

Practice Note: A Boat in the Water

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 6, 2010

When doing meditation, both seated meditation and walking meditation, the two primary partners for that practice are mindfulness and concentration. One image I have for how they work together is that of a boat moving through water. The bow of the boat just ploughs through the water, and the water parts for the boat and creates a wake. The water just falls to the side and is left behind. So to some degree, when you set your course, the bow of your boat, on your breathing, the idea is to have some continuity with the breath, to be able to hang in there, to be mindful of the breathing. That's where the bow of the boat is. All kinds of stuff may come up – all kinds of thoughts and feelings. Different things come up, and for the most part, you just let it be like the water that washes off the side and becomes the wake, and falls back. Just keep the course.

A big part of mindfulness is having that steadiness, that concentration, the continuity of one thing, because the mind does not necessarily have its best interests at heart. What the mind thinks about is not really in your best interest, and so to simply follow the course of the mind, whatever way it takes you, is usually not that useful. And it keeps you from being settled, because the mind can jump around a lot. You are much better off getting some basic settledness.

You have to find some way not to give in to all the thoughts that come up, and to not be so interested in them, and to have a different interest. So the idea is to be really interested in where the bow of the boat is set: on the breath, or in walking meditation it's set on the feet. There's the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out, or the rhythm of stepping, one step after the other. And the idea is to somehow collect oneself, gather oneself around, so that's the tip of the boat. That's where you're gathered. The boat is there, and that's what you're doing. A lot of things will come up, and you allow them to just wash off. Often you have to remember to go back, but for other things, you can let them wash off.

Unless, of course, it becomes quite compelling, what else is going on, and then you change the course of your boat. If some really strong sensations in the body come up, then you aim the bow of the boat on those strong sensations to really take them in. And you really get to know them, and then to allow surface thoughts to just wash off and fall off. And just keep the course, focusing on that. Or if strong emotions come up, the same thing, you just turn the boat, and keep it focused on that in a clear, consistent way, gathering yourself around that experience. And again, with things that are nothing to do with that, you can for the most part just let them wash off.

A lot of things can wash off. You'll be amazed, how many things are really not that necessary. Just let them wash off, hold your course, and take some effort to do that.

I hope you hold your course today.