrounding the storms. If you can place your center of gravity in that awareness, you don't get blown away.

It's not that difficult to get out of the storms if you can observe them as they arise, as they're just beginning, but they're hard to extract yourself from if they're already full-blown. So you need to learn how to change your center of gravity in advance and keep it changed. Otherwise the secondary storms – the ones that blow in on the tail of the first storm – can catch you off guard. One of the problems is the impatience that blows up as a separate storm. You get impatient: When are these storms going to go away? And then you place yourself in that second storm, the impatient storm, and that can blow you away as well. Or you

can get swept up in a storm of boredom. A lot of these secondary storms are the ones that throw mediators off balance, so you have to watch out for them. Remember that there's a space around those storms as well. You have to learn how to watch those from the outside, too.

A great deal of the commentary going on in the mind is just this sort of thing: You pull yourself out of the storms whirling around events from the past or future, but then you let yourself get caught up in storms of the present. When these things come up – regret or impatience or whatever – just watch them. They may seem awfully powerful and awfully real, but you can learn to question their reality. Remember that although there may be a reality to these things, it's a created reality – false, artificial. It's something you're creating right now, and you may not even be aware of what you're doing.

Back when I was younger I use to like to write fiction. Basically what a fiction writer does is to inhabit a little mental world, exploring what it feels like from inside. The more real you can make that world to yourself, the better the story when you write it down. What's uncanny about these worlds is that sometimes a character you create can surprise you. The more real the character becomes in your mind, the more it can start doing unexpected things. When that happens, you start thinking: "Maybe this character has its own reality," but it's actually a figment of your own imagination. The reason these characters can surprise you is the same reason that you get surprised by things coming into the mind in normal world-creating thoughts. You're so oblivious to what you're doing that it can actually surprise you. That's when these thoughts begin to seem very real, to have an independent existence. What's happened, though, is that the part of your mind creating them is behind a wall, separated from the part that's watching them. That's why they can take unexpected turns.

This is why we have to get the mind really, really quiet – both so that we can get closer and closer to the part of the mind that simply observes, and to get clearer about where these fabrications are coming from. When you can see that second part in operation, it offers no surprises. And when you get to the point where fabrications offer no surprises, you start getting disenchanted with them. You see them for all their artificiality. You can begin to pull yourself out of their worlds more and more consistently.

So whatever storms come brewing up in the mind, remember: It's just an event in your awareness, and there's an awareness surrounding it, outside of the storm. Learn how to give more weight to that awareness than to the storms. If you're going to identify with anything – and it's natural that we do identify with things all along the path – learn how to identify with that very still awareness. It may not seem very intelligent, very creative, but it's your salvation. It's what you can hold onto that'll keep you from getting blown away.

How many times have you seen people who are very clever, very imaginative, very creative, and then something takes on an independent life in their minds and they can actually end up killing themselves, simply because of their thought-

creations. They find themselves pushed into all sorts of weird and self-destructive behavior simply because they can't let go of particular thought-worlds in their minds.

So for the survival of all that's good and worthwhile in your own mind, you've got to learn how to step out of these things, realizing that although that simple awareness may not seem interesting or clever, it's your real friend. And there's a wisdom in learning how to stay there and watch, watch, watch, not to be impatient to get results, not to be impatient to see how things turn out. Learn how to be more stable in that watching, because the stability is what will allow you to see very subtle things, to see the tricks the mind plays on itself, the places where it pulls the curtain down or throws up walls to maintain its illusions. Your steady gaze is what's going to enable you to see through those illusions.

In the early stages of the meditation, that basic watcher — the observer — may seem as unstable and as fragile as any of the other worlds you might create. But as you get more and more used to placing your center of gravity here, you find that it's a lot easier to stay here than to keep creating those other worlds. This awareness, too, is a kind of world, and there will come a point where you have to take it apart, but in the mean time, this is the most stable world at your disposal. Over time, your center of gravity can begin to shift more and more in this direction. Once it's here, the qualities of stability and patience and endurance come a lot easier, and you come to value them more. Although they themselves may not seem all that surprising or entertaining, they do allow you to find out some very surprising things about the mind. In particular, you learn how to see through this process of creation. Where do these worlds come from? This is how the Buddha discovered dependent co-arising, by just watching very patiently, putting himself in a position where he didn't get blown away.

It's like really good scholarship. Everyone wants to get in on the dialogue of common scholarly assumptions and show that, yes, they can engage in that dialogue as well. But the people who say, "Well, stop. Wait a minute. These questions don't make sense. Something's wrong here": Those are the ones who bring a real advance in knowledge. When you step back to get out of a particular dialogue, you begin to see its underlying assumptions for what they are.

The same thing goes on in the mind. There are little signals and signs that the mind sends to itself, and you feel clever in catching their meaning: "Yes, I understand that signal, I understand that sign, I'll play along with that." And then you get sucked into the world of those signals and signs. But it takes real understanding not to get sucked in by the signals, to step out of the worlds that those signals create.

Ajaan Suwat once said that one of his greatest insights in meditation was seeing how the mind liked to play make-believe with itself. You have these little internal signals and agreements — "Well, this is this and that's that" — and suddenly there's a whole world of becoming, just because you thought you were

clever in interpreting and catching on to the signs. So sometimes it's good to play dumb, to say, "I don't understand this, this doesn't make sense." And step back. That right there is a lot of the practice.