

Collecting Your Tools

August 2002

We've got this chatterbox up in our heads that just keeps talking, talking, talking. And all too often we think that the things it says are *our* thoughts and we lay claim to them. The problem is that we're not really skillful about doing it. Sometimes the thoughts in the mind are useful and sometimes they're not. Think of it as many voices up there. Some of them are intelligent; some of them are not. They all seem to be speaking with the same voice, though. So you have to be very careful who you listen to, who you don't listen to.

There's a widespread belief that the Buddha taught the Kalamas, "Go by your own sense of right and wrong." But when you look inside your mind, whose voice are you going to listen to? Whose sense of right and wrong can you go by? There are lots of different voices in there. When you look outside, there are lots of voices outside as well. So what do you do? You try out different people's advice, you try out the different voices inside, and see what works. That's basically what it comes down to. Of course, if you tried out everything that comes into the mind, you'd die before you came to any kind of really firm conclusions. So you try to see who seems most believable, which voices, either inside or outside, seem most reasonable, seem most useful. And then you test them even further.

In other words, you look at your thoughts not simply as events or judgments on what's true and false, but as parts of a causal chain. What would happen if you followed those thoughts through? This is really important. What goes on in your mind is karma as well. We tend to think of karma having to do with our relations with other people: the things we do to them, either good or bad; the things they do to us in return, either good or bad. We forget that the thoughts going through our mind are karma right here, right now. These are actions, and actions have results.

The skill in learning how to get some use out of your mind is learning which thoughts are useful tools. When are they useful? Where are they useful? We hear that views are one of the mental fermentations, views are one of the forms of attachment. Well, does this mean we shouldn't have views? Well, no, how could anyone live without views? If you try to deny that you have views, you're stuck in denial. The views go underground where you can't really see them. So you learn how to look at views instead as tools. When is a particular view useful? When is it not useful? That way you learn to pick them up, put them down, pick them up, put them down as needed. You don't have to carry them around all the time.

This is an important lesson. Even though the Buddha awakened to the truth, he said that he didn't define himself in terms of those truths. They were there. Whenever he needed them, all he had to do was just put the question to his mind and there was the response. Now, to have that kind of inventory of knowledge requires that the mind be really quiet and very still. That's

the center from which you can notice things. That's the center from which you can pick up your tools and use them properly.

This is why the practice of meditation is such an important kind of karma as well: learning how to put the mind in the spot where it doesn't have to carry its tools around, but its knowledge is there when it needs it.

We try to find a balance as we're meditating, how to be quiet and yet alert at the same time, so that when issues arise in the mind, we know what we should do. Then, when that particular understanding has solved a particular problem, you put it down. You don't go carrying things around with you. If you do have to carry something around, make sure it's a state of concentration that you're carrying around and not a lot of other stuff. Stay with the breath. Stay with the present moment. Try to maintain that. If it seems burdensome, that doesn't matter for the time being. It's a skill you're working on. As you get more and more skillful at staying in the present moment, it becomes more and more second-nature, easier and easier all the time.

And don't worry about getting stuck on concentration. That's the kind of thing you can get unstuck from pretty easily. It's a lot harder to get unstuck from your ideas. Often, things come up in the course of your concentration. Because as the mind centers in on the present moment, your sense of your body changes, your sense of your mind changes, all kinds of things can happen.

So again, you have to watch these sensations as they come and go, and not be too quick to label them, saying, "Oh this must mean that, and that must mean this." Just look at what they are in and of themselves, and see what they lead to. And ask the question, "When is this particular state of mind useful? When is a particular way of relating to the breath useful?" Remember that tools are not always useful all the time. Sometimes you need a saw, and sometimes a hammer. If you're holding on to a saw when you need a hammer, it gets in the way.

So whatever knowledge you come at through your study, through your meditation, learn that at best it's a tool, something you pick up to use and then you put down again. In that way you're safe. You're not carrying a lot of excess baggage around. And you don't fall into that syndrome where if you've got a hammer in your hand everything you see is a nail. In other words, you've got one tool so you try to use it in all sorts of circumstances, whether it's appropriate or not.

We're working on a whole box of tools here. The mind centered on the breath: That's the central skill, that's your central tool, that's the tool that's useful almost all the time. That's why we work on it; that's why we stress it. As for the other tools, learn when they're useful, learn when they're not. And if you keep the mind still in the present moment, you don't have to worry about losing them. The mind is really present right here, so things will come to it, realizations will come to it.

Then you learn how to test them. As you get more and more sensitive in the present moment, you get quicker and quicker at having a sense of what's useful, what's not; what's helpful, what's not.

So you use the breath as your central skill, your central object of attachment. As for everything else, learn to put it up and take it down as you need it. Eventually, you get to let go of the breath, but don't be in too great a hurry to do so. The mind needs a center that it can hold to, so that it doesn't get flung out in different directions.

So try to look at whatever comes your way as a potential tool. Some things you look at them and you notice immediately that they're not going to be useful for anything at all. With other things, you're not so sure, so just file them away for future reference. But remember: Nothing you encounter in the meditation is an end in and of itself until you really get to the end. Everything else is a tool.