

Walking and Flowing

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So, thank you for being here this morning. And maybe it could be a little louder, because I need it a little bit louder. Let's see. Is that—how's that now? Better? Is that good for...? The people who should not answer those questions are the people who have good hearing.

So this morning, I talked about stepping stones. A big part of what we're trying to do in this meditation is not to be lost in thought, not to be swept away in thoughts. Hence, the language of the early Buddhist tradition around thinking sometimes is that they can be floods. The floods come through and carry everything along, and we get lost in the floods and tumbled about. Thoughts can be that strong.

Sometimes they're talked about as whirlpools, and you're spinning around and around. When I did some rafting on the rivers, there were these interesting river phenomena. There were the eddies, and you get caught in the eddy. An eddy is a current on the side of a river that makes a kind of circle. Sometimes the intensity, the strength of that current, is so strong that it's actually hard to get out of it. It's not quite the whirlpool, but it just goes round and around on the edges of the river.

And then there was another thing that was fascinating: what they called a hole, a hole in the river. The hole was kind of like a vertical eddy. A horizontal eddy is one that, you know, goes across the surface of it. This is when the water goes over a little rapid, and the flow is so strong, like a little waterfall, that it pushes down into the surface of the water that it lands on. Then, because the overall flow of the river is downriver, it pushes the water down.

The water gets pushed underwater a little bit, comes up the other side, then flips over and comes back, and makes a circle. Like a water wheel, almost, because it's like this. So if you have a raft and you fall into that hole, you end up going up the side and falling back into the hole, up the side. You can get stuck in the eddy. That happened to us once in the raft, and

I don't know how we got out of it, except I think what helped was that the person who was rowing fell in. Maybe that gave us enough propulsion, or something that pushed us out, or I don't know how it happened. But it was kind of exciting.

So we have these water metaphors for how thoughts can be for us. We get caught in these currents of very powerful thoughts, and we kind of lose ourselves in them, or we do lose ourselves sometimes. The beginning of coming out of that is to find the stepping stones that help us stay where it's dry, stay away from those swirling floods or those whirlpools. A very important part of practice is to be able to connect to the present moment for a moment, to connect to something concrete and specific. That is something in our sense experience, and to be able to be there without being pulled away.

We think we're in the present moment, but we're mostly thinking about it, analyzing it, judging it, making commentary about it, telling stories about it. Then those take us away even further, until we're not even connected at all to what's actually happening. But to help us kind of cut through all those stories and ideas, we really have to be here in the present with this experience here. So think of these as stepping stones. Each inhale is a stepping stone, and you would just really be there, connect to that, and feel it. Feel it in the simplicity of the sensations: this, here, now.

Then the exhale is the next stepping stone. There is that rhythm of making contact, being there for the duration, and then setting a new intention to be here for the exhale, for the duration. It is kind of very gentle and relaxed. But you have to renew the intention, renew the effort to be here now, here now. The mistake I made early in my meditation was thinking that somehow or other, I'm supposed to turn on a flip of a switch, and then somehow I'm supposed to just stay continuously aware all the time. Like that was just the way you're supposed to be present, right?

That was just a recipe for falling into the whirlpools, because that's not really possible, especially as a beginner. So, just stepping stones. Have each step of attention be relaxed, be easeful. Don't be straining. Don't be pushing. Don't try to make anything happen, except just gently take that step.

The metaphor applies very well to walking meditation, where you are actually taking a step, a physical step. Each step is the place for attention, and then the next one. What's really nice about breathing and stepping is that the very stepping stone you're using appears and disappears. When you're breathing in, the inhale is present, and you can make a connection to it. But the inhale disappears completely when you exhale. Where does it go?

You know, why is it so shy? Why is it running away? Where's it hiding when you exhale? It's just not there. It doesn't exist. It only exists while you're breathing in. The exhale only exists while you're exhaling, and then it vanishes. It's gone.

So it's all brand new: this inhale, and then a whole renewal of attention for this exhale. Just as it exists, just as it comes into being there, and then it disappears. Then you do that with the next one. The same is true with the steps. Each step exists as you're making that step. It kind of doesn't exist when you're taking the next step, and then the next step.

So again, you're constantly in a rhythm of going back and forth: the next one, the next one, here and here. As we do this and can stay in that rhythm, stay in the alternation, stay from one to the next, it gives a chance. We're no longer feeding the thinking mind. The amount of food we give our thinking mind is phenomenal. The food is your awareness. If your awareness gets hijacked, gets pulled into your thinking, then you're just going to keep thinking more and more.

That's what you're supporting. That's what you're feeding. But if your awareness goes into something tangible, physical, that's not a thought, then that's what you're reinforcing. That's what you're strengthening with time. Then the thinking, over time, will get quieter and quieter, softer and less and less. You know, it's not being reinforced so much.

But as we settle down, and we start to have more of a sense of being really there for each breath, each sensation that comes for us, at some point there is a sense no longer of stepping stones, but a sense of something flowing, something gently moving. It could be that there is a sense that the body sensations in the body, whether in the peripheral attention on the side or central, have a sense of flow. The coming and going of inhale and exhale becomes more like a continuity of sensations, like a stream. The idea of beginning and end of the inhale becomes less important, as there is a continuity of just sensations as you breathe in that become sensations as you breathe out. There is more like a stream or a flow of sensations.

Some of those sensations are there just very briefly, but what you sense is not necessarily the briefness of it. Rather, they flow like a river, the flow of sensations of breathing. The same thing happens with walking. But also, in a deeper way, something begins happening with attention itself. Then awareness seems to have kind of a flow to it, kind of a continuity to it, that is not something you do anymore. Maybe you've set the momentum going, or it comes from being very quiet.

A quiet mind is available to sense something more subtle, deeper, of what's happening. It can feel more like a stream of experience than stepping stones. And so, in the Buddhist tradition,

these two metaphors—well, usually it's the metaphor of walking, taking steps—is used as a very important one. We have to bring all of ourselves into the practice. Nothing is left out. In the beginning, we walk the path. We walk.

The word *gacchāmi* means to walk, and that's the word used for going for refuge. We walk for refuge. We walk in refuge. We bring all of ourselves, and then at some point, when all of ourselves is immersed in the walking, then we feel like it can be with really good hiking, or if you go running. You feel like now you're not doing the walking, but there is some momentum. There is a kind of being in the flow of the running and the flow of the walking.

You're being walked, almost. There is a river of walking happening. The same thing happens with meditation. There is a stream, and we enter the stream. Then it becomes more and more not that we make each step, but more like we rest in the current. We allow ourselves to be carried by it.

So, in the beginning, we make the personal effort. Then slowly that morphs into less and less what we do, and more and more what gets done to us. There is a language that's used sometimes: first we practice, and then we are practiced. Then the practice does us, because the momentum, the flow, the being in the flow, begins happening. It's important not to be chasing any of this. It's very important to be content with wherever you are.

Be content with each step. Be content when it's a flow. Be content when it goes back to stepping. Whatever it is, just kind of be content that this is the practice you have. So I hope this makes a little sense for you and guides you a little bit for this practice and encourages you. Mostly, I think for most of us, for most of the time, it's just encouraging us to take the next step, one step at a time, one moment of mindfulness at a time. So thank you.