

Don't Scratch

Alan Zundel speaking at the HeartAwake Center, Oct. 11th 2007

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Okay. So people often become attracted to meditation and spiritual practices because they're looking for something, a state of mind. They could express it either in the simplest sense of wanting to have more calmness or peace of mind, or they could put a name on what they're seeking that's more elaborate, like 'enlightenment' or 'union with God' or something like this—something that's a little harder to envision, makes the aspiration seem a little more far-reaching.

And I think the tendency often is to think, 'Well, I'm *here* in my usual self, and what I'm looking for is something that's very different, that is in some way almost not even a part of me; it's so different that I'll become a different person.' And while that's true, the metaphors used usually are more of a finding within yourself what's already there. So the question becomes, if it's already there, why doesn't it seem to be there?

Now have you ever noticed—for one thing, say you've got some irritated skin, like some dry skin, and it itches. You scratch it, it itches more, right? But if you get distracted, like if you get active doing something, or listening to music or watching television or reading a book or something, that itch pretty much goes away. I mean, as far as you can tell, because when you're not paying attention to it, you're not experiencing an itch. And then you might put down your book or turn off the television or end whatever it is you're doing, and then suddenly you remember you've got dry skin and the itch comes back and it's there again, right? But where was that itch during that period when you were distracted? Did it exist? What is it when it's there, that it could not be when you're not paying attention to it?

In a similar way, when we experience maybe being in a down state of mind about something, maybe we're anxious about something, or just feeling the sadness of life, or even upset about something—that mood can attract all kind of thoughts. I'm anxious, so I think of all the things that could go wrong, or I think of all the things that stand between me and what I'm trying to achieve or where I'm trying to get to, and what else can go wrong, and what else *has* gone wrong in the past, and why do all these things happen to me and that kind of stuff; it attracts these kind of thoughts, right?

Or if you're feeling down you start thinking about all the sad things in the world, all the things in your life that have happened badly, and you think life is really hard, or, you know, I'm a sad sack of a person, or a loser of some kind, because, you know, I keep coming back to this place where things just seem so bad for me. Or same thing when you're upset, you know, it's easy to perpetuate that mood by thinking about more things that get you upset, thinking about things in a way that's calculated to make you even more upset. And it attracts those kind of things.

This is similar to scratching the itch. You scratch the itch, it becomes worse; you get into a kind of a mood, and you start scratching it, in effect, by collecting thoughts that are guaranteed

to—what?—stimulate the perception of that mood, and it's a perpetuating of the attention on that state of mind. Again, I think very often, when we're experiencing a state of mind like that and we get distracted—say somebody comes into the room and you start having a conversation—you forget for a moment what you were feeling, what you were thinking about. Or a phone call happens, or you go for a walk even, or it could be any one of a number of things, that your attention gets distracted from that mood and during that time when you're distracted you could feel fine. Life seems—everything's okay, everything, you know—life seems peachy. And you don't have that same experience, right?

But then once that distraction is over—you finish doing what you were doing, or the person who was taking your attention leaves, or whatever it was stops—you could remember that bad mood and start perpetuating the feeling all over again; you could summon it up. And it's, I think, very common when we do that, when we have that state of mind that's unpleasant and then there's an interruption and then we bring it back—it's very common to be in that state of mind and think, you know, 'It was just under the surface here and I got distracted, so, yeah, it was there the whole time.' When it's here, it feels like it's part of yourself and it must have been there somewhere—and yet you hadn't experienced it. 'That just means I was distracted for a moment, but now that I'm feeling again, yeah, the world is a hard place and I'm upset about it,' or 'I really do have something worth being anxious about because this is not going the way it should, and I just forgot about it for a moment but, yeah, that is the *truth*.' And it seems very real to you. Yet in those moments when you weren't perceiving that, where was it? *Where was it?*

Same thing with the search for peace of mind or greater calmness, and even the search for enlightenment or the search for a deeper experience of God. When we're in a particular state of mind where we're thinking there's something that we're missing, we tend to scratch that itch. We think it's out of reach and we have to do something really esoteric—meditate hard, pray harder, study, change something radically about the person we are—in order to experience that more deeply or more consistently. Yet this very act of focusing on our supposed distance from God, or our unenlightened state, or our not-calm state—that is scratching that itch, that is perpetuating the state of mind where it feels so far away, where it feels like I'm really this miserable person, I'm really this person who's never going to 'get it.' I'm the one person in the world who, everybody else will find it, but I'll still be wondering to the end of my days what it was I was missing. You scratch that itch by perpetuating that state of mind.

Yet once again, if you get distracted—say someone you love, a grandchild, comes into the room and you start playing with them—everything's fine, you know. It can go away entirely; you can forget that you had this great longing to become closer to God or to know what it means to be enlightened. You can go gardening or something you like—I don't know what it might be, bicycling, some people like to go for walks outdoors, or listen to music—and during that time you're doing something, that itch of wanting this different state of mind isn't there. So where is it?

So what I'm suggesting is that what people are really looking for is just not scratching the itches. Now they come up, and it's really tempting to scratch; that's your automatic response to an itch is to want to scratch it. You learn from experience that scratching an itch makes it worse,

and so you learn to discipline yourself not to scratch, right? And it'll go away and it'll be easier to get distracted and then it just doesn't bother you. And you tell children when they're scratching an itch, 'Don't do that,' because it'll make it worse, right? So you learn from experience. And it's the same thing with these states of mind; you learn from experience if you watch them, if you start to pay attention, that you can perpetuate them by the way you move yourself into them.

And it's a scratching; it's a scratching by moving into it and feeding it. Why is my life so anxious? Because when I start to feel anxious I scratch it, and I think of things that will make me anxious. Why is it that God seems so far away? Because when I have this thought or this mood that God's far away from me, I scratch that itch by thinking about how my life has been such a long search and quest and I've never found God, and on and on. But really what we're looking for, I really believe, is just to have this state of mind where these things come up and we don't scratch the itch and they become transparent to us and they drop away of their own accord.

The biggest itch that we scratch is our own sense of being a particular person, a particular individual. We have identities, and those identities are composed of all these different itches that we like to scratch—memories of our history, very selective because we want to string it into a story of who we are; particular traits that we like to scratch and perpetuate—and we've got this bundle of stuff that is to us who we are, who we're familiar with as *us*, of whom we would say, 'This is my personality, these are my characteristics.' But really what it is, is a bunch of stuff in our minds that we like to scratch.

So as you start to see these things, and you stop scratching them, they start to fall away. They become more and more transparent, to the point where they can be there and not there, if that makes any sense. Maybe another metaphor for that—okay, we had a dog. And when Marianne, my wife, would walk into a room and sit down, the dog would come up to her, stick its nose under her hand, and keep bugging her until the dog got petted. When I came into the room and sat down, the dog would look, and it'd lay down again. Now why was that? Because she pet the dog consistently! [*laughs*] And the dog learned that she's going to get petted so she bugged her. And I think it's the same way.

[*Voice:*] Behavior was reinforced.

That's right. It's habit. Our body is a habit-forming machine; that's how we learn to ride bicycles and do complex tasks—sewing, writing, all this stuff. We practice it until our body remembers it. And our mind is the same way; you know, it's brain functions. We perpetuate moods, we perpetuate memories, by bringing them back and practicing them. And if they come back and you don't rehearse it and you say, 'Oh well, there's that memory, there's that thought; there it is again, but I don't have to go into it, I don't have to scratch it; okay, let's just go on to something else.' Eventually that habit becomes less strong, right?

Now, you'll always remember how to ride a bike. So it's not like your personality disappears and you can't ever function as a person in society any more. [*laughs*] You always remember how to do it, but the thing is, if you don't feel like riding a bike you don't have to. You can go through the rest of your life not riding a bike if you don't like riding bikes, right?

So if you don't like your anxious moods, you don't like your moods of being upset at the world, you don't like your moods of feeling sad about things, or you don't like feeling like you're on an endless quest for something else 'out there'—it's a matter of not scratching those itches, until they start to drop away.

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