

## *Against the Stream*

*December 1, 2018*

I was talking one time to someone, in fact a group of people who were acquainted with Chinese astrology, and they were saying that Chinese astrologists don't like making predictions about people who meditate. They say with ordinary people they just kind of go with the flow, but people who meditate go *against* the flow.

You could sit here for the hour and just let whatever thought come through your mind, but that would be a waste of time. You could decide that you're going to establish mindfulness or you're going to practice concentration, and that requires that you go *against* the flow of things.

Thoughts will come up, but where they're coming from is not the question. The question is, what are you going to do with them? Right now you're trying to encourage thoughts of the breath. You want to be with the breath, be sensitive to the breath in the body, and if you're going to think about anything, think about the breath—how's it going? You watch it, you ask questions about it as you watch.

You can start out with long breathing and see how that feels—and if it feels good, you keep it up. When it gets to the point where it doesn't feel so good any more, if it feels too heavy or too long, you can shorten it. You can also experiment with fast breathing, slow breathing, deep, shallow, heavy, light, or in long, out short; in short, out long—lots of things you can do with the breath.

So that's the conversation you can have about the breath. As for other thoughts that come in, you can decide for the time being that they're not-self, they're not yours. You don't have to ask who did them to begin with, or where they came from. The question is, are they worth continuing right now? And the answer is no. You just say, "Okay, they're not-self." And let them go, and get back to work.

In this way, you begin to push against the stream, go against the stream, and as you do that you get more and more sensitive to little tiny thoughts that are just about to form, and you can say No to them too. They're nothing you want to get involved in right now. For the time being, they're not-self.

This whole issue of self and not-self can cause a lot of confusion if you think about it as a question of whether there is a self or not, or who's responsible for things. But if you think about it in the mind's way of dividing things up, as to

things worth getting involved with and things that are not, things it wants to protect and things it doesn't, then it's a lot clearer, and you have a choice.

In fact, we're doing this all the time: We'll identify with a certain thought for a while, and then we decide we don't like it and we drop it. But all too often we're pretty random in our reasons. The Buddha's simply asking you to be a little more systematic and strategic in how you identify and dis-identify with things.

So right now you want to identify with *the meditator*: the voices in the mind that are telling you, "Stay with the breath, stay with the breath, evaluate the breath, when the breath gets good how do you make the most of that sense of pleasure? If you just wallow in it, you're going to destroy the basis for your concentration. You have to have a sense of the body, a sense of the breath. Keep that perception of breath in the body and try to hold a perception that allows the sense of ease to spread."

And then there are energy channels—and the breath is a form of energy—there are energy channels that go throughout the body. They can go through the nerves, they can go through the blood vessels, and as we all know the nerves in the blood vessels get very small and they get everywhere, they cover the whole body. So you think of the breath energy covering the whole body in the same way. You hold that perception in mind, it helps you to settle down. So it's a useful perception, something you want to hold on to.

Once the breath gets really, really still, and you don't have to be evaluating any more—you're just there with the sensation of breathing—there will be times when the breath energy in the body feels full and there's no felt need to breathe. If you're holding a perception in mind that the breath is something you've got to pull from outside, it'll startle you, and you'll feel that something is wrong, that you'll have to start breathing again. But if you hold in mind the perception that the breath is something that actually originates in the body—after all, the air is not going to come in and out of the lungs on its own, there's an energy in the body that has to pull it in and let it go out: If you're focusing on that energy, it's there in the body already. All you have to do is to tend to it, and if it feels like it's full and it doesn't feel like it needs to breathe, you're okay—the perception *allows* this to happen. So that's a perception you want to hold onto.

What you're doing is that you're carving up your experience as to self and not-self in a different way. When a thought appears in the mind, we have to look into it and ask, "Is this something I want to get involved with?" And all too often, we have the feeling that because it's already there we have to finish it off, to see how far it goes. But here the rules are different: A little bit of a stub of a thought appears and you don't have to continue it. If its ends are dangling, leave them

dangling—you're not responsible for continuing or completing every sentence that starts in the mind.

So this is one way in which the perception of not-self is used in the meditation. We're not asking, "Who's doing this?" That's not the issue. The question is, "Is this worth doing?" Or if it's been started, "Is this worth continuing?" Just because something starts in the mind doesn't mean you're committed to it. You've got other things you want to be committed to: committed to the concentration, committed to the breath, or whatever your object of concentration may be. For the time being, that's you. In this way, you're not a victim of everything that comes up in the mind.

There will come stages in the meditation where you're just there with a sense of awareness and you're willing to entertain thoughts as they come up. But that's because you've developed a foundation. You've established your territory, which is just awareness in the present moment. And when that's solid enough, you can let other thoughts in for the purpose of understanding them: What their allure is. Why you would go for them. What their drawbacks are. So you can contemplate them and get a sense of dispassion for them. But before you get to that point, you have to get really good at turning off any thought that's not related to your topic of concentration.

It's like learning how to be a boxer. The first thing they teach you is how to pull back when the opponent gets too aggressive—how to pull back in such a way that you're not exposing yourself to further blows. If anything happens, you pull back, pull back, pull back. And only when you're confident you can pull back out of anything, can you start getting more aggressive with your opponent.

Well, it's the same with the mind. You have to learn how to step out of your thoughts no matter how insistent they are, how important they say they are, or how attractive they are. Or even if they're not attractive, how insistent and repetitive they are. You have to be able to pull out, pull out, pull out, no matter what. That way, you'll be in a position eventually where you can watch them and not get taken over by them.

So when the Buddha talks about not-self, he's simply laying down some ground rules for something we're already doing haphazardly: the issue of what we want to identify with, what we don't want to identify with, and seeing that desire for self-identification or self not-identification as a kind of karma. As with all kinds of karma, the question is, "When is it skillful, when is it not?" And the skillful question is: "What when I do it, will lead to long term welfare and happiness? What will lead to long term harm and suffering?"

It's the same with your thoughts: Which thoughts, when you engage with them, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness, and which thoughts will not? Then judge your thoughts on that standard.

This is how the Buddha himself said he found the right path to awakening after all those many false starts and false attempts, when he finally realized he had to start by simply dividing his thoughts into two sorts: those that were worth developing and those that were not. And the criterion was: What kind of mind state do they come from? And then where do they go? What do they lead you to do? What habits will they develop in the mind?

And that's a set of ground rules that's very different from how we ordinarily think. We go for thoughts that are attractive, thoughts that are interesting, thoughts that look like they're going to be entertaining. We don't look for the long term.

That whole idea that we're simply here to be in the present moment no matter what, has nothing to do with what the Buddha taught. We're in the present moment because karma is being made here in the present moment and we're going to make sure to make it well.

And karma starts with the thoughts. So even though a thought comes up in the mind, you're not committed to identify with it, to take it on as yours. You can step back, identify with different thoughts. Even though that first thought may not want to stop—it may have a momentum of its own—you identify with the thoughts that say, "I'm just going to watch for a while, I'm going to be off to the side, with the hopes of figuring out how to see the weak point in the thought that seems so insistent." After all, as the Buddha pointed out, our thoughts create *ruts* in the mind, or as he said, they *bend* the mind in a particular direction. And once your mind has been bent like that, it takes a while for it to get unbent.

So there will be thoughts that come into the mind and they just don't seem to want to go away, but this is what we have the breath for. Say, "Well, that thought can have that corner of the mind, but I'm going to stay with the breath," and you identify with the part of the mind that wants to stay with the breath. This way, you're not a victim of everything that comes into your mind.

As for where the thoughts come from, as I said, you don't have to ask. Sometimes it seems like we're engaging in self-denial: It's your thought, after all, who else would have thought it? But that's not the question. The question is: Is it worth continuing? Because each moment gives us an opportunity to step out of what we did in the past moment. You can start something and then you begin to realize, "Okay this is not going in a good direction." Well, you have every right to pull out.

So as we work with the breath and develop a sense of well-being that we allow to spread through the body, that gives us another place to stand. It becomes our safe place, our solid place. The image they use a lot in the forest tradition is that the establishings of mindfulness, which are the topics of concentration, are your stronghold. That's a place where you go when the enemy gets dangerous. You've got your stronghold here, and it's a place where you're safe.

Now, sometimes you can make attacks from the stronghold and other times you simply have to hide out in the stronghold to weather whatever the enemy is doing, but you're safe inside here, as long as you stay here and can learn to see those thoughts as other, the thoughts that would pull you away.

That's how you take the Buddha's teachings on not-self and begin to use them in a way that's really skillful—and that's how you get the most out of them.