

The Mind Like Water

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The Buddha often compares the mind to water, flowing water, and it flows because of craving. All our defilements, all of our emotions, are like flowing water, and we have to bring them into check if we want to understand them, get some control over them.

As the Buddha said, it's through mindfulness that they come into check. It's like a dam you put across the river. The water stops for a while and gets still. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have the potential to flow. It can flow if there's a crack in the dam, which is why we need discernment. And for discernment to work, the mind has to get very still.

There's another analogy where the Buddha talks about the different hindrances that come up as you're trying to use your mindfulness to get the mind into concentration. Sensual desire is like dye that you put into the water. Ill will is like boiling the water. Sloth and torpor are like slime and algae that grow in the water. Restlessness and anxiety are like wind blowing over the water. And doubt is like putting the water into a dark place. In none of these cases can you see your reflection clearly in the water.

We're trying to get rid of those hindrances so that we can get the water still again. Now, some people have noted that the image there implies that the problems come from outside. The wind comes from outside. The heat that boils the water comes from outside, which is one of the reasons why when you're practicing meditation you want to close your eyes, get off to a secluded place. But that still doesn't mean that the potential for the water to continue flowing isn't there. It's there. Things can come up from within the mind.

In fact, those are the real problem. If they weren't the problem, you'd come to a place like this, go sit under a tree, and your mind would be perfectly still: nothing to bother you but the sound of the wind in the leaves or the insects and animals in the leaves on the ground in the orchard. But we can sit here under the trees, everything can be perfectly still, no outside disturbances, and still the mind is creating problems for itself.

As the Buddha said, things arise from within the mind that can destroy it. He compares it to bamboo and reeds. I've never seen a bamboo bear fruit, but apparently when a bamboo does bear fruit, that's the end of the bamboo. The same with reeds: When reeds bear fruit, it kills the reed. The same with greed, aversion, and delusion: They can arise in the mind and can kill off your goodness,

even if there's nothing outside disturbing you at all. So you have to look into these tendencies within the mind itself.

This means that once we've made the effort to calm the mind down, it's not the case that the job is over. Here again, you hear some misinterpretations, the idea being that once the hindrances have gone, the mind is clear and still, you've made it. That's what we're here for. That's the innate nature of the mind. But the Buddha never talks about the innate nature of the mind. He talks about how changeable the mind is. And even clear water has the potential to flow and take you to bad places if you're not careful. So this is where discernment has to come in to see what's causing the flow to begin with. And this is where you have to bring in five qualities, what the Buddha calls the five factors for exertion.

The first is conviction in the Buddha's awakening: that he was able to cleanse his mind through his own efforts. And it took a lot of work. It's easy to focus on the extremes that he went to and say, "Well, he was trying too hard, pushing himself too much." Which is true, but then the question is, how much pushing is just right? As he says, for some people, just right will be a pleasant path. Other people will require a more difficult path. The stronger your defilements, the stronger those issues welling up in the mind, then the more work needs to be done. But you take heart from the Buddha's example. As Ven. Ananda said, you realize that there are other people who've gained awakening, you're not there yet, but you can tell yourself, "If they can do it, why can't I?" That's conviction.

The second quality is that your health is basically good, because the path going to require a certain amount of physical strength. Remember that the Buddha himself, after those austerities, when he realized that he was going to have to get the mind into the right concentration, realized also that his body was too weak for that. So keeping yourself in good health is a part of the practice. This doesn't mean the practice is impossible for people who are sick. It's just that it's an extra difficulty.

The third quality is that you're honest. As the Buddha says, you're not deceitful, you're not fraudulent. Whatever is coming up in your meditation, you tell your teacher so that the teacher can help. This quality of honesty, of course, relates to being honest with yourself. I don't know how many people come here with grandiose ideas of what they can accomplish and then they crash. They have to be willing to look at what's actually going on in the mind and take clear stock of where their strengths are, where their weaknesses are. If there's any tendency to misrepresent things to yourself, it's going to be a big problem.

So you have to be very clear: When a defilement comes up, you admit, yes, this is a defilement. When you have a little bit of concentration, nurture it. Don't

throw it away and say, “Well, this isn’t good enough. I want something bigger and more dramatic.” You take the little things as they come and you nurture them. That’s how they grow. Redwood trees come from tiny seeds. And it’s not the case that every seed that comes down from the redwood tree grows into another redwood tree. Many of them die, but a few of them survive if they get the right conditions.

So you try to provide the right conditions for your concentration, the right conditions for getting the mind to be stable, still. This requires, of course, that you be honest with yourself when things are going well and when things are not.

The next quality builds on that, which is persistence. You keep working at developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. You don’t shirk your duties. You don’t take time off and say, “Well, I was practicing for a while, but it’s difficult, so I need to rest.” When you’re just resting, you’re just creating more problems for yourself—when you rest from this kind of activity, the activity of keeping watch over your mind and recognizing that not everything that comes into your mind can be relied on.

As I said earlier, the things that destroy the mind come from within, just like the fruit of the bamboo. It’s not the case that, once the mind is still, you can trust everything that comes up in it. People have had lots of strange visions, lots of strange realizations. There’s a whole list given in the commentaries of what are called the corruptions of insight, where things arise in the quiet mind and convince you that you’ve gained some attainment, you’ve gained some understanding that’s really special. You latch on to them without really considering things, without noticing the defilements that arise within the mind around that supposed attainment.

So you have to be careful of what’s coming up in your mind. Just because a thought labels itself as your thought, that this is what you think, doesn’t mean that you have to believe the label. There are some thoughts that keep coming through the mind and you’re familiar with them because they come so many times that there’s the attitude that, “Of course, these are my thoughts; of course, these are my opinions.” That’s simply a sign that they’ve been hanging around for a long time. People who hang around for a long time are not necessarily the people you want to take as your friends.

The fifth factor for exertion is discernment itself. The Buddha calls this penetrating discernment into arising and passing away. Now, this doesn’t mean that you simply see things coming and going, and leave it at that. When the Buddha uses the word *penetrative*, it means that you see that some things arising

should be maintained, should be encouraged. Other things arising should be pushed to pass away faster than they would otherwise.

In other words, you're not just a passive observer of things. You're passing judgment. After all, you want the kind of knowledge that leads to the right ending of stress, the right ending of suffering, and that doesn't come simply by watching things passively. To understand things, you have to get involved in the causal process, like any scientist doing an experiment. You change this, see what happens; you change that, see what happens. You get involved.

This is the kind of intelligence you want on the path. There's a tendency to say, "We shouldn't try to figure things out. We don't want to engage in intellectual speculation." But figuring things out and intellectual speculation are two different things. Figuring things out means figuring out, "Why are there these tendencies in the mind?" The books give you some ideas. There is some discernment that comes from listening. If we didn't have the Buddha's teachings to read and think about, where would we be? But then the question is how to apply them to what's going on in our minds right now. That's the kind of intelligence you want.

And it does require figuring out your mind, figuring out how unskillful thoughts can insinuate themselves into your affections or how you can take a perfectly good mind state and throw it away. That's what you've got to figure out. That's where the discernment becomes useful, because when you figure that out, you begin to realize that this is where these streams and currents come from that keep the mind flowing along, flowing along. It's only when you've cut the stream that the mind can be really still.

This, of course, is where the analogies break down. If you find a state of mind that can't be affected by anything at all, inside or out, that's the awareness that's truly safe. There's no water like that. Water is always influenced by things around it.

So you're getting the mind beyond being like water, which takes effort. For some people it takes more effort than for others. As the Buddha said, for some people the path is slow and pleasant, for others it's fast and pleasant. For some people it's slow and painful, and others it's fast and painful. And we can't choose ahead of time which path we want. We have to deal with the defilements we have.

In some cases, as the Buddha said, if there's a pleasure that's in accordance with the Dhamma, you don't deny yourself that pleasure. We're not here to deny ourselves pleasure on principle. But if you find that engaging in a particular pleasure leads to unskillful mental states, you've got to learn how to practice with pain. That's just the way it is. That's part of being honest with yourself, but the rewards of honesty are really good. They say that honesty is its own reward. Well,

there're further rewards. If you're thoroughly honest with yourself, you can thoroughly clean away the problems in the mind.

So we're not here just to get back to the mind's innate nature. As Ajaan Lee said, the mind itself isn't good, isn't bad, but it knows good and knows bad, and can do good and do bad. So we're trying to figure out how we can get together those factors for exertion and use them to support discernment. As you'll notice out of the five—conviction, good health, honesty, persistence, and discernment itself—four of them are actually aspects of discernment. This connects with the fact that in the practice of mindfulness, ardency is the discernment factor.

So discernment requires energy and it requires dedication, discipline, honesty: all good qualities. This is why the path is not just a path of techniques or ideas. There's a moral aspect to it as well. It's an all-around training of the heart and the mind, so that the heart and mind no longer produce their own suffering. You can get them to a place where everything they produce is good.