

# Getting Untangled from Thorns

May 26, 2013

As we meditate, we try to stay with the body because otherwise we're swimming around in our thoughts. Our thoughts are like many different currents in a river or an ocean. This current goes north; that current goes south. This other current spins around, and it spins you around so that you begin to lose track of what's north or south. In other words, it's easy to lose your sense of what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and what's not. You can't regain it until you can pull back and observe these things a little bit from the outside. In fact, the more you can observe them from the outside, the better.

So staying with the body gives you an anchor. It gives you a spot on which you can stand. It's like an island. The island doesn't flow down the river. It doesn't get pushed around by the currents of the ocean. And that way, you begin to see: "Oh, here's a current coming in from that direction; here's a current coming in from this direction." You can recognize the directions, but as you stand on the island you don't have to flow along with the currents.

Another reason for staying with the body, staying with the breath, is that it really does anchor you in the present moment. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present. And often, it acts as a good mirror of what's going on in the mind. Sometimes there are subtle currents that you otherwise wouldn't notice, but because they have an effect on the subtle aspects of the breath energy, you can detect that they're there.

So there are a lot of good reasons for wanting to stay with the body. It helps you observe thoughts arise, pass away, and it gives you something solid to hold onto. As thoughts begin to subside, you're not lost. You're right here where everything important is happening. The issue, of course, is that before your thoughts begin to subside you have to get through a tangle. To change the analogy, they're like lots of different thorny bushes. You get past one and find that you're snagged on it. You have to go back and undo whatever's been snagging you.

I was up on the North Rim this last week, and there are a lot of little locust bushes with lots of long thorns. As I was hiking through the forest, my old blanket was constantly getting caught. I'd have to stop, go back, and very carefully pull out that thorn, pull out this thorn. I found that in doing that, I learned a lot about thorns, and I learned a lot about the weave in my blanket. It's the same in dealing with distracting thoughts. We want to get past them; we'd rather not have to deal with them. Often we're very impatient. "When will I get past this?" And sometimes we do get past a particular thought, but then it comes back again.

It's very easy to get discouraged. But you've got to look at the distractions as opportunities to gain understanding, to gain discernment, to pull back and see what's caught and where and why. You gain a lot of insights into your own mind this way. So even though you're trying to get past your thoughts, still it requires patience and a willingness to learn—often the very lessons you don't want to learn about yourself. Some people avoid this by saying, "Well, I'll just accept whatever comes, whatever goes, and not worry about trying to get the thoughts to settle down." But you're never really going to understand them that way. You can observe a little bit, little flashes of things as they go past. To really understand them, though, you have to resist them and learn how not to get discouraged when they overcome your resistance, but just simply ask yourself, "Okay, where was the weak link in my resistance here?"

So we have to use a combination of patience and persistence with these thoughts, in the same way that getting my blanket untangled from the thorns required patience and persistence. If I were in too much of a hurry, the blanket would rip. If I gave up and just left the blanket there, then I'd be left without a blanket, and it was cold up there. I needed a blanket, so I needed to untangle it—carefully.

In the same way, we need our mind to be functioning well, so we have to untangle it carefully. Always hold in mind the fact that this is a long-term project we're working on

here, and a very delicate one. You can't just rush through things. It's also especially important not to get discouraged when you've worked through something and then find it coming back again. It's not a sign that you've failed, simply that you learned one lesson, but there are other lessons you have to learn as well.

Most of the problems we have in our lives come from impatience. We're a very impatient nation, a very impatient generation. But the impatience often gets us into trouble. Sometimes wanting to do something quickly does give rise to quick results, and sometimes it just messes things up. I understand there's an Internet company that has as one of its slogans: Move Fast and Break Things. Well, that's not what we're doing with the meditation. We're not trying to break anything; we're trying to understand things. And that requires untangling them, sometimes one thread at a time.

When a particular instance of anger comes up, sometimes many, many threads are caught. Or they catch you. Many, many thorns catch you in your blanket. And when you've learned about one thorn, that doesn't mean you've solved the problem. When you come back and the other thorns get you, it doesn't mean that removing that first thorn was a failure. It was just one step in a very complicated process.

It's the same with lust. You find that there are many layers to lust: your attraction to a particular image, to particular details in what you see, your fantasy narratives, your role in the narratives, your attraction just to the feeling of having lust. Then there are all the little details. That's why the Buddha said, when he was describing restraint, that you notice the details or the themes and variations—the general themes and the little, tiny things that can set you off. It's not that you don't look at people or anything at all, but simply that you learn how to notice: What are the things that attract you? That's where you learn some really important lessons about the power of perception.

Certain perceptions have certain ideas associated with them, and it's all pretty arbitrary. As the Buddha said, it's fabricated. You want to see these fabrications in action because that's where ignorance lies—the big root that we're trying to dig out here. If you wonder where the ignorance is right now, look for where your mind is fabricating something. And perception's a very useful fabrication to focus on. After all, concentration itself is what the Buddha calls a “perception attainment.” You have to have a certain mental image of the breath in order to be able to focus on the sensation of the breath—and to see it as a breath sensation.

Many people have trouble right here. They say, “I'm trying to focus on my breath, but I just keep coming back to being with the body.” Well, what is the immediate sensation of the body but breath energy? It's a question of perception, seeing it that way. Then you begin to realize, “Okay, you can see it that way.” Or you could see it in other ways, but the question is, which perception is most useful. Realize that you have the choice. There are lots of different ways you can perceive things.

It's like going to another country that has a different system of medicine. Their whole analysis of diseases: the different categories of diseases, the way they've organized them and the way they treat them... There's a whole different body of perceptions that they apply to diseases, even though they're talking about many of the same things that happen to us here in America. There are a few variations, some different diseases that we don't have here, yet many of the basic diseases are pretty much the same. But their way of categorizing them, their way of treating them, their way of understanding why they're there in the body is very different. Instead of simply dismissing their approach as something strange, you learn from it. Sometimes it can treat diseases in ways that are more direct and effective than anything you've known here. You realize, “Okay, there is that angle from which I could look at things, and it works.”

Once you get a sense of the power of perception in your concentration, then it's a lot easier to see it at work in your thoughts: how one particular perception can ignite anger and another perception can ignite lust or fear, greed or envy. You begin to realize how arbitrary these things are. That in itself is very liberating. So, if you find that your blanket is snagged on the thorns, just stop and very carefully take things apart one thorn at a time. Have the patience so you don't rip your blanket, but the persistence so that you actually get it free.

An important part of the skill in the meditation is just that: knowing how to balance these things. This is one of the main ways that we develop discernment in the practice. If the practice were simply a matter of going to a far extreme, whatever that extreme may be, it wouldn't require much thought or discernment. It would require just a lot of pushing. As the Buddha said, his path is a middle path, and it's "middle" in lots of different ways. You have to figure out how much food is enough and how much food is too much if you're trying to practice. How much sleep is enough; how much sleep is too much? How much pressure to put on your object of meditation: If you don't put any pressure at all, you'll be flying away. You put too much pressure, and things begin to clamp down, you don't feel comfortable here. How much thinking is necessary? How much thinking is too much?

As you engage in these issues, you find that you really do develop your powers of discernment. You develop sensitivity to what's working and what's not, what's skillful and what's not. This is where the discernment becomes your own because, after all, it is your stress, it is your suffering that you're dealing with, along with the fact that you're causing it and that these are things you experience from within. You can read about these things and have all kinds of theories and have everything all correct so that you can explain it to other people. But if you don't actually see it happening within your present awareness, it's just perceptions. And even correct perceptions can hide things if your gaze is not all-around.

So again, this is one of the reasons why we stay here with the body. You start by experiencing the body from within. You don't worry about how other people might explain what you're sensing here. You ask yourself, "How am I sensing this?" We use the Buddha's categories of breath energy, earth, water, and fire to help give ourselves a vocabulary for getting a sense of what's going on here. Then you begin to see your thoughts as they have an impact on the body and on your feelings.

And as you get sensitive right here, you get more and more sensitive to where there's stress and where there's no stress, what kind of fabrication leads to more stress, what kind of fabrication leads to less stress. It's right here that everything becomes apparent—apparent in a way that may be unexpected, but really does you a lot of good. So right here is where you belong.