

Take Down Your Sails

August 3, 2013

The Buddha once made the observation that when he would speak, the words he was going to say would have to pass three tests. One, that they were true. Two, they were beneficial. And three, it was the right time and place for that. If the words didn't pass all three tests, he wouldn't say them.

It's good to apply the same principles to your thoughts. When something comes up in the mind, first question, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? There are a lot of true things out there that are not beneficial at all, especially for the training of the mind. And then three, is this the right time and place for that?

If you can apply this to your meditation, you'll find that it helps sort through a lot of things that would come up in the mind. After all, there are people out there you're concerned for, issues in your life that you're concerned about for yourself. But are those the things to be thinking about right now? This is not the time and place for that. There may be another time and place where it is beneficial to think about them. But you also have to learn how to teach the mind just to strip down any thoughts that come through, and not react to anything that comes in, because you've got work you've got to do here: working on your own mind. You need your mind to be in good shape for whatever comes up.

How much time do you actually get to devote to keeping your mind in shape? For a lot of us, it's just little bits and snatches in the course of the day. So make the most of the time that you've got.

As for other things that come up, think of your mind being like a ship. In the old days, when they had big clipper ships with lots of sails, and the sails were good for getting around. But there were times when a storm would come up, and they would have to immediately climb up and take down the sails so that the wind would just blow through the masts and there was nothing to catch the wind.

It's good to have that skill: knowing how to take down

your sails quickly. Situations around you, what people say, people do, a lot of times you do have to be sensitive to that, you do have to respond. But there are other times when you realize that no matter what, there's nothing you can do to improve the situation. Or at the very least, there's nothing right now. So you have to take down your sails. Any thoughts that come up with regard to that have to go right through. You can't catch them, you can't let them drive you around, because if you let them drive you around—well what happens to those clipper ships in a storm if the sails are up? The ship gets knocked over or crashes into rocks. Everybody on board dies.

It's the same with the mind. If it gets blown around, your goodness dies. We have to remember that although we have unlimited goodwill for all beings, our abilities to help all beings, and our abilities to help ourselves, are limited. The amount of time, the amount of strength, the talents we have, the skills we've developed: There's only so much we can do. Now we're working on the skills in the mind so that we can expand our range. But that means we have to devote a lot of time to *this* project and let a fair number of things go for the time being.

So develop this skill, how to take down your sails. Know that the Buddha's teachings on equanimity and patience are important here. If a sound comes to the ear, remind yourself, "There is a sound at the ear," and don't build any more stories beyond that. It may be true that so-and-so said something and it was harmful or hurtful, either to yourself or other people. But for the time being, you just want to be able to keep your mind out of the way so that you're not wounded by those words. Just leave it at the fact there's a sound and you don't have to think about who's saying the sound or what their intentions were.

This may seem inhuman but there are times when do have to depersonalize the situation if your goodness is going to survive here. And that's an important talent. This is why the Buddha teaches not-self in so many areas, the things we get all wrapped up in, saying, "This is me, this is mine, and nobody better touch it. This is *my* little place here." And of

course, someone's going to touch it, something's going to happen to it. Even if people don't touch it, just the fact that we're living in a world where things can change, things are *going* to change, you can create a lot of suffering out of laying claim to "this has to be this way and I can't stand it for being any other way."

This is why the Buddha teaches not-self. If something's not under your control, why do you make your happiness depend on it?

This ability to depersonalize things is really important. Even as we're just sitting here meditating right now: You can be sitting here and things are not going well, and if you make it part of the story of "here's something else I'm not good at," that actually gets in the way of your improving it. Thoughts of who you are and what kind of type of person you've been in the past: Put those thoughts aside and just ask yourself, "What's going on here? What am I doing? And can I catch anything that I'm doing that's causing any unnecessary stress right now?"

If the mind won't settle down, go through the list of things that could be wrong in the present moment. Something may be wrong with the mind, something may be wrong with the breath. Those are the two issues. Learn how to sort things out, learn how to articulate them to yourself. Are you carrying in a mood from the day? What can you do to shred the mood? How about the breath? How does the breath feel right now? Are you breathing in a way that really feels good? Or are you just going through the motions? Is it mechanical? If the breath is mechanical, the body won't like it. It'll breathe that way if you force it to, but there's a resistance inside to letting that energy spread, because it doesn't feel right.

In other words, be less of a *person* right now and just more just an *observer* and a *doer*. All the other personal details can be put aside, and you'll find that it's really liberating for the mind. Any thought that come into the mind that lets you know who you are and what century this is and which country you're in right now, put them aside. You've just got the PRESENT, in capital letters. There's awareness.

There're choices. There's a body. That's it.

This is how you take down the sails so that whatever storms are blowing through, they're not distracting you from the work you've got to do. Even when a ship is sitting out a storm, the sailors are not just sitting there. They have a lot of things that need to be done down inside the ship, once the sails are down. And those jobs are more likely to get done properly when the ship is not being driven around by all kinds of crazy winds.

So this ability to depersonalize what's going on right now simplifies the issues, and enables you to get your work done. Take down your sails, and you'll be safe.

So experiencing right here, right now, enables you to get the work done.