The Flowing Mind

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Sometimes when the Buddha taught, he would take words that other people used and give them a new meaning. There’s the word “asava,” which we translate as “effluent” or “fermentation.” He borrowed that from the Jains. The Jains described it as “sticky substances that would glue you into samsara,” in other words, when you died you would be reborn because you were stuck by glue. And the purpose of their practice was to burn that glue away. The Buddha wouldn’t talk about a soul. He didn’t use the image of stickiness. It was more the image of a flood, which also fits with the word “asava,” “flowing out,” making the point that the process of samsara is not something out there that you get stuck to. It’s something that comes from within. The mind flows out. There’s a parallel in his image of how rebirth happens, which uses fire as an image. You’ve got a house and it’s on fire, and there’s a wind, and you grab onto the fire and it grabs onto the wind and gets carried to other places. You can go very far. In both cases, the image is something flowing out, and you’re flowing out with it. One of the purposes of meditation is not to keep on flowing out like this. The flowing out doesn’t happen only at the moment of death. You’re doing it all the time. The main thing you see is the mind flowing out to senses. It’s not that things from outside come in and stir up trouble in the mind. The mind is going out looking for trouble, looking for distraction, looking for entertainment. Sometimes it looks for things to get lustful about, and other times things to get angry about. It’s because you keep flowing out like this that the mind knows no peace. One of the main skills you want to learn as a meditator is that even though there may be currents in the mind that want to go out, you don’t go out with them. What this means in the beginning is that there may be some very strong push from inside. You say, “No.” And the best thing to do is get out of the way. If you stand authoritative, it’s going to push you. So just get out of the way. Just observe these things, this habit the mind has of going out. Learn how not to identify with it. Because that’s our problem as we identify with this push to go out, go out, go out. Constantly looking for things to think about, things to watch, things to listen to. Anything but staying right here. And there’s a part of the mind that doesn’t want to look right here, or it doesn’t want you to see anything right here. It’s like those policemen at a crime scene saying, “Nothing to see, nothing to see. Keep going, keep going.” Usually there’s a lot to see. Now, in the case of a crime scene that involves somebody else, maybe it’s none of your business, but what’s going on inside your mind is very much your business. Because it’s what keeps propelling this process of samsara. We tend to think of samsara, this wheel of rebirth, as a place. But the Buddha describes it as a process. We keep creating it. We keep doing it. As long as this flow keeps going, it’s going to keep on happening. So first, learn how to disidentify with it. Stand aside. Watch it go out, but you don’t go with it. Try to hold on to the breath. There are three specific things you want to watch out for. One is sensuality, our fascination with sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. When do you see this? When do you see that? We have this big fear of missing out. We should learn how to divide that into two things, the fear of missing out outside and the fear of missing out inside. The fear of missing out outside is what keeps you scattered. You should develop the fear of missing out inside, in other words, seeing where these things are coming from, these currents that push out. It’s when the mind pushes you out. It says, “I want to see this, I want to hear that, I want to smell this, I want to taste that.” You have to ask yourself, “Why? What’s the satisfaction?” As Ajahn Swarton likes to say, “Those sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now?” They’re only memories. Even if you remember them, a lot of times you’ve totally forgot them. But even with the memories, sometimes the memory of something good is not necessarily a happy memory, either because you miss what you saw or heard, or because you realize that in order to get possession of what you would like to see and like to hear, you did things that were unskillful. So this tendency to want to go out, go out, go out, it doesn’t leave you with much. You have to keep asking yourself, “What am I gaining from all this distraction?” Then there’s the effluent of becoming. You want to play a role in the world outside. The question is, does the world outside want you to play a role? And what will they do to your role? Think of all the things you could build, the things you could construct outside. They’re going to get washed away. What you do have, of course, is the qualities of mind that you develop. But a lot of people, in order to play a role in the world outside, have to learn how to develop some pretty unskillful qualities. And even in those cases, what they accomplish gets washed away. You can gain that way, but you can’t take it with you. So you have to question this desire for sensual entertainment, this desire to play a role in the world. Then finally, there’s the effluent of ignorance. The mind doesn’t like to look at itself. Again, it’s got that area of ignorance cordoned off, saying, “Nothing to see here, nothing to see here, go away.” That’s what you really want to look into. That’s the hardest part of the meditation, because you’re going to see some things you don’t like to see. This is one of the reasons why you have to create a good, strong state of concentration that’s based on well-being. Well-being in the mind, well-being in the body, well-being here, meaning a sense of ease. You sit here, focused on the breath, and you can breathe in ways that are comfortable, energizing when you’re feeling tired, soothing when you’re feeling frazzled, relaxing when you’re feeling tense. There’s a lot you can do with the breath energy in the body, both the in-and-out breath and the general sense of breath flowing through the nerves, flowing through the blood vessels. When you have that sense of well-being, then you can start looking at things inside your mind that you don’t like. Your attitude is different. You’re not looking for things to like or dislike. You’re trying to figure out what’s going on in here. Because, as the Buddha said, what we experience is not something coming in from outside. It’s not everything coming from the past. We do make choices here in the present moment, and what are we basing those choices on? What’s our range of skills? We choose the way we breathe, and often that goes unconscious. That’s what we choose to talk about. Although often it just seems like things spring into mind without you having called for them. But maybe there’s some subterranean things going on in the mind that you didn’t see. Then there are the images you hold in mind, the perceptions and the feelings you focus on. And you play a role in shaping these things. And again, all too often they seem to just come out of nowhere. A pain is just a pain. It’s already made. A perception is an image that’s already made. That’s what it looks like. But actually, you’re playing a role. As the Buddha said, there are intentions that you are alert to, and there are lots of intentions that you are not alert to. And whether you’re alert to them or not, they still have an impact, shaping our lives. So you don’t want to be unalert. You want to know what’s going on. That should be your attitude. And you’re going to run into parts of the mind that are afraid to see these things. So you try to soothe them, you try to comfort them, reminding them that this is all for the good. If there’s anything in there that’s creating trouble, you’re not going to be able to deal with it. You’re not going to be able to solve the problem until you first admit that it’s there. So whatever you can do to give yourself a sense of well-being, a sense of confidence, that whatever comes up, you can handle it. Again, this ability to stand aside as the currents go flowing out is going to be a really useful habit. So try to take a stance here. As what’s going to flow out, just let it flow out. But you don’t go with it. As the Buddha said, one of the important aspects of discernment is seeing things as separate. You don’t identify with the flow. You see it as something separate. And that’s how you can begin to understand it. So give yourself a good self-awareness. That’s the place to stay here. The image the Buddha gives is, again, of a river flowing. And you’re creating an island in the middle of the river, an island that’s above the flood, through your practice of mindfulness, being mindful in a way that leads to concentration. The flood can go by, but the island is not washed away. You see these currents, that’s what they are, but you don’t go with them. You’ve learned an important skill. This will especially come in useful when the time comes to die. A lot of currents go out in all directions. Again, the Buddha’s image is a fire, but you can also think of flames. Floods. And in either case, you want to latch on to them, because they can hurl you far distances. And they don’t really care about where you end up. You should care. That’s why you should learn how to step aside. Because you get to see, this is where these things come from, this is where they go. But you don’t have to keep creating them, and you don’t have to encourage them, you don’t have to go with them. That’s a step in the right direction.

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