

An Island in the Flood

June 17, 2014

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to emphasize the feeling of the breath. Then make up your mind that you're going to stay with those sensations, the breathing sensations, as long as you can. You want to get established firmly right here, with just the sense of the breath in and of itself.

This is part of the practice of establishing mindfulness in the body in and of itself. In other words, you're not going to look at the body in terms of how other people look at it, or how it functions in the world, but just what it's like to have a body, right here, right now. Don't switch your frame of reference to anything else. If feelings come up, or if you notice things in the mind, try to relate everything to your desire to stay with the breath, to be firmly right here.

When you're able to do this, the Buddha says, you've got an island for yourself, an island in the midst of a river, a river that's flowing strong. There are actually four floods, he says, in the mind, and they come out of what are called effluents. There's the flood of sensual passion, of becoming, of views, and of ignorance. These things are flowing in that river. They come out of a spring that keeps the river well fed. The eventual purpose of the practice is to put an end to them, but before you can put an end to them, you've got to learn how to stand firm in the midst of them, because they're going to keep on coming.

If sensual desire arises, remind yourself that you've followed the current of sensual desire for who knows how long. It's one of those rivers that the Buddha said has crocodiles, whirlpools, and all kinds of dangers. Whatever means of thinking are needed to keep you from getting snagged on these things, getting carried away by this flood of sensual desire, you can engage in that amount of thinking, and then get back to your island.

Views: There are right views and there are wrong views. We have to make use of right views on the path, but right now you don't have to be thinking too much about views. Simply remind yourself that it's a good thing to be here. You're accomplishing a lot. If you have any doubts about that, you can talk to yourself a

bit about why the mind needs training, and how all the big problems of the world come down to the fact that the mind is creating a lot of unnecessary suffering for itself, but it can learn how not to do that. This is how you do it. So whatever problems may be coming up, whatever issues may be coming up, remind yourself: If you're really going to see through those issues, you've got to get the mind really well trained. That gets you back on your island.

Becoming: That's a big one. Essentially, it means taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. You see this when you dream at night. You're drifting off to sleep, and all of a sudden a picture of a particular world appears in the mind. You slip into it and suddenly find yourself playing a role in that world. That's becoming and birth.

The same thing can happen as you're sitting here. You may not feel secure in your role as a meditator right now, and so you tend to slip off into other roles: thinking about your dealings with other people right now, how you feel about your dealings, all those issues. That's a becoming in the mind, and the mind takes on all kinds of becoming. We're really good at this—so good that when we die, we keep it up. We find another becoming. So for the time being, you want to take on the becoming of being on the island. You're going to be the meditator, the inner teacher who keeps you on the island and gets you back if you've gotten washed away.

Finally, there's the current of ignorance, where we're not really looking at things in terms of the stress, and the cause of stress, the path that's going to lead to the cessation of stress. We're thinking in other terms, we've got other issues and we see the world through those other issues. No matter how much we may know in terms of those other issues, though, it still counts as ignorance. That ignorant knowledge can wash us away as well.

So realize that you've got these currents that are running constantly and that it's very easy to fall off the island. You've got to watch out for them.

Remember that your real strength comes from staying on the island. You've got a good solid foundation. Otherwise, it's like trying to walk on water. Even if you were to get those shoes they made years back, out of foam that allowed you to around on water, it would be pretty unstable. But for most of us, we're not even

walking on the water in an unstable way. We're getting washed away, along with all the other debris in those rivers. The only really safe place is right here on the island.

When you can stand here, the mind gains strength. And when the mind has the strength from concentration, it doesn't have to follow its feelings, because feelings are part of these currents as well. In other words, our emotions, how we feel about this person, how we feel about that person, when we feel like helping, when we don't feel like helping: Those things are totally unreliable. Yet we feel we get some sort of energy out of doing things out of the force of our feelings.

I was reading a book a while back on positive psychology where the author was talking about how when you go around helping people, the times when you really feel good about it is when you have a spontaneous urge that you want to help. You notice it more than in the cases where you're helping someone regularly. It sounded as if he was advising people, "Don't help anybody regularly, just do it the spur of the moment when the urge hits."

The Buddha does talk about that, in terms of the generosity—you act on your sense of being inspired to give—but he also says that there's a higher motivation for generosity, which is that you have a sense of duty. You do have your duties in the world, and the people you have to help. Sometimes you don't feel like helping them, but you want to stick with it, because if we don't help one another regularly, how are we going to live?

And where are you going to get the strength to do that when you don't feel like it? You get strength from the power of concentration. You learn how to live your life less in terms of your emotions and more in terms of what's really right to do.

The texts talk about how mindfulness and concentration are dependent on virtue. As the Buddha said, the things that foster mindfulness are views made straight and careful virtue. But mindfulness and concentration help with your virtue as well, because they give you this center of strength, this island you can stand on, where you feel secure, where you feel well established. When you're well established, your duties are easier to do.

You gain nourishment from the concentration. The Buddha compares

concentration to food. This island is not a barren island. It's well stocked. It grows food. Instead of having to depend on the currents of your feelings to push you toward food or to wash things in your direction, you've got good solid nutrition here: the nutrition of conviction that what you do is going to come back at you, so you want to do things well; the nourishment of persistence, sticking with something again, and again, and again, making good things habitual; the nourishment of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. There are all these good things here on this island in the middle of the flood.

So do your best to learn how to stay here on the island. Strengthen the island so that it doesn't get washed away, and it'll give you the strength you need. It'll give you the sense of security you need, so that your goodness doesn't drown.