Cut the Currents

June 29, 2025

When you practice concentration, you have to gather the mind around one object, all the various strands, all the various wanderings around, trying to bring them together right here. The good thing is when you’re focusing on the breath, the breath is quite large. It has space for all the movements of your mind, because it’s a whole body process. When you breathe in, the whole nervous system is involved. All the way down to the tips of your fingers, the tips of your toes, out to every pore of the skin. Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and it’s all in harmony. And everything is gathered right here, focused, looking in right here. Don’t let any currents of thought go straying away. And if they do stray away, bring them right back. It’s those currents of thought that you have to watch out for. It’s interesting, the Buddha talks so much about heedfulness. He says it’s the basis for all skillful qualities. It’s the basis for the five faculties, five strengths. And Buddha’s very last statement to the monks before he passed away was to bring about consummation through heedfulness. So even though it’s a very important topic though, there’s only one place where the Buddha defines what it means. It means you watch out after what he calls the mental effluents, the things that go flowing out of your mind. Make sure you guard them, because of those effluents that we get reborn. The mind can’t stay here in the body anymore and it goes flowing out. It latches onto something and that’s where you take rebirth. And all too often, when the mind flows out that way, it’s out of desperation. It can’t stay, it’s being evicted. And a lot of it depends on what good karma or bad karma you’ve had in the past, what’s going to appear at that time, what options will be available to you. But if you can train the mind so that it doesn’t go flowing out no matter what, then you’re safe. So what are these flows? The first one is sensuality. And by the word sensuality, the Buddha doesn’t mean sensual pleasures, he means the mind’s fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. You can think for hours on how you’d like a certain meal to go or a certain relationship to go. And it’s a total waste of time. You’re making your happiness depend on things that really don’t belong to you. And often when you get sensual pleasures, there are other people who want the same pleasures you have and they’d be willing to do anything at all to take them away. One of the images the Buddha gives is of a hawk that has a piece of meat. As it flies away with that piece of meat, other hawks and other raptors will come after it to try to tear that piece of meat away. And they wouldn’t mind killing the hawk if they had to. That’s the way it is with a lot of sensual pleasures in the world. So if you spend your time fascinating about fantasizing about your sensual pleasures, you’re setting yourself up for a dangerous situation. If that’s where your mind is flowing out to while you’re here, then when the time comes when it has to really leave the body, that’s probably one of the ways it’s going to flow. It’s the most obvious way. There’s pain in the body, but you see the opportunity for sensual pleasures and you go for it. And the mind is often not too picky about those sensual pleasures. One talks about how when he began to recollect his previous lives, there was one period when for 500 lifetimes in a row, he was reborn as a dog because he was satisfied with dog pleasures, dog sensuality. That’s a scary thought. If it could happen to him, it could happen to us very easily. So this is one reason why if your mind goes wandering away, you want to bring it right back as fast as you can. At the same time, contemplate the drawbacks of dog sensuality. The Buddha gives a long list of images. He says it’s like a dog chewing on a bone that doesn’t have any meat. It chews and chews and chews, but it doesn’t get any nourishment. It’s like a drop of honey on the blade of a knife. There’s a little bit of sweetness there, but it’s dangerous. It’s like a man who’s borrowed the ornaments of other people. He goes around showing off the ornaments and the owners find out about it and they take them back. He has no right to complain because it belongs to them, not to him. In other words, wherever you look for your sensuality, it belongs to somebody else. It’s up to them whether they want you to continue enjoying that sensuality or not. It’s like putting you in a bad place. Then you think of the objects for your sensuality. One of the reasons why we have that contemplation of the 32 parts of the body is to help you realize that there’s not much there that’s really worth getting worked up about. If you took out all the organs of the body and put them down on the floor, for one thing you’d get a big bloody mess. Then the question would be, okay, which of the organs here are you lusting for? Or if it’s your own body, which of them are you proud about? So learn to contemplate in this way so that you can cut the current. If your mind is flowing out after thoughts of sensuality, you can’t cut it just with force. You have to cut it with understanding so the mind understands why it’s not a good thing to go flowing in that direction. Then you have to give it something good in return. That’s why the Buddha says we try to get the mind into concentration with a sense of well-being in the body and in the mind. So you’re going to have a sense of well-being to withstand the temptation to go flowing out. Another current the Buddha talks about, another effluent, is the effluent of becoming. This is when you want to take on an identity in a certain world of experience. You want to be something so you can get something in that world. Again, this is going to be very strong at the moment of death. You feel that everything you’ve identified with is falling away. And you feel exposed and you feel like you’re being deprived. And there’s an opportunity to take on another identity in another world. Again, if you’re not strong, you go flowing after that current. That’s how you take rebirth. So you’ve got to remind yourself that every state of identity, every world of experience you can go to, has its drawbacks. It’s going to collapse on you. And even if you get whatever it is, in that world that you originally wanted, how long can you keep it? And what kind of karma do you have to create in order to get it to begin with? When the item itself is gone, the relationship or whatever it is, you’re still stuck with the karma and the fact that that world is going to collapse around you. That identity is going to collapse around you again. So you’re going to see the drawbacks of this kind of metal current flowing out. Often the state of becoming doesn’t start with the idea that you want to be something. It’s just that there is something that you would like. And the question is, in what world does that thing exist? And then what kind of identity do you have to take on in order to get it? It’s like choosing an avatar in a game. But as you know, with every avatar, whatever good qualities you have, there are going to be some bad qualities that go along with them. So you want to learn how to see the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, so that you can cut the current again. Finally, the final effluent is ignorance. Not seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, you see things in terms of me and mine, what I want, what I don’t want. Whereas in the Four Noble Truths, they don’t talk about who you are or where you are. It’s just, there is suffering here and it’s caused by these actions. There’s a path of action that can lead to the end of suffering. They may have to take on an identity of someone who actually wants to pursue that path. But that’s an identity you can let go of, once the path has given you its results. Otherwise everything is being defined, just in terms of mental events right here, right now. The things you see as you get the mind into concentration. If you have thoughts about who you are, you see, those are just thoughts. Those are just perceptions. They’re flowing away from right here, right now. So let go of them. As for other thoughts that focus you in, okay, you hold onto them for the time being. But again, there’s no question about who’s doing this. It’s just something to be done. There are duties to be done here. You focus on that. And that gets you away from that question that often happens as people approach death, which is, “Where am I going?” “My life so far has been this narrative. What’s the continuation of the narrative?” We don’t have to worry about narratives. We don’t have to worry about the future or the past. Just be with what’s happening right in the present moment. Make sure you handle it skillfully. And that cuts through all possible affluence. There’s a case in the Canon where the Buddha’s leaving an area where he’s been for the rains retreat. And one of his cousins comes and says, “Suppose it’s sick and dying while you’re gone. What should I tell them?” And the Buddha says, “First thing you ask them, are they worried about their family? Are they worried about their business? And if so, say, ‘Look, you’re dying right now. This is not time for that.’ Drop those thoughts.” Then the next question is, “Are you worried about losing human sensuality?” And if they say, “Yes,” then you remind them, “Well, there’s better sensuality in the levels of heaven. Set your mind there.” And the Buddha has them imagine the pleasures of different levels of heaven, going up to the levels of heaven where people are past sensuality. They’re simply in a state of concentration. So even there, though, there’s a sense of self-identity. There’s defining who you are, where you are. Can you drop that? If you can drop that, the mind can be released. We’re not saying there’s nobody there. It’s just a question of what are you thinking about? What are you telling yourself right now? That’s going to make it difficult to be at peace when everything else falls apart. Or you can tell yourself not to go flowing after the different currents that come out of the mind. When you can prevent the currents from flowing, that’s when you consent to be heatful. As the Buddha said, you develop the faculty of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, all the qualities you need to keep the mind strong and still, not flowing out anywhere. That’s what keeps you safe. So this is our practice we have as we try to keep the mind with the breath. Any thought that has to do with anything else besides keeping the mind with the breath, you just let it go. No matter where your mind may be flowing out, no matter how interesting or attractive it may be, you have to say, “No, not right now. I’ve got another skill I’ve got to develop, the skill of not flowing away.” Because you never know. Death could come at any time. You want to be prepared. You want to have the skills mastered that you’re going to need at that time. And this will be the number one skill you have to master, how not to go flowing out. So remind yourself that you’re doing something important here. You’re learning the skill of how to stop the flow. If there’s any flow going on, you direct it back into the breath, right here at the breath. The more you gather things here at the breath, the stronger you’ll be.

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