

## *Directing the Flow*

*December 30, 2005*

The mind well trained brings happiness; the mind untrained brings suffering and stress. The Buddha once said that it's a sign of a wise person to realize how much the mind needs training.

If it's untrained, it's like an untrained animal. If you have a dog that hasn't been trained, it can't live in the house. If a horse hasn't been trained, you can't ride it. If an elephant that hasn't been trained, you can't get it to do any work. And it's the same with the mind. If it hasn't been trained, it'll make a mess here, a mess there, all over your life. Just as things are going well, you act on some stupid desire: Greed, anger, and delusion come in and make a mess of what you've done.

We see this happening all over the world, and yet when it comes time to train our own minds, we resist. Because training means pointing it in a direction it otherwise might not want to go. So it becomes a battle of the wills. Part of you wants to go whatever old way you went before, the way an untrained horse would just want to run around the meadow, and part of you realizes it needs to be trained.

So there's always going to be this tension in the practice. And an important part of gaining the upper hand is learning how to identify with the desires that want to train the mind.

It's not so much reason versus desire, as reasonable desires versus unreasonable desires. Because the purpose of this is not simply to be harsh and disciplinary and then come down hard on things. It's to find true happiness. You want a happiness that lasts, a happiness that really is satisfying, a happiness that doesn't turn into something else. This is why we practice.

It's not a practice of just accepting everything as it is or of going with the flow. A lot of it has to go against the flow—or rather, it redirects the flow. That's what the three trainings are all about: the training in heightened virtue, training in heightened mind, training in heightened discernment.

The precepts for example: They're meant to be clear-cut. They're promises you make to yourself because the practice of learning to keep a promise to yourself is very important for the whole rest of the practice. You make up your mind you're not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, you're not going to lie, you're not going to take intoxicants. Or as a monk, you make up your mind you're going to stick with all the precepts: all the training rules that the Buddha laid down. And suddenly you find a wall here, and a wall there. Things you used to be able to do with the greatest of ease, all of a sudden you can't do anymore. So you have to learn skill in holding by that promise.

If you simply feel bottled up by the precepts, there will come a point where you'll explode. You have to use wisdom, you have to use discernment in sticking with the precepts. When

there's a desire inside that comes up against a precept, that wants to say something that the precepts don't allow, look in your mind for the desire that wants to stick by the precept. And understand why it's important to stick by the precept. This way you learn to train yourself intelligently and effectively.

And the more discernment you bring to the process, the easier it becomes to stick by the precepts, because you keep reminding yourself, "This is why I have this precept. There's a really good reason here." You need to develop a willingness to listen to the training, to take the training seriously, to keep reminding yourself that there's a reason for these rules. There's a reason for the way the Buddha set out the training. It may not make sense immediately, or may certainly not appeal to some of your desires, but it's good to learn that you can't take your desires as your guide.

Maybe the Buddha knew more than you do. And the best way to test that is to follow his teachings and see where they lead, until you get to the point where you feel comfortable with the precepts. Then it begins to go against the grain to even think about going against them. That's when you can say the mind is beginning to be trained.

Because the Buddha is working on one very basic, very elemental and natural desire: We want to be happy, and once we have happiness we don't want it to change. And we certainly don't want our own actions to destroy it. So it's not as if he's asking us to do something unnatural. He's just taking our natural tendencies and training them in the right direction.

It's like training a plant: Say you've got some ivy and you want it to grow up the wall in a particular pattern. Well, you can train it, you bend the little tip here, tie it down there. You're not asking it to do anything unnatural. You're not asking it to develop leaves that ivy won't grow. You're not asking it to become a tree, or anything that ivies can't do. You're just figuring out how to make its natural tendencies go in the direction you want them to go. Once it's been directed in that way, it'll do its natural thing. It'll keep growing and growing the way ivy grows. It's simply that you've got it growing in the direction you want it to go.

The same with training the mind: We're not asking it to do anything unnatural. We're just taking your natural desires and aiming them all in the same direction—toward true happiness.

The same hold true with the training in heightened mind, which is basically training in right concentration. You look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation: Mindfully you breathe in; mindfully you breathe out. You know when you're breathing in long, you know when you're breathing out long. You know when you're breathing in short, you know when you're breathing out short.

And then you train yourself—all the remaining steps are trainings. There's got to be an element of will in each of them. Be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out. This takes effort, because the mind has a tendency to shrink the range of its awareness and focus on one little spot: this spot here, then that spot there. It's kind of like a spotlight that moves

around, like those crazy spotlights you sometimes see aimed up at the sky, moving in all directions—only that the mind is crazier, jumping here, jumping there, one spot to the next.

When you can get your conscious awareness to settle down and spread to fill the whole body so that you're consciously aware of every part of the body as you breathe in, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, it takes training. But it's not unnatural. Simply that you're directing the mind to stay here, and the best way to keep it in the present moment is to fill the whole body in the present moment, so that your idea of the hand is in the hand, your idea of the head is in the head, your idea of the feet is in the feet. Then maintain that. At first it may seem to go against the grain because you haven't been doing that. But as you get more and more used to it, you settle down and find that it really is a good place to stay—and a good way to stay.

Otherwise, the mind is like a cat that's always ready to jump. It lands on one thing that's kind of rickety so it's already tensed up, ready to jump the next time it has to, constantly in this mode of tension. But if you allow your awareness to meld into the body and have a sense of ease in the body, it doesn't feel the need that's it's going to have to jump, doesn't need to tense up—a much better way of maintaining your awareness. It's like a cat lying stretched out on the floor in a spot of sunlight, totally relaxed.

And so it goes, on through all the other steps of breath meditation: training yourself to calm the breathing, training yourself to breathe in a way where you're sensitive to pleasure, sensitive to rapture. That takes training because sometimes the incipient stages of pleasure and rapture are hard to notice. They're subtle, like little tiny sprouts: If you don't pay any attention to them, if you don't appreciate them, you just step on them and they're dead. But if you allow them to grow, they can turn into big plants.

The same with the sense of ease and rapture: It doesn't seem like much to begin with, but there is the potential for rapture in every little nerve ending. Once you locate it, tend to it, allow it to grow, it can take over and give you a strong sense of refreshment and fullness all through the body. And then you allow that to calm down.

Again, these are all steps in the training. You realize you can't just stay there with the pleasure and the rapture. It's not solid enough. You want something more solid than this, so the Buddha lays out the further steps. And though each step requires an act of will, there is a natural progression—natural in the sense that you're taking a natural desire, your desire for happiness, and you're giving it direction.

The same with heightened discernment: seeing where the acts of the mind are causing stress and suffering; learning to see that they're not necessary. Part of this goes against the grain, because the Buddha's asking you to step outside of your thoughts and watch them as events, patterns of cause and effect in the mind, without getting involved in the dramas and the narratives that come from being immersed in the thoughts.

It's a new habit, but once you develop it, you begin to realize that it's the best way to function, the best way to deal with your mind, to use your mind as a tool, so that you can direct it where you want to go. You want it to go to true happiness. Well, this is how you do it.

It goes against old habits, but it's not asking you to do anything unnatural. Like the ivy: You want it to go up the chimney, so if you find any little strands that are going off in the other direction, you bend them up, tie them down a little bit for a while, and then you'll find that they naturally grow up the chimney.

You want the mind to grow toward true happiness. Well, this is how you do it. You've got to bend it here, bend it there. Force it here, force it there. Use wisdom and discernment and intelligence in how you do the forcing, so at least part of you is happy to go. And over time, more and more of you will be happier to go, because you begin to see the results of the practice. It really does lead to true happiness.

So we're not here just to relax into things as they are, or to learn total acceptance of things as they are, or go with the flow—we're trying to *direct* the flow.

The image the Buddha gives is of engineers building dams and then digging canals to direct the water to where you want it to go. It waters your crops instead of just flowing on by and going down to the sea. So many images in the Pali Canon are of just that: directing things, fashioning things, shaping things. Irrigators directing the water into their crops, fletchers making arrows, and as the Buddha said, the really wise people are those who take the same attitude toward training their minds.