Don’t Go with the Flow

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When I was in Thailand, there would be times when we’d be invited for a house blessing. And my favorite one was one in which we didn’t do the normal house blessing chants at all. It was also one of the few times that John Foong actually went out for an invitation like that. Instead of reciting chants, we had a Dhamma discussion. The woman who whose house we were blessing had invited her sister. Her sister had read a lot of Dhamma books, and she had a question for John Foong. The purpose of meditation is to make your mind empty, right? And he said, “No, you’ve got to give the mind something to hold on to. If you make your mind empty, it’s like leaving the front door to your house open, and anything can come in and take over the house. You need something to hold on to.” So the things passing through don’t take over. The Buddha talks about change a lot. There are a lot of types of change, he says, not to resist, but there are others that we should resist. This is why we need a good foundation in the meditation to give us the strength and the stability so that when things come flowing through, we don’t go flowing along with them. The mind stays in place. This is why we hold on to the breath. It’s also why we try to get interested in the breath, explore the breath energy in the body. Both because the mind needs something interesting in order to hang on, and because you can create a sense of well-being as you do this. In his instructions for breath meditation, the Buddha talks about getting to know long-breathing, getting to know short-breathing, getting a good sense of what the variations of the breath are like. And then immediately he goes on to being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. It’s that sense of the whole body being your foundation. That’s important to develop. Because that’s the kind of foundation you can take with you wherever you go. Not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through the day. You can take your whole body as your foundation and think as if you’re a screen. Think of events as flowing through. Thoughts flow through. Sounds flow through. Other people’s words, attitudes, they just flow through. But you don’t leave the breath. You don’t leave the sense of the breath energy in the whole body. You can think of it as being a big screen. The wind goes through the screen. The screen stays in place. It doesn’t get blown around by the wind. It’s firmly attached to the wall, but it’s open enough so that things can flow through and not get stuck. So while you have the time to be here with your eyes closed, try to get as into the breath as you can. Because this path that we’re following here, even though it’s not the goal, it too is totally fabricated, unlike the goal, which is totally unfabricated. That means the path will have to change. But you don’t use that as a reason to give up on the path. The common image they have in the texts is of the path as a raft across the river. If you’re going to make a raft, you want to tie it up well. So it doesn’t get scattered by the current and leave you floating on one single log down the river. So you want a good path, a good solid one, that’ll last long enough to get you across the river. So even though someday the raft will fall apart and the wood will disintegrate, that’s not an issue because you’ve made use of the raft while it was still good. And you made sure that you’re raft was well tied together with vines or ropes or whatever it is you can find. So you can depend on it as you’re going across, and you want to make sure you can hold onto it. So try to get a good sense of how the breath is flowing in the body. When you’re breathing in, breathing out, what is the breath energy? Try to get a good sense of that. Sometimes you find yourself actually forcing the blood in different parts of the body, which is not the breath, because that can lead to headaches and it can lead to a sense of things being tight in one part of the body or another. Think of the breath as flowing freely around and through everything, even the solid parts of your body. Hold in mind the perception that they’re made out of atoms and the atoms have a lot of space. And energy can flow very freely through atoms. That’s the image that helps make the breath, not cause any undue pressure, say, up in your head or in your back or in your chest. If there’s a sense of ease, think of that flowing along with the breath to fill the whole body. Again, this helps solidify your foundation. If it feels good to be with the breath, you’re much more likely to stay with it as you go through the day. If it feels tight or constricted, you’re going to drop it and go with whatever flows through. And the “flowing through” refers not only to events coming from outside, but also events in your mind. You’re able to step back and look at your thoughts and see them as part of a cause-and-effect pattern. And when you’re able to step back from them, then you can do something about them. Again, there’s a popular misconception that mindfulness is all about just letting things happen on their own without your interfering. A lot of people teach that, but the Buddha was not one of them. He taught that when mindfulness really is in charge, what you’re doing is remembering. That was his definition of mindfulness. It’s being able to keep something in mind. And here you’re remembering that if something unskillful comes into the mind, in other words, a thought or a motivation that’s going to lead to suffering, lead to affliction either for yourself or other people, you’re trying to get rid of it. If something’s going to be skillful, lead to your happiness. Your genuine happiness is the genuine happiness of others. If it’s not there, you’re trying to give rise to it. So it’s not just watching things arising and passing away and not doing anything about it. There are certain things you want to arise and you’re going to encourage to arise, and other things you’re trying to get to pass away more quickly than they might otherwise. But to see clearly which is which, it’s good to have a place to step back and watch when this thought flows through the mind. What comes in its wake? What are its eddies like? When that thought comes through, what does it leave in the mind? These thoughts are like different currents. Some of them can cause the bank of a river to fall away. They can build up sandbars here. Thoughts can do all kinds of things. Just like currents in a river can build sandbars, destroy sandbars, undercut the bank of a river. So you have to be careful. Some things come flowing through and you want to divert them so they don’t come flowing through again. But as for things you don’t understand yet, you can watch them and step back from them. When the Buddha talked about change, he didn’t say that all change is a good thing or you just have to put up with change wherever it’s going to go. You learn that change has certain patterns. When you see that, then you can start manipulating the patterns. Thoughts of greed, aversion, and delusion come into the mind and you recognize them. These are going to cause trouble. You learn not to get involved with them so they can disappear as quickly as possible. You will also find that a lot of the ability of thoughts to stay in the mind comes not from some outside force or something beyond your control. The mind is fabricating right here, right now, often in line with old habits. But if you bring awareness to the process, you can change those habits. Based on what you can remember as to what’s worked in the past, what hasn’t worked in the past, which is a kind of knowledge that you keep on having to refine as you go through life. But it’s your ability to remember what worked, what didn’t work. That’s what allows for the refinement. So we’re not always going with the flow. The Buddha talked of a meditator as someone who goes against the flow. His image of a stream is not that it’s going to take you to beautiful places, totally in safety. You look at the rivers of the world. They’ve got rapids. They have whirlpools. They have all kinds of ways of destroying your raft if you’re not careful. And it’s the same with the currents of the mind, the currents of the world around you. You want something dependable that you can use to make your way across, in full knowledge of the fact that the currents are dangerous. You’ve got to hold on to your raft. So whichever image you use—the body as a big screen, the path as a raft—always remember there are some things you’ve got to hang on to so you can let the rest of the things just flow right through. But you don’t get carried away by them. You don’t get swept away by them. Jon Chah has a nice image. He says, “It’s like you have a house with one seat. And as long as you stay in the seat, then other people can come. But you don’t give the seat to them. If they’re going to stay in the house, they have to stand around. And usually people who are forced to stand around, they don’t stay. The breath is your one seat here. Greed, aversion, and delusion can come, but you don’t give them the seat. You are fully inhabiting your body. You’re fully inhabiting the breath. The breath is the seat. And it’s fully inhabiting your awareness. You’ll be aware of other things, but you let them flow through. That way they don’t take over.

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