Choose Your Wave

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One of the most important principles to keep in mind as you’re meditating is that you have the choice of what you want to identify with that’s going on in your mind. You think about the brain, the nervous system, just churning up all kinds of stuff. And in your experience, as the Buddha said, you want to experience it as the result of past action. These are processes or currents or waves that you set in motion, but that was something that was done in the past. Some waves you want to ride with and others you don’t. So when you’re trying to get the mind to settle down and other distracting thoughts come through, just remind yourself that you don’t have to get involved. They’re just waves. This is where the teaching on not-self gets really useful. You don’t have to worry about what a horrible person you were to get those waves in motion sometime in the past. That’s not the issue right now. The issue is which waves you want to ride. And the wave that says, “You want to stay here and stay with the breath,” you want to ride with that wave. Keep it going. In Thailand, they have a phrase, “Santho,” which means basically to continue weaving. The concentration is something you want to continue weaving for the rest of the hour. Take that initial intention you had that you want to get the mind to settle down. You want it to stay here. Weave that. Continue with that intention. And as for other stray or random intentions that come up, you don’t have to get involved. Just let them stay unwoven, frayed ends. Think of this in terms of karma. The karma that’s really important is what you’re doing right now, your intentions right now. So you don’t have to get all your thoughts in order and get everything all straightened out before you can settle down. They’re going to come running through just like the noise that comes through. We have no control over when the helicopters are going to come over, make noise while we’re meditating. And have that same attitude toward your thoughts. They’ll come bubbling up. These little strands will come and appear. You’ve just got to let them pass. And even though you recognize them, obviously, as related to your past actions, you don’t have to identify with them right now. This is where the not-self teaching gets really, really useful, if you take it into areas where you’re trying to determine whether there is a self or there isn’t a self. Then you get all entangled. I was talking with someone the other day who somebody had certified as a stream-enter, and apparently the insight that led to that was that everything was empty and there was nothing there. And she was complaining that she had trouble getting up in the morning because, after all, everything is empty. What’s there to do? That’s not a way of thinking. That’s just a sense of being lost, being purposeless. And the idea that there is nothing there can really get you all tangled up. There’s lots going on. There are things there. The main thing that’s there right now is that there’s suffering. There’s a potential there for happiness. There are pleasures and there are pains. Come from actions. And because you can’t lay claim to the pleasures or lay claim to the pains, you can use them, though. You can take them as tools. You can’t gather them up and put them on the shelf and say, “This is mine. These are my trophies.” But they’re tools. The pleasure of the breath right now, when it gets comfortable. You use that as a tool. You ride with that. When you have a sense of being centered, you want to protect that sense of being centered, because it will yield good results. The Buddha’s not saying that there are nothing but processes, but he is saying that if you look at things in terms of processes, you can get a lot out of it. It’s really helpful. So the question is, what lies behind the processes? He says, “Don’t ask.” Because that pulls you away from the line of thinking that can really help you here. If you bring a strong sense of self into the meditation, then your self suddenly becomes either built up or torn down by the meditation. The Buddha talks about how people get very proud of their jhana, and that destroys it. But there’s also the problem of people who can’t get the mind to settle down, and they can get really, really upset about it and turn on themselves. That’s not helpful either. But if you say, “There’s nobody there,” okay, well, then why bother? I’ve been struck recently with a question about the number of people who find pleasure in saying that. The Buddha’s not really talking about anything transcendent in terms of nirvana. He’s just talking about making us happy in our present lives as they are. So get over it. Don’t think that there’s anything really of permanent value here. It’s just kind of a nice coping mechanism. And for some reason, they want to think that. It’s very bizarre. The Buddha’s offering you something really important here. He says there is the possibility of awakening, of a happiness that doesn’t die. He talks about a consciousness, as he says, without surface, something that lies outside of the aggregates. He mentions that only twice, but just to alert you to the fact that it’s not a nothing out there. Other times he’s a little bit more rigorous and he says, “Okay, you really can’t say there is anything left or there’s nothing left. But,” he says, “that dimension that you can’t describe can be experienced, and it really is worth experiencing. It’s something that should be known, something that should be experienced, something really is transcendent.” If there were no self, there’d be nothing. At the end of life, everything just goes poof and that’s it. So we are working on something that’s really important. There are things you do want to hang on to, hold on to. Another strange statement I heard recently was that the core belief of Buddhism is that life is suffering. That’s not the core belief. In fact, the Buddha never said that to begin with. The core belief is something totally other than that. It’s that the Buddha really was awakened. He awoke to something deathless, and it was through his own efforts. And it wasn’t because he was somebody who had some special powers that human beings can’t gain through their own practice or can’t develop within themselves. These are all qualities that we all can develop. Being heedful, being ardent, being resolute, that’s how we gain his awakening. And it’s something that’s available to all of us. So it’s important that you understand what the teaching on not-self is for. It’s for stripping away the clinging or the sense of responsibility for things that are going to weigh us down, get in the way. But you do have the choice that there are other things you can identify with. Eventually you’ll be able to get past that identification. In fact, that’s one of the final steps in the path, when there’s no need for having any kind of sense of self at all. But that’s when nothing needs to be done. As long as there’s something that needs to be done, you’ll be developing a sense of self, trying to make it skillful. And you do have the choice which of your actions are you going to identify with right now, which of your intentions, which of the thoughts bubbling up in the mind, will be a useful wave to ride. It’s like a good surfer. You learn how to choose your waves. Some waves are going to send you crashing against the shore. You don’t want those waves. Other waves are just little bumps in the water that don’t really go anywhere. You want the waves that’ll deliver you to the shore with a smooth ride, a safe ride. So your intention to get the mind still, that’s something you want to hold on to. Other intentions that come through, just regard them as the sound of that plane just now. It just went right through. You didn’t have to get involved with it. If the thoughts come back again and again and again, you may have to do something to cut away their appeal. But the first line of defense against thoughts like that is simply to just drop them. Ajaan Chah has a nice observation. He says it’s not a case of being pulled away by the thoughts and having to pull your attention back to the breath. If you let go of that thought wave, you’ll be right here. It didn’t really take you anywhere. It created this little sense of becoming. But the becoming isn’t really anywhere. It’s like waking up from a dream. You don’t have to pull yourself back to where you fell asleep. You’re right there. So pick up that strand, pick up that thread, and continue weaving. Pick up that original wave and ride with it. Because you do have the choice. In the Buddhist terms, there’s what’s called the noble search and the ignoble search. The noble search is for something deathless. And as I said, it’s very strange that there are people who don’t want to hear about this. They’d rather that this were an impossibility so they could just be left alone. Well, they could be just left alone. Just not even bother with the teachings, but they want to erase what the Buddha had to say. That’s what’s strange. Don’t erase the Dhamma in your heart. Don’t erase the potential for a true happiness in your heart. There is this noble search. Some of the waves of the mind can help with that noble search. You’re seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. Where is the stress right now? And what can you see that’s going on in the mind right now that’s contributing to the stress? How can you develop a sense of dispassion for it? Well, you work on the path. This is what makes those noble truths noble. They’re part of that noble search. They inform that search. They give you direction. They help you sort through what kinds of things to just be watched and what kind of things you have to let go of and what kind of things have to be developed. It’s in the developing that you have to have a certain amount of desire. With the desire, there’s going to come a sense of clinging and a sense of self. But if you learn how to cling skillfully, it’s like riding a wave with skill. So make your choice as well, because they make a huge difference. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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