

Not Swept Away

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The world is swept away—which wouldn't be a problem if we weren't blown away, too, when the world gets swept away. We hang on to little bits and pieces of the world, and when they get swept away, we get swept along with them.

The good news of the Buddha's teaching is that it doesn't have to be that way.

All too often the Buddha is accused of being pessimistic, but the whole import of the four noble truths is that you don't have to suffer. You don't have to get blown away. At the very least, suffering is manageable. As someone once said, the the third and half noble truth, when you haven't quite gotten all the way to the third truth, is that suffering is manageable. But it requires training the mind.

In other words, you can't run away from it. You can't escape. You can't pretend it's not there. The more you pretend it's not there, the more it's going to sneak up on you. Aging, illness, and death: We often think of these things as far off in the distance, but they have a way of barging into the present moment right in your face. If you're not prepared, you get freaked out. Whatever emotion comes up the mind seems to overwhelm you, seems to be more than you can handle, so you grasp after straws.

As the Buddha once said, our normal reaction to suffering is, one, bewilderment, and then, two, looking outside for somebody to give us advice. If you're looking for advice, that's okay. If you're looking for someone else to take the suffering away, that's a problem, because the real suffering is not caused by things outside, it's by how we react to them—and that's a question of our own lack of skill. No one can come in and make you skillful, but skillfulness is something you can develop from within, which is what we're working on here: giving the mind a good solid foundation that's not going to get blown away. At the very least, with some concentration you can have a sense of the observer that just watches events of the world and doesn't feel obliged to get involved.

We develop that observer by being mindful. You focus on the breath as the breath comes in, the breath goes out. Whatever the breath is going to do, you be aware of it. Keep in mind that this is where you want to be. It's not that you're here to get the breath. You're after the mind, and you're going to learn a lot of interesting things about the mind as you try to stay focused here. Other thoughts are going to come up for sure, and you need skill in learning how to not get sucked in by them.

Sometimes you can simply notice the fact, “Oh, here comes another thought.” That in and of itself helps separate you out. If the thought is not too overwhelming or too in-your-face, that can be enough to be done with it. Other times, though, it keeps coming back, coming back, coming back. That’s when you’ve got to look at the drawbacks of getting involved in that kind of thought. Where is it going to lead you? Is it going to help you or harm you?

This helps to separate you a little bit more. You begin to see the thought as a process. It’s going to lead you someplace. You’ve got to have a good active imagination to picture where it’s going to lead you. This is one of the areas where imagination plays a very useful role in the meditation.

One of the reasons why people get addicted to drugs, alcohol, or other things, is that they refuse to imagine the drawbacks. All that they can see is how easy it is to take the drug and how they’re going to be away from the problem for a while. They refuse to imagine what’s going to happen afterwards. It’s the same impulse that makes people run after rituals, like a ritual that’ll take away your karma. The idea of someone who’s going to come down and forgive you and erase all your mistakes in the past, so that you don’t have to think about the results of your actions, is very appealing. But it shows an unwillingness to use your imagination to take responsibility for your actions and to learn from them: What the consequences are going to be? Where are these things going to lead?

The Buddha is encouraging you to keep a level head: that no matter what happens, you can face the consequences and say, “Yeah, I could survive that.” There are so many problems in life, where we say, “Oh, I just couldn’t stand that. It would kill me to have that happen. I wouldn’t be able to handle it.” That’s a defeatist thought. It causes you more problems than you might imagine. When events come, you discover, yes, you can handle them. In other words, whatever thoughts come up, you say, Where is that thought going to lead? And look at it as a pattern of cause and effect, so that you don’t identify with the thought.

When you don’t identify with it, then when the wind comes and catches the thought and the world gets swept away, it sweeps the thought away with it, but you’re not swept away as well. All the other techniques for dealing with distracted thoughts are precisely for this: to get you in control of the ways of your thinking, so that you can think the thoughts you want to think and you don’t have to think the thoughts you know are going to be harmful. After all, those are the thoughts that actually what got you swept away. Without those thoughts, your state of awareness would be perfectly fine. But it’s your sense of possession, that you own this thought, you own this person, you own that relationship: These thoughts are like little parachutes that catch the wind and blow you away. If you’re going to

identify with anything, identify with the sense of just the knowing right here. It's not your ultimate protection, but it's a good temporary shelter, because this knowing doesn't get destroyed by anything. Whatever happens, you keep knowing, knowing, knowing, and the skill lies in separating the knowing from its objects.

So you start that by immersing yourself in the breath, really getting one with the breath, so that it gives you a good solid foundation. Whatever else comes up in the mind, you can say, "Well, that's not where I am. That's not me. It's a process. I can get involved with the process if I want to, but I don't have to, if it's going to be harmful."

Ajaan MahaBoowa once commented after Ajaan Mun passed away, he was feeling really lost. He had lost his teacher. He said he felt like an animal in the forest. If he had any diseases, there was no doctor to look after him. But then he caught himself: Wait a minute, all the things that Ajaan Mun taught, he could use those as his teacher. What was the point he stressed more than anything else? To have a very clear sense of the knower, the observer, the awareness that just watches things no matter what happens. "When anything comes up in the meditation that you're not sure about, just stay with the knower, and no matter what, you'll be safe."

This principle doesn't apply just to the meditation. Anything that comes up in your life: If you have a strong sense of just being with the knower, of being aware of things, and say, "Well, this is what human life is like," then you don't get swept away. You're not holding on to any umbrellas or parachutes that would catch the wind and knock you off your feet. In doing this, it's not that you're heartless. Actually, the more solid you can be in this awareness, the more you have to offer other people. You see everybody else being blown around, and one of the best gifts you can give them is not being blown around. You keep your head, no matter what the circumstances.

So this is an important skill, this little exercise you're doing here with the breath—learning to stick with the breath, learning to get involved and engrossed in the breath so that you can get really firmly implanted in the breath—because in the course of that, you don't learn just about the breath, you learn about the mind. You learn about how you can begin to disentangle yourself from all the thought processes that would lead to harm and suffering. As you get more and more skilled in this area, you begin to discover more than just the sense of the observer. There is something deeper inside as well that's totally unconditioned, that doesn't require mindfulness or anything at all to maintain it.

When you find that, as the Buddha said, you've gained a foothold in the deathless. The image is of crossing a river. When you finally get to the point where you're nearing the further shore and your feet can touch the bottom of the river, you've gained a footing and you're much safer. You're not going to get swept away by the currents. From there it's only a short distance to the shore where you can stand on firm ground, and the river can't possibly sweep you away.

But even before you reach that footing near the further shore, you've got this island in the middle of the river, the island that comes from developing mindfulness, being with the body in and of itself, abandoning greed and distress with reference to the world, i.e., the world that's swept away down the river. This is where you can stay for the time being. This is where you're safe.

So do your best to stay with the island, so that you can be an island of calm in the midst of this swirling world. That way, when aging, illness, death, and separation come jumping into the present moment, you're not going to get knocked over. They won't fill your awareness because you've already learn how to inhabit your awareness in the present moment. These other things won't be able to get a foothold.

This is an image the Buddha gives of a mind that's firmly concentrated. The unconcentrated mind, when your awareness is not filling the body, he says is like a ball of wet clay. You throw a stone into it, and the stone gains entry into the clay. But once you fully inhabit the present moment, he says it's like having a solid wooden door. You throw ball of string at the door, and the string doesn't gain entry into the wood. Try to make your awareness, try to make your sense of conscious awareness filling the body that solid, and nothing will knock you over. It's when you let your emotions get so big that you give them entry into the body to the point where they fill your whole body that they seem to be so overwhelming. But if you occupy the body first and stay there, they can't push themselves in. They may try to push themselves in a little bit, but you can push them back.

So try to keep this sense of awareness, full awareness of the present moment, as strong as you can. That's your first line of protection.