An Island in the Flood

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The mind, when trained, brings happiness. Cittam dattaṁ sukhāvaham. At the same time, when the mind is not trained, it can bring a lot of suffering. This is why we have to meditate. The word meditation in Pali, bhavana, means to develop those good qualities that can train the mind and get it under control. Because when it’s not under control, you can take the most intense pleasures outside and they still make you miserable. Or you can make yourself miserable around them. As the Buddha said, there are these fermentations in the mind, things that come bubbling up all the time. Thoughts about this, thoughts about that, ideas about this, identities that we assume. And if we’re not careful, they turn into a flood. They overwhelm us. And all too often, we side with them. We jump into the flood. This is why the practice is a matter both of creating an island for yourself and learning to treasure that island, to learn to realize how important it is. This is why the Buddha singled concentration out as something really worthy of respect. This is what we can hold on to in the midst of the flood. At the very least, you can get your bearings. So, as you’re working with the breath, think of it as your lifeline. You hold on to this, and this is where your safety lies. But that in and of itself is not enough. You hold on to the safety. And sometimes you just decide to give in to the pressure of the breath. This is why you need to understand it. Where is it coming from? So simply staying with the stillness is not enough. You have to learn how to use the stillness. In the three steps of the meditation, one is learning how to do it, get the mind to settle down. The second one is learning how to maintain it, keep it going, in the midst of all the things that would pull you away. Even though the whole mind can’t be sustained, at least have a corner of the mind, or one fragment of the mind, where there’s a sense of stillness. Learn how to protect it. Learn how to cherish it. Learn how to respect that. Even at times when it seems small, it’s your way out. We have lots of examples in life of little things when you look after them. They grow. It’s like a little fire in the wind. You have to cup your hands around it, protect it, until it takes the tiny seed of a plant that you’d like to have grow. You have to look after it, make sure nothing comes to eat it up, that it gets proper water and fertilizer. Ultimately, it can grow into a big tree. This is why I have the three trainings, the training in virtue, concentration, and discernment. After saying that all three require respect, the Buddha emphasized the concentration again, because it’s so easy to overlook it, and yet it’s so important. It’s like building a bridge across the river. The pilings on this shore are not that difficult to get in place. The pilings on the far shore are not that difficult to get in place. But it’s the pilings in the middle of the river. Those require a lot of work. That’s what concentration is. It’s the pilings in the middle of the river. So we keep at it again and again and again, keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath, trying to make it as clean as possible. When it’s easy, we do it. When it’s hard, we do it. The Buddha once said that this is so important that even if the practice is so difficult that tears are coming down your cheeks, you stick with it, because the difficulty won’t last forever, and you begin to find that you have resources that you didn’t expect. If you look for them. Of course, simply the power of concentration is not going to be enough. You’ve got to learn how to use your discernment as well. Once you have a sense of an island or a place where you can stay, you turn around and look at all these fermentations bubbling up in the mind. See where they’re coming from. What do they want? What ideas do they have? Every idea that comes up, every desire that comes up in the mind, is not just brute force. There’s a certain understanding that comes behind it. All these things are fabricated in the mind, and every fabrication includes a mental side, a verbal side. But like little kids who’ve learned to get their way simply through the force of their mind, the desires that make the least sense tend to be the ones that are most insistent. So you have to learn patience. This is where the concentration comes in. It allows you to develop patience and endurance as you can question these things as they come flowing out, flowing out, flowing out of the mind. And you have to be insistent in your questioning of them. Why are you here? What do you want? If I find you, if I followed you, where would you take me? And you find that even though in the beginning these things seem awfully powerful and awfully insistent, you can develop your powers of concentration so that you have more endurance than they do. It’s like that picture of the tiger. I saw it in a meditation manual one time. The face of the tiger was extremely detailed and very realistic, but the body of the tiger was folded origami paper. A lot of our strongest emotions and demands of the mind come on really strong in the beginning. But if you stick with your concentration long enough, you realize there’s not that much to them. So this is why we do the concentration when we want to and we do it when we don’t want to. As the Chan Cha once said, “When you feel like it, you do it. When you don’t feel like it, you do it.” Because you learn not to get your impulses and moods. You learn not to put them in a position where they take over, where they’re in charge. Because, after all, where do they lead you? Where do you get when you let them take over? Well, we’ve seen it. It’s all our normal ways of life. We look around us and see everybody pushed around by their moods, pushed around by their impulses. And it’s our desire to find something better than that that has us practicing, because it’s the only way out. So learn to value this island in the flood. If it starts getting washed away, well, you can establish it again. It’s as if you had all these truckloads of dirt that you could bring in. Keep piling them on, piling them on. So the dirt is not just plain dirt, but you find that you’ve got a resource there where you can get hold of rocks that are more resistant to the flood. And as you follow the flood back to its source, you find it’s in these fermentations in the mind, these little things that keep bubbling up, bubbling up. And if you catch them in time, they don’t turn into floods. It’s like discovering that the flood came from this broken pipe or a spigot. You can fix the pipe. You can turn off the spigot. At the very least, you can turn down the volume, turn down the quantity, so it’s less and less of a flood and more and more of a trickle. It’s this combination of depending on the stillness of the mind and your ability not to fall along, not to get deluded by the thoughts of the mind that keep pushing you away from the breath. So no matter how attractive or whatever they seem, you don’t get carried away by them. You don’t get fooled by them. So we have to learn respect for the training. Sometimes it seems very small, not all that impressive, as we see our defilements taking over. But it’s not always going to be that way. Learn how to protect it. Learn how to cherish it. And you find that ultimately you do develop that island that the flood cannot wash away, strengthened by your conviction and your persistence and your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment, all these things working together. So these things become what the Pali calls indriya, these faculties that take over the mind. They become in charge. In the past, it was the defilements that were in charge. It’s like a revolution. You want to put your skillful qualities in charge. Because when they’re in charge, you live in peace.

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