

Same Old Seat

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, March 13th 2007

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When I was a college student, I'd go into a classroom on the first day of class and I'd look around and I'd pick out a seat to sit in. And then for the rest of the semester I'd pretty much just walk in and go to the same seat, week after week, class session after class session—that seat or someplace near to it. And if I would walk into the class and somebody would be sitting in 'my' seat, I'd be a little discombobulated, because you'd kind of stop for a minute and feel like, 'Oh now I've got to choose another seat.'

So when I became a college professor, I began to notice this even more so. Standing in front of the class, you see all these student who are—there's no assigned seating but they've all chosen particular areas of the class that they sit in week after week, for the most part. Occasionally you see a little movement, shuffling around, but usually some people prefer the front seats, some people prefer the middle seats, and some people prefer the back seats.

And I got to think there was a pattern here, like the students in the front were the ones who were really interested in the topic of the class or the real eager beavers who were out to get an A. They wanted to be sure that they were right there where they could look at me and hear every pearl of wisdom as it dropped from my lips. [*laughs*] The ones in the middle were a little more ambivalent about it, a little less likely to chime in during class discussions. The ones in the back were the ones who seemed like they didn't really want to be there, you know—they were taking the class because it was a required class, or for whatever reason it was the only class they could fit into their schedule, or they were not that thrilled to be there, or they were kind of the rebels who felt that college was Mickey Mouse and weren't sure why they were there and just sat in the back to kind of say, 'Well, I'm here, but I'm not really *all* here'—making some kind of a statement.

Anyway, I think there were reasons why different people chose different parts of the classroom to go to week after week—

[*Voice:*] Were those assumptions or observations, Alan?

Ah, I think a little of each. Some of them are assumptions, some of them you notice higher-grade students tend to sit close to the front. Not all of them, of course, not a hard and fast rule, but generally speaking.

So—your mind is like a classroom. And the tendency is to find a favorite place of your mind that seems comfortable to you, for reasons you may not be even aware of, and to go there, time after time after time.

For different people, it's different parts of their mind that they go to repeatedly: same old seat. For some people, they like to go to the analytical mind, and they approach every situation from a kind of intellectual standpoint—a little bit removed from any emotional sense of it, always analyzing. The people that can tend to be a little argumentative at times, you know, they always have a come back for something that you say, a question or a criticism or something. Probably the kind of person I've been [*laughs*], for a large part of my life. You go to the analytical, intellectual part, repeatedly and habitually, without even knowing why—that part is so familiar to you.

Other people, there's emotional states that they go to repeatedly. For some people it's anger; it doesn't take much and they're right there. It isn't very hard to push their buttons and they're angry about something. For other people it's resentment, or some kind of indignation at the state of the world. Everything is going to hell in a handbasket in their eyes; they just see the world through this sense of how bad things are. They're always looking at the dark side of light—dark side of *life*, not the dark side of *light*; that would be interesting.

Other people, they go to particular ideological positions, like a particular belief system. They want always to go there because it's comfortable and familiar, and see everything through the prism of that, whether it's a religious belief or a political belief or just beliefs about the way the world works in some philosophical sense. They like it there and they prefer to stay there rather than moving outside to try to see the world from any other possible intellectual framework or philosophical framework. It's just a place they go, time after time after time.

There's a lot of different places that different people find to be the comfortable seat, and they're not always aware of why they find that place comfortable. It's mostly habit—because you know that place it's easy to go there, for one thing. You go there so quickly and easily that you don't always think about it. It just seems, like, normal. Seeing the world this way, or through this feeling, is normal to you. You don't question it too much.

Different times when I asked students, like in the back of the classroom, to come in the front so we could have a better discussion, they would resist. They'd say 'Why?' and you'd say 'Well, why do you want to sit in the back, what's special about that?' And they'd say, 'Well, I just like it here, it's comfortable.' And I think that's the way people are about their mental states that are habitual. They don't always know why they want to do it, but they just know it's comfortable and they kind of resist stepping outside that, particularly if you directly challenge them to do that. Or something interrupts their ordinary state of mind, that discombobulates them the same way that when I would walk into a classroom and somebody would be sitting in the seat that I ordinarily sat in, would set me off balance a little bit. It forces you to suddenly take stock of where you're at and why you don't know where to go, where you should go. [*laughs*] What is it you want to do? Where does your mind want to *rest* now?

So there's reasons people go to particular mind states, having to do with habit, and having to do often with just psychological things about the way you were raised, what kind of a temperament you have and you reinforce it by doing it over and over and over. But it's not as important to know where it comes from, as to be aware that you're doing it.

The way to break out of this, habitually going to the same old seat—*seat*—those are the kind of things that I have to edit out of my tapes: ‘steat.’ [*laughs*] Sometimes I’m too lazy to edit it that much. Um, whatever I was saying— The way to get out of it, going habitually to the same old seat in your mind, there’s steps that you have to take.

First of all, you have to be aware you’re doing it. If you’re not aware of doing it, if you’re not aware that you’re doing this, it’s not going to be something you try to get out of and you’re going to continue to go there because it’s the easy place to go. Your mind moves there, you go right with it and you’re there. Meditation is one way of practicing the mindfulness of how your mind moves. When you see things come up during your meditation practice, you’re becoming, or you should be becoming, more aware of how your mind moves habitually to certain types of things. Maybe to an anxiety state about some area of your life, maybe to some kind of resentment, maybe to an intellectual state—you know, sitting here thinking about what meditation is and why you’re doing it and stuff like that. But to become aware of how your mind moves and have that little bit of distance from it, so you’re not just jumping in and going with it but watching as it moves along and then carrying over that attentiveness to your ordinary, day-to-day life so you can catch yourself as your mind takes you to these kinds of places. To be aware of it and to see it. Sometimes you can’t catch it fast enough—you’re there and later on you’re aware you were there again, or you’re there for a little bit and all of a sudden you say, ‘Whoa! I’m in this state of anger or something that I continually go to,’ and it may be hard to get out of at that point. But the more awareness you have of your tendency to do that, the sooner you’re able to catch yourself as your mind tries to take you there, the easier it’s going to be to break free of it.

The second thing, though, is you have to have a motivation for breaking free of it. You have to have a reason for wanting to be free of that, otherwise it’s just the easiest and most comfortable thing to do. You’re like that student in the back of the classroom that just likes sitting in the back of the class, and doesn’t like to be taken out of that seat and put in a different seat. You resist it, because it’s the easy thing to do.

Why would you want to get out of that mind state? Well, in short the answer is to be free. To have the freedom. Going to a habitual mind state mechanically like that is just giving in to a sleep state. It’s like dreams that you can’t resist while you’re sleeping, they just take you wherever they want to take you and you have little control over where you’re going. In your daily life, if you get pulled into mind states and you really don’t have any choice over it, you’re not free, you’re in a mechanical state. You’re just responding to stimuli outside of you, or to patterns that have formed in your past, and you have no control over this. So you want to be free of this, you want to experience the freedom of choosing which mind states are appropriate as they come up, and determining whether or not you want to go there, whether or not you want to stay there once you find yourself there.

Some mind states are very dysfunctional for leading a happy life. Not only because they’re unpleasant in themselves, but because they are hard on relationships with other people. They cause problems with other people. If you’re habitually suspicious of other people’s intentions people are going to avoid you, or they’re going to act in a way that confirms your suspicions because they realize you don’t trust them and they don’t trust you then—there’s not a

relationship of mutual trust and concern. You go to an anger state habitually of course people are going to try to avoid you, or else you're going to be alienating them or causing contention. You go to an analytical state you find yourself kind of removed from people and people find you cold, maybe a little distant, hard to build relationships that have a sense of warmth in them. So they can be dysfunctional for relationships and they can also be very unpleasant for you when you habitually go there.

So you want freedom, and you want a happier life. You want to be able to channel your mind in directions that make you happier and other people happier. Just to be awake means to have that kind of freedom: to know what your mind is doing and not just go with it automatically, unconsciously.

So if you're aware of doing this, and you have the motivation not to do it, then it's a matter of practicing not going there, or trying to get a little distance from the state if you find yourself in that state. Not going there simply means catching yourself as you're being pulled in that direction, and redirecting your attention. Instead of going to that habitual state, do something else. Do something that's not related to that mind state. If you're feeling angry, go do something that would calm you. I mean, just simple things but what it means is, instead of going there you go somewhere else; you're breaking the habit, you're forming different habits.

If you find yourself there and remember that you're trying to break that mind state, it's a matter of again finding ways to get out of it, or trying to look back and say what was it that triggered that and avoiding those types of situations. Seeing the process in retrospect as it develops and saying, 'How could I have changed the course of events?' If there were certain steps that led me into that mind state, was there a step at which I could have went in a different direction? And then trying to remember that for next time; implant the idea in your mind that this could be different.

The ultimate aim, though, is to be able to walk into that classroom and just be free of having to sit anywhere in particular. You can sit here, you can sit there—any place is just as good as another for you, so you're not tied to it. In general psychological terms, you can redirect yourself to different states, but that's just directing yourself to different states; you might form better habits, but they're still habits. What I'm getting at is trying to move toward this state of mind where there are no habits, or the habits have no hold on you at all.

This is what I mean by the awake state of mind, by freedom, liberation. At least that much. To have your mind not being the master of your consciousness, of your spirit you might say, but rather to have the spirit the master of the mind.

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