

The Story behind Impatience

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

November 20, 2005

Back when I was in college I majored in history. One of the big frustrations about majoring in history was that you felt you could never really get to see what it was really like back in the days you were studying about. Studying about the 13th century – what was it really like? Think about all the generalizations they make about 13th century culture in Europe, and yet having lived through the 20th and into the 21st centuries what kind of generalizations would you say really do justice to the reality of that kind of experience? How can you sum up a century in a sentence or two? The more you read the stories that make up history, the more you realize they can never take you back there.

It's good to reflect on this, because look at how we live our lives: We tend to live in the narratives that we make about things – what happened in the past, what we would like to see happen in the future, what's the basic story line, looking for development, looking for closure. How much does that story line really have to do with reality? How much does it actually stand in the way of our seeing reality? Think about that, especially as you meditate.

There are ways of telling the story of your life that help get you into the meditation. For example, you can look at your past suffering, recognizing that a lot of it was caused by your own unskillful habits, and come to the conclusion that your skillful habits need some work. That kind of story helps bring you into the meditation. But there are a lot of other stories that pull you away. You've got to watch out for those, because they make you impatient. They make you less observant about what's actually going on.

You sit here working with your breath. Maybe in the back of the mind there's the thought, "Let's just get this over and done with so we can move onto the next stages, which are a lot more interesting." So you're not really looking at your breath. You're looking at your plans for the next stage or thinking about what's going to happen tomorrow or what's going to happen the day after that. You're looking at your thoughts about how much longer you're going to have to be stuck with this until you get results. That's the kind of story that gets in the way of actually seeing what's happening right here and now.

So when you see those thoughts arising, learn how to put them away. This can be hard because a lot of our sense of who we are is in the story. This is an area where the teaching on not-self is useful: to see how artificial and made-up our sense of who we are is and how it gets in the way of the work we need to do in the present moment.

People sometimes believe that the whole purpose of the meditation is to get into the present moment and just stay there. The Buddha never talked like that. He always said, "There's work to be done in the present moment." That's why

you get here. You want to settle down here with the purpose of understanding the intentions acting here in the present moment, because that's the only place where you can really *observe* your intentions in action. If there's any greed, anger, or delusion in the intention, you're going to see it only in the present moment.

After it's passed, that intention is just a memory – and you know how memory tends to color things depending on what you want to see, how it fits into a good or bad narrative about yourself. But it's just a narrative. There's no guarantee that it's going to get you to the reality of the intention. The only way you can really see is by looking in the present moment.

And when the present moment is full of distractions, don't think of the process of dealing with your distractions as getting in the way of where you want to go. If you see it simply as getting in the way, you're going to overlook it and try to push through it blindly. Instead, see it as, "This is the spot where the Awakening is going to happen, where the understanding is going to happen, and through the process of watching the breath, catching the mind as it wanders off, and bringing it back, *that's* where all the insights are going to arise." In other words, the problems in the present are not something you simply want to push your way through or get out of the way; they're something you want to look into – because the Buddha had an amazing insight about the present.

You may have heard the story that, after the night of his Awakening, he spent 49 days experiencing the bliss of release. Not only bliss: He learned an awful lot in the course of those 49 days. You may also know the story of when he was in the forest of simsapa trees. Simsapa trees have tiny, tiny leaves, about the size of a dime. And he scooped up a handful of them from the forest floor and asked the monks, "Which is more, the leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest?" The monks replied, "Of course, the leaves in the forest are many more than the leaves in your hand." And the Buddha said, "In the same way, what I learned in the course of my Awakening is like the leaves in the forest. What I have brought out to teach is like the leaves in my hand." And he focused on the four noble truths as being the leaves in his hand.

There are other passages where he boiled down the basic insight he gained in his Awakening even further: It's a simple principle of causality. When you think of all the amazing things he could have talked about, it's interesting that this is the one he found most worthwhile to teach. His insight was basically that our experience is based on two kinds of causal patterns: One is that when x exists, y exists with it; when x ceases, y does, too. In other words, these things come and go together. This is causality happening right in the present moment. The other principle is: From the arising of x comes the arising of y ; from the passing away of x comes the passing away of y . This connection doesn't have to happen immediately in the present moment. It can occur over time. When you put these two principles together, they mean that any moment of experience is the combination of three things: the cause arising in the present, plus the effects of that cause, and effects coming in from the past.

And what is that cause? Your present intention. And where are the effects from the past coming from? Past intentions. This means we have free will. Our intentions shape our life. At any moment we can choose what to focus on, what to do, what to say, what to think. We're not *compelled* by the past. There are influences coming in from the past, but we can choose which influences we're going to let pass, which one's we're going to work on, which ones we're going to pick up, and what we're going to do with them. That's what the whole fabric of our experience of time and space comes from: the constant input coming from intention. And the Buddha's insight was that if you look at where the new input is coming from, you'll see the way out. And where are you going to see that new input? Right here, right at the intentions in the present moment. You really want to get to know these well.

The best way to get to know your intentions is to set up one intention to see how long you can keep it going, and to see what other intentions are going to come in and try to change it. Then you learn the skills needed to maintain that original intention – as long as it was a good one. Here the intention is to stay with the breath, and to think about the breath, to evaluate the breath, to make it more comfortable so that you can stay here longer, to give more support to your original intention.

As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you find that you also get more and more sensitive to those intentions. Those are the real causal factors in your life. What's dismaying about them, especially in the beginning of the practice, is to see how random they are. This little intention fires off and goes in one direction, and then another one comes and goes in the exact opposite direction, or other ones come from all over the place. But don't let yourself get discouraged when you see this. Learn the skills you need to focus on a skillful intention and stay there in the midst of all this randomness.

The randomness helps remind you how artificial your storyline is. Storylines, if they're going to maintain your interest, have to have a clean trajectory. There may be a few setbacks here and there to make the story interesting, but eventually there's one overall trajectory. It's like the basic shape of a melody. It may be an arc. It may be a valley between two peaks. And the individual notes may play around with that, go outside of the basic arc a bit, but there's a basic shape to what we hear. That's what makes the melody satisfying. When we're creating a narrative out of our lives, we're trying to string together only the intentions that make sense, that seem to fit into a basic shape, but when you meditate, look at what you've got here: intentions running all over the place.

That's an important insight right there. Even though it's the dismaying insight that comes from seeing how unconcentrated your mind is, it's a valuable insight. If you take it to heart and use it skillfully, it'll help deconstruct any narratives that are getting in the way of your practice. This way you'll find it easier to settle down with less and less distraction. When you can let go of the narratives, there's really a lot here to discover. Whether the meditation goes well

or not, whether it goes in line with your expectations or not, that's just another narrative.

The important thing is that you really look at what's right here, right now, particularly with regard to your intentions. You have your intention to stay with the breath, and, whoops, there's another intention going off someplace else. Bring your focus back to the breath. You've learned something about the mind right there. The act of bringing it back strengthens your original intention, strengthens your resolve, and the fact that you're able to catch the mind as it's wandering off strengthens your mindfulness and alertness.

So whether things are progressing at the rate you'd like to see in your ideal narrative, that's not the point. The point is that you're looking and you're learning. Sometimes you may have more lessons to learn than you originally thought, but if you don't start from where you are, where are you going to start from? If the picture of what your mind is doing in the present moment doesn't fit into your ideal narrative, maybe it's time to question the narrative and not get impatient with the present moment.

Because what is impatience? Impatience is the part of the narrative that makes us judgmental in an unskillful way. We need our powers of judgment, but what turns powers of judgment, of being judicious, into being judgmental is that we get impatient. We want to come to a decision really quickly before all the evidence is in, and as a result the judgment is useless – one more obstacle in the way of seeing things as they actually are.

So give the present moment some space. Don't push it too hard, thinking you've got to get this or that result in this or that amount of time. Really look at what's going on here without impatience, without the narrative that gives the push to impatience. That's when you'll get to see what's interesting and unplanned – because the spot where intention enters into the causal pattern, the route by which it enters in, is also the route by which you're going to get out.

And it's right here. It's not in the past, it's not in the future, it's right here. Allow yourself to settle down right here, and that way you'll get to see it, to know it, and to follow it to release.