

Damming & Diverting

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A common image in the teachings of the forest ajaans is that the mind goes flowing out. In other words, greed, aversion, and delusion don't start from things outside. It's not the case that we're just sitting here perfectly fine—passive and placid—and then something comes along and stirs us up. All too often we're out there looking for trouble. The mind goes flowing out, looking for things that it can desire, looking for things that it can get angry about. This is a tendency we have to learn how to keep in check. The Buddha himself has a similar image. He says the streams—and here he means the streams of the mind—are restrained by mindfulness and finally stopped by discernment.

It's interesting. He describes mindfulness as a form of restraint. All too often we hear mindfulness being described as an open, accepting, spacious state of mind. But actually, when you're establishing mindfulness, you're laying down some laws. You're establishing a territory. The mind is going to stay right here and it's not going to wander out. There's that image of the monkeys in the Himalayas. They wander away from their home territory. And because they wander away from their home territory, they get caught by the hunters. If they stayed in their home territory, the hunters wouldn't be able to get them. In the same way, greed, aversion, and delusion can get you when you get out of your boundaries of mindfulness.

So stay in your boundaries right now. Try to be very clear that you're going to stay with the breath. You're going to work with the breath in a way that makes it comfortable, because otherwise you'll feel hemmed in here. The mind's going to rebel. It's going to want to go slip outside. It's like the image in the Canon of catching a forest elephant. It's tied to the post, so they have to give it nice food to eat, nice music to listen to, to soothe its forest ways until it finally gets used to being tamed and actually likes being tamed. The same way with the mind: You've got to give it something good to stay with, which is why we work with the breath, trying to get it comfortable, trying to get it at ease.

Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really gratifying right now. Sometimes energizing breathing feels good. Sometimes calming breathing feels good. You can experiment to see what works for you right now. The Buddha talks about calming bodily fabrications as one of the important steps in breath meditation. But it's not all just about calming. There are times when you need energizing as well. In fact, in some of his discussions of calming the mind or

calming the body, first you have to get it energized with rapture. Rapture may sometimes be too strong a term, but in some cases it's perfectly right. There's an overwhelming feeling of energy. But you've got to learn how to not let yourself get overwhelmed. Other times, it's subtler, in which case the translation "refreshment" might be better.

And then when the body and the mind have had a sense of "that's enough," you can tune into a more refined level of pleasure or comfort and let it spread around so that the mind is happy to stay in these boundaries that you've established for it.

We do this not only for concentration but also for insight, because once the mind has boundaries and the boundaries are clear, you get to see, when the mind goes flowing out, where does it go? Where is it coming from? This is necessary for understanding the mind, because otherwise we just go along with the flows. This river flows into that river, and that river flows into this river, and the currents get all mixed together. We have no idea where things are coming from or where they're going. But when you establish a boundary like this, it's like damming the river. You get to see the currents clearly: where they start and where they stop.

But you don't stop at just damming the river. You have to divert it. In other words, take the energy in the emotion and have it flow into something that's actually skillful, like the skillful practice of concentration or other skillful thoughts outside. If there's passion, divert the passion into doing your practice well. As you keep the mind in control like this, you begin to get a better sense of what's going on: how the mind shapes a mental state, like we're trying to do right now. You realize how much work goes into it. You have to work with the breath. You have to work with what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation: in other words, thinking about the breath and making sure you stay on topic; and then asking yourself questions about it. What kind of breathing would feel good? Once it feels good, how do you spread that goodness around? How do you maintain that sense of goodness when you're spreading it?

And then in the background, there are the feelings and perceptions: the feeling of ease that comes when the breath feels good and also the perceptions that hold you in place—perceptions of what the breath is doing in the body, where the breath stops, where it starts. All of this fabrication goes into creating this state of concentration. And as you get really good at it, you find there are certain things you can let go of. When the breath is really good and it's been spreading through the body to a point of comfortable fullness, you can let go of the directed thought and evaluation. Just be with the perception of breath.

Then there comes a point where the breath stops, and all you have is a sense of a background energy filling the body that's not flowing in or out.

You begin to see that there are these elements, these fabrications, that go into keeping the mind here. It turns out they're the same fabrications we use to create any mental state, especially with an emotion. If the fear or lust or anger gets into your breath, it's gone from the mind into the body. That's all too often why we have a sense that we have to get something out of our system, because the way you've been thinking, the way you've been perceiving things, will have an impact on the breath, and that'll have an impact on the body. And that in turn has an impact back on the mind again.

One of the skills you learn as a meditator is how to take these different ways of fabricating an experience and then re-fabricating any unskillful emotion that comes up, turning it into something more skillful. For instance, if you're angry at somebody, you can ask yourself, one: how am I breathing right now? Hold in mind the perception that if you act on your anger, you're probably going to do something stupid. So you've got to get some control over it. So first you look at the breath. Make sure that it's normal and calm. When it's calm, you can see more clearly the inner chatter you have about the issue. As the Buddha says, give yourself some other way of chatting about it. One is that just that thought: If you act on the anger, you're going to do something stupid. Do you want to do that? How else can you look at the situation? What else can you focus on? If you're focusing on how horrible that person is, change the focus.

Look for that person's good qualities. And the Buddha gives you a perception to help with that—lots of different ways of perceiving it, actually. One of them is that the other person's goodness is like a little bit of water in a cow's footprint. You're alone in the desert. You're hot, tired, trembling with thirst. And you see the water. You realize that if you scooped it up with your hand, you'd muddy it. So you have to get down on all fours and slurp it up out of the footprint.

Now, this is not a very dignified position to be in. You wouldn't want anybody to take a picture of you doing that and posting it online. But you realize that this is what you've got to do, for your own good. You need the water. Otherwise, you'll die of thirst. In the same way, you need to think about that other person's goodness, because otherwise you'll find it very easy to mistreat that person. You may feel that they're so bad that it's beneath your dignity to focus on their goodness. Well, remind yourself: You need that goodness to nourish your goodwill. You need your goodwill so that you can trust yourself, when you're dealing with that person, not to do anything that's going to be for your harm or for anyone else's harm.

It's in this way that you can take the anger, deconstruct it, and construct something else in its place. Now, this is still just damming the stream. It's not getting back to the source. Basically, you dam the stream so that you're not going to go in the direction of anger. Then you divert it off into something more skillful.

But, in the process, there still will be parts of the mind that don't want to go along. This is where the discernment comes in. The discernment has already helped in analyzing it in terms of fabrication. But as you keep diverting and diverting and diverting these unskillful thoughts, you get closer and closer to their source.

Their source is the allure: why you go for these things. Sometimes you hear that we go for things because we think they have innate being or some sort of essence; we don't realize that they're not permanent. But there are a lot of things we go for that we know full well are not permanent. That's one of the reasons we cling to a lot of things: We realize they're not going to last so we try to squeeze as much out of them as we can while we can. Actually, we go for things because of the pleasure they offer, at least the pleasure we perceive, and we feel that the pleasure is worth whatever goes into getting and keeping those things. And a lot of times, the allure—what we find attractive in going for those things—is something we hide from ourselves.

A part of us likes anger and is willing to give it any kind of excuse. The same with lust; the same with all kinds of unskillful emotions. But if you keep blocking, blocking, blocking and cutting down the reasons the mind offers, you'll finally get to the real reasons. A lot of the reasons it gives you first are just for show: reasons that you can accept and still have a sense of your own dignity or rationality or your own intelligence.

But there are some pretty stupid reasons in there as well. Those are the ones we really hide from ourselves. And yet those are the ones we most need to see. But it's only after a long series of damming the stream closer and closer and closer to the source that you finally get there. If you just let things go with the flow, you'll never know where they're coming from, what their force is, what the mind's reasons are for going with them.

So this quality of restraint is very important. Restraint is what allows discernment to do its work. Without the restraint, discernment wouldn't know where to begin. You might deal in very some broad generalities and miss the whole point. The practice of mindfulness, which is basically how to get the mind into concentration, is the restraint that allows us to get some control over the mind. And in the process of getting some control, we learn how to deal with whichever parts of the mind speak up and object. That's where the discernment

can focus and do its real work. Then this source of all the flowing, flowing, flowing of the mind can finally get turned off. You see what's causing these things, the deepest root cause. And then you can let it go. And then you're free. You're not pushed around by these currents anymore.

So even though we don't like hearing the word "restraint," it's a really important tool on the path. The concentration allows us to do a good job of restraint. It gives us some control, but we're not control freaks. We're control sages. We know how to control the mind skillfully and keep it in a good mood but, at the same time, keep it under close surveillance. That way, when something seems to be creating a leak someplace in this dam, you're right there. And some day, you'll see right through it. Then you'll be free.