

8. Expressing the Source

July 5th, 2018

I love this phrase, “expressing the source,” because to most people it sounds really spiritual but means nothing (or anything you want it to). In the context of mindfulness as we’ve been using the term for the past six months, it means something pretty specific, though it’s a conceptually subtle idea and can be hard to put to words. Fortunately, we’ll be doing some experiential exercises this evening which might help more than the words I’m about to say.

This activity of expressing the source is a major element of zen practice. In zen, however, the teachings are not by expository words, but by observation and experience. A zen monk learns how to express the source by watching the more senior monks doing it, and over years it sort of rubs off and starts to make sense. There is not a lot of clear teaching about it out there, so this is my best attempt at describing what cannot easily be described.

Let’s start with: what is “the source?” Of course it’s not a *thing*, or a place. It’s the source of all things and all places.

Mindfulness Meditation is sometimes called Insight Meditation because of the insights into ourselves and the nature of nature that sometimes arise while we are meditating. I’ll bet everyone here has had some experience of this. Have you ever been watching your thoughts and suddenly it became obvious to you how little control you have over them? How they just pop up randomly with no apparent reason? Or perhaps you’ve come to see how some external stimulus can trigger a thought which triggers another and another until you’ve created a whole new reality around some simple event? Or you’ve seen a habitual response get triggered by something you hadn’t noticed before? All these are examples of insights that you might discover about yourself and how your mind and emotions work together to create your current subjective experience. These types of insights arise from your brain mulling over your observations and pulling together conclusions based on the things you’ve been paying attention to.

But then there are deeper insights: “Aha! moments” when some realization or understanding or unshakable knowledge just suddenly happens. As if out of nowhere, you have a revelation about something. Maybe you see the impermanence of everything, or the connectedness of all beings, or the

unreality of your self. Has anyone ever had this sort of insight? The source of these insights is the *source* that I'm talking about: it is the "nowhere" whence the insights spring.

Let's come at it from a different tack. Sometimes I have you observe your subjective, internal experience, by watching See, Hear, and Feel IN. (That is, your visual and auditory thoughts, and your emotional body sensations.) Why bother watching this subjective experience? Because this is where our sense of self arises, and by watching the individual elements of this self, we begin to see the fleeting and inconsistent nature of what we call "me." By watching this, we learn to become free of the small, controlling self. We can watch it, but we know it is not a thing. And if there is no self, then what is it that we *are* watching? We are watching the activity of not-selfness, that same nothingness from which deep insights spring. This is the "emptiness" so often spoken of, the emptiness which is full of everything except "self;" the "*todo y nada*," the "alpha and omega," the emptiness which is the source of all.

As you come to see this emptiness and to loosen the bonds of the controlling self, you will begin to act from this emptiness, motivated by it rather than by the random habitual reactions that you used to think of as "me." Acting from this emptiness is acting from the source, and because the source is nothing less than the activity of being, when we are free from the bondage of self, we are manifesting the source.

It's a spontaneity in which your action is not caught and manipulated in the net of self before being released into the objective world. Remove that net, and the spontaneous activity flows unhindered from source to situation. You move, speak, eventually even think, spontaneously from the source. You have let the self-net go and allowed that level of consciousness that you cannot control take control. It has some surface similarity to how one lets go control when channeling spirits, doing automatic writing, or speaking in tongues; but it's completely different in intent and result. You are not letting go of one self in order to allow another self to use your body. You are recognizing that there is no such thing as self, and are allowing what lies beneath that illusion to have a voice.

It's not as esoteric as it sounds. It's actually nothing more than allowing the words and actions that are forming in your subconscious to enter into the objective world without having gone through that net of conscious assessment, amendment, and determination first. Imagine that you think about something before you say it. You decide it might be better if you said it this way, tweaking the wording to be more effective. Then you say it with these modifications. That is a very course parallel to what

I'm talking about. The example of thinking before you speak takes place in a shallow level of surface consciousness. Much of your external expression and behavior goes through a similar process, but almost instantaneously, and on a very, very subtle level, the level of initial cognitive thought, just barely out of the unconscious; a level which you may have never noticed.

Just prior to this level of initial cognition is a pre-cognitive level of consciousness that occurs as thoughts and motivations pop out of the unconscious.

You can learn to detect this pre-cognitive level of subtle consciousness. Because it is pre-cognitive, you cannot actively manipulate it. To have conscious control requires moving up into active cognition. You manifest the source when you stop controlling; hence, you can't control that pre-cognitive activity. You can't just decide to do it. What you *can* do, however, is to learn to notice the activity happening in this thin state of mind. Just as you can observe thoughts arising and passing (thoughts which occur in your cognitive consciousness), you can learn to observe the pre-cognitive thoughts and motivations which are passing through the pre-cognitive state. Some of these thoughts pass into more visible parts of consciousness and appear as the thoughts and emotions that you observe in a basic meditation technique. Some of the motivations pass into the same thicker parts of consciousness and become words or actions over which we have some influence, albeit the influence may be very subtle and difficult to see. But other of these arisings emerge directly into the objective world, appearing as utterly spontaneous movement or speech. Those times when you just jumped to the rescue and did the right thing without thinking about it, or when you said something perfectly appropriate and unbelievably wise and didn't know where those words came from – those are the manifestation of activity from this pre-cognitive space. This is expression of the source.

If you can learn watch this spontaneous level of consciousness, then you can get used to the feeling of source-manifestation. You start to feel at home with it and to trust it, and it primes the pump, as it were, for spontaneous emergence of activity from this place, bypassing the cognitive web.

In a moment I'll teach you a technique designed to train your ability to detect activity in this spontaneous conscious state. But first I must give a few words of warning.

Manifesting the source does not imply that every word or action that comes from this emptiness will be good and kind and appropriate. When you manifest the source, you are not manifesting god or some perfect goodness; you are manifesting the clarity and wisdom and freedom of the emptiness of your own not-being-there-ness. We all have residue from our lives, both positive and negative, caked in

our subconsciousness that continues to influence our subjective experience and consequently our objective words and actions. Hurts and suppressed memories and habituated reactions and pleasant association and unseen expectations – these still exist within us, and will have some impact on what arises spontaneously, though in a far finer and less linear way than when it occurs in cognitive activity.

This is why we continue to intentionally and rigorously work on refining our ethical conduct and our understanding of compassion and connectedness. The surface-level lessons we learn about skillful action and skillful speech, for example, are the agent by which our subconscious is cleansed. The more we make skillful decisions about our words and actions from the cognitive level of consciousness, the more we are cleaning out that subconscious grime, thereby ensuring that our spontaneous expression of the source is skillful and kind and wise. So as you learn to express from the source, don't be afraid to make mistakes, but be sure to monitor what comes up. Don't assume that because it's spontaneous, it's pure, but at the same time, don't assume that because it isn't perfect, it isn't from the source.

How to do Auto-Walk

The technique I'm going to teach now is one of a series that my teacher Shinzen created to sensitize meditators to the feeling of this spontaneous expression. Most of us don't have the time or interest to live in a zen temple for 20 years, and there aren't really any existing techniques aimed specifically at facilitating manifesting from the source, so this is a new creation that you won't find in other meditative traditions, at least as far as I know.

The series of techniques are all called "Auto." This doesn't mean the mindless blind activity of an automaton. It comes from the greek word *auto* which, ironically, is often translated as "self" but which in fact refers to a more primordial self and can be translated into "spontaneity."

We're going to do Auto-Walk. In this exercise, you simply let your body walk, as it knows how to do without your interfering with it. As you walk, you try to notice and tune in to the natural just-happening-ness of the walking. This is not just blind activity without attention. It is spontaneous activity without need of direction or control. It is easy, though, to start to control your walking (especially once you start paying attention to it). One way of getting around this is to walk in a way that

requires your body's instinctive spontaneity to override any attempt at control. For example, walk as if you were a little drunk. Stagger a bit, and as you lose your balance, your body will auto-correct before you have time to think about fixing the situation. If you can tune into the just-happening-ness of that balance correction, you are tasting the activity of pre-cognitive action. It's a pretty sweet taste, but it can be very subtle and will take a lot of experimentation and groping around before you really get to know it. Luckily, although Auto-Walk can feel embarrassing at first, it's actually pretty fun. You feel like a kid again, just jumping in puddles for the fun of it. Let your body take you where it wants to go. Don't impose the adult judgments on the activity. Just Walk, and Notice.