



Serene and clear: an introduction to Buddhist meditation

by Patrick Kearney

Week five: Watching the mind-stream

Serenity and insight

We have been moving from *vipassanā* to *samatha* - from the insight wing to the serenity wing of the practice - in order to experience the different perspectives from which it can be engaged. These two wings constitute different perspectives from which the self and its world can be known. Together they constitute a single system of meditation training, *samatha-vipassanā*, which the practitioner seeks to understand and ultimately master. Separately they constitute two distinct approaches to the practice, either one of which can in turn be subdivided into a number of distinct techniques.

In *samatha* (serenity) practice we maintain a continuous stream of attention directed to a single object, and we seek to become absorbed in that object. In *vipassanā* (insight or clarity) practice we maintain a continuous stream of attention directed to a discontinuous stream of separate and distinct objects. These objects are either aspects of body (physical experiences) or mind (non-physical experiences). In all forms of meditation practice, in other words, maintaining a continuous stream of attention is paramount. All forms of meditation have that in common. What distinguishes the two forms of practice is our relationship to the meditation object. In *vipassanā* practice we seek clarity above all, learning to discriminate clearly the nature of this present object. The clarity of experience is central, for without clarity we cannot discern how experience is constructed and deconstructed. In *samatha* practice we are concerned to become absorbed in the object and are not concerned with its precise nature. As the mind becomes ever more concentrated and absorbed, it becomes ever more subtle. In *samatha* practice the subtlety of the object, rather than its clarity, is central.

The mind stream

Today we return to *vipassanā* practice, the cultivation of insight. One important aspect of *vipassanā* is watching the mind stream, the flow of consciousness and its contents - thoughts, emotions, images, and so on. Consciousness is awareness, the knowing of the object. There can be consciousness of both physical and non-physical, or mental, phenomena, and here we are concerned with knowing mental phenomena. These mental phenomena are the stream of images, thoughts and emotions that flow through our minds. Note that in Buddhism "mind" does not just mean "thinking," but the inner space within which all non-physical experience arises and ceases. Depending on context, the Pāli word *citta*, usually translated as "mind," could equally be translated as "heart-mind," or simply "heart."

The mind functions like a television that broadcasts an endless stream of soap operas. "I" am the star of every soap opera, and none of them ever comes to an end. The mind is always throwing up images, like a fire throws up sparks, and our attention moves in to capture any one of these and immediately turn it into a narrative. Normally we ourselves are the central

character of each of these narratives and, despite that fact that they often contradict each other, for as long as they are playing themselves out we believe them. These narratives define our world for us. They provide us with our sense of identity, our sense of a personal and independent self. These narratives are powerful because we find them so entrancing, so fascinating, and our fascination is based on our habit of identifying with them. The narratives we are constantly telling ourselves are either about me or, if they are about others, they are about others from the perspective of their relationship to me. The central reference point is always me. It is natural for the mind to generate thoughts - that is its job, like it's the job of the liver to secrete bile - but when we habitually identify with thoughts we generate a relentless self-obsession which becomes the main source of our suffering. Contemplating the mind stream is a direct attack on one of our most ingrained habits, and therefore a direct attack on the deep roots of our sense of identity - because identity *is* habit.

In week one we discussed the nature of self awareness, or reflexive awareness, the capacity of the mind to know itself. This capacity is central to our humanity. We are capable of self-consciousness, an awareness of ourselves as if we were looking at ourselves from beyond ourselves. Reflexive awareness is the capacity to turn our attention around 180 degrees to see, as if from outside, our state of mind. It is this capacity that is central to the contemplation of the mind stream. In this practice we make the stream of thoughts, images and emotions flowing through the mind the meditation object, so that one part of the mind is watching another part.

To cultivate reflexive awareness of thought requires us to become sensitive to perspective. We always experience events from a particular perspective, and it is the perspective from which we view things that gives them their power. For example, if I hear on the morning radio how the Aswan Dam has burst, and in a matter of hours many thousands of people downstream will be flooded out of their homes, I briefly acknowledge this and quietly make myself a cup of coffee. If I hear that the Warragamba Dam has burst, and in a matter of hours many thousands of people downstream will be flooded out of their homes, then my coffee is forgotten in my scramble to respond to this news. What's the difference? Because I can identify with the suffering caused by the bursting of the Warragamba Dam far more than I can the suffering caused by the bursting of the Aswan Dam. Why? Because of the perspective from which I experience - the Warragamba Dam is closer to me, and my experience of the bursting of the Warragamba Dam is far more intimate to me than my experience of the bursting of the Aswan Dam. My experience of "I" and "mine" is the most intimate to me because "I" and "mine" constitute a perspective from which I experience my self and my world. "I" *am* the point from which my self and my world is experienced.

Have you had the experience of being distracted from a meditation object, such as the breath, by thought? Of moving from being absorbed in the object to being absorbed in thought, and not being sure of how you got there? Let's consider the process. When watching a meditation object such as a physical sensation it is like the object is some distance away from the witnessing point; it is "objectified," separated from the witnessing subject. Then when we realise we are lost in thought, where do we find the thought located? We find it located much more intimately. We find thought entangled in the witnessing, the knowing of thought. Thought is now an aspect of the witnessing subject, so it is now the witness who is thinking. And of course, to the degree that the witness is thinking, to that degree there is no witness - just a thinker, "me," lost in "my" story. In order to watch thought we must turn thought itself into a meditation object. This means we must objectify thought, and create distance between the thought and the witness, the point from which knowing knows. Every time we identify with thought - "I am thinking" - we have failed to objectify the thought, so thought is no longer the object, but the subject - the thinker. So we must objectify thought again; and again; and again.

Watching the mind stream

The contemporary Hindu sage Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj sums up this practice in the instruction, "Watch your thoughts, and watch yourself watching your thoughts." Watching our thoughts is an exercise in reflexivity in which we create a sense of distance from the mind stream and so objectify it. Usually we watch the meditation object *from* the mind stream, because we are so habituated to identify with our thoughts. Another way Maharaj expressed this practice was to compare it to a mother watching a child playing with a favourite toy. The child is absorbed in the toy, like we are absorbed in thought. The mother sees the toy, but that is not where her interest and her focus lies; she is watching the child. In the same way, when we watch the mind stream, we are not focusing on the contents of our thoughts, but in our relationship to them.

How is this done? We always begin by anchoring attention in the body - breath and physical sensations - to develop a degree of *samādhi* (concentration) and to establish a central point of reference, an object to which we can always return. In other words, we need somewhere to park the attention, and we use the body as our parking spot. We choose some aspect of physical sensation that we are familiar with, that we are used to watching, and park the attention there. From that point we can direct our view to the mind stream, bringing it back to the body each time we become lost or confused. In weeks two and three we discussed how attention chooses one aspect of our experience to focus upon, but allows other things to be in the periphery, circling that central point. Looking at a program on television I can see other things in my peripheral vision but I pay them no attention, because my focus is directed to the screen. Suddenly I sense a movement to my side and I look directly at someone moving across the room. That person is now the centre of my attention, and the television is relegated to being one part of the periphery. Returning to the screen, the television is back at the centre of my attention, while everything else is peripheral. Attention always works like this. It selects one phenomenon as the centre of its focus, and allows what's happening at the edges to just happen.

In watching the mind stream we begin by anchoring our attention on one part of the body, to ground ourselves. At first we focus on the body, allowing thought to swirl around the periphery. Then we direct our attention to the mind itself, but maintain awareness of that one part of the body on the periphery, not paying it particular attention, but just knowing it is there in the background. We now have the physical foundation to contemplate the mind stream.

- Sit and think about nothing. What happens? Are thoughts arising? But if thoughts are flowing through your mind when you have decided not to think, then you can't be in control of the process of thinking. And since you know that thoughts are flowing through your mind, then your mind must be divided into at least two parts: the witnessing, and the thoughts that is witnessed. Which one of these two parts is you?
- Now investigate how these thoughts appear to you. Do they appear as visual images? Are they words? Are they feelings? Are they combinations of these? Study the flow of these thoughts - not focusing on their content, but on their nature - and see how they appear to you. Again, since you can see the flow of thoughts, there must be a witnessing point beyond or outside these thoughts that is not the thoughts, but which knows thoughts. Once you get a clear view of thoughts, can you turn your attention around and focus on that point of knowing?
- Examine the flow of thoughts more precisely, and turn your attention to the point where thought arises. Locate that point. This is similar to locating the point where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have a specific and

precise physical location, while the mind stream strictly does not. However, people usually (but not always) experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it may be useful to place the attention there. In any event, finding the location of the arising of the mind stream is like finding the location of a stream of physical sensations. Watching the thought stream, do you see the point at which thoughts arise? Do you see them arising, the beginnings of thoughts? Do you see thoughts cease, their endings? If you can detect the beginnings and ends of thoughts, their arising and ceasing, then there must be gaps between thoughts. Can you focus on those gaps? Can you find the silence inbetween thoughts?

As you do these exercises you may wish to name the experience in some way, just as you name physical sensations. "Thinking," for example, or something more evocative: "bubbling," as you watch thought bubble up. You may wish to use a generic name like "knowing," just to remind yourself of what you are doing. Or you may find that the mind stream is too rapid and too mercurial in its movements to allow time for naming.

Try to get a sense of distance between the witnessing and the thoughts. Don't worry about whether or not there is thought; your job is to witness the thought stream, not suppress it. It is the difference between identifying with the thought stream ("I am thinking"), and watching the thought stream like you would watch a movie without getting involved in the story ("thinking"). The practice is objectifying thought, creating a distance between you and thought so it can become a meditation object.

When we are caught up in thought, experiencing the thought stream as "I am thinking," we are identifying with the mind stream. This is clinging to thought, because identification is the most subtle and powerful form of clinging. We cling to that which fascinates us, that which is most interesting for us at that moment. This fascination creates a sticky relationship to thought. We can clearly see fascination with thought when we are thinking about something, realise we are thinking (and so to some degree are already objectifying the thought stream), but then find that we really *must* finish this particular thought before we can let it go. This sense of "I *must* finish this; right now, this is more important to me than anything else" is clinging. This sticky, fascinating quality of attachment can itself become our object of meditation.

- As thoughts cascade through the mind, do not attend to the content of the thoughts any more than you would attend to the details of a clock ticking in the background. Focus on your sense of attachment to thought; how do you experience it? Name it accordingly: "sticky;" "fascinating;" or whatever. Or if you are experiencing frustration at your failure to escape from thought, to extract ourselves from the stickiness of thought, then make this frustration itself the meditation object: "frustration." If you are experiencing the painful quality of the experience of being stuck in thought, make that painful feeling the object - "pain;" "stuck." Are you lost in the enjoyment of thought? Make the pleasant quality of the experience the meditation object - "pleasant;" "enjoying." Can you feel your desire to keep generating thought? Make that the object - "wanting;" "intending."

When we think, we are experiencing not just thought but a complex relationship to thought, and any aspect of this relationship can be made the meditation object. In this kind of practice, while thinking is going on in the background we foreground some aspect of our relationship to thought - fascination; frustration; pain; pleasure; and so on. It's like tasting a dish to check if there's enough salt. We taste all the flavours, but focus on the flavour of salt. We foreground the flavour of salt, and background all other flavours.

In this exercise we may, possibly, experience distraction. If so, we need to understand distraction. Distraction is not the fact that thoughts are flowing through the mind. The thoughts flowing through the mind are our object of meditation, and without them we could not do this practice. They are the content of our practice. Distraction is not thought; distraction is our entanglement with thought. Distraction is not thought, but a relationship *to* thought. Distraction involves interrupting the natural thought stream in order to cling to one aspect of it, in the form of one particular story which must be followed through. This is why our practice is to let thoughts be. When you get involved in a story drop the identification, step back, and watch the whole stream rather than just one aspect of it. And this mind stream includes all our emotional reactions to thought, to our experience of distraction, to our feelings of failure or frustration. Nothing is left out; everything can be watched. Indeed, everything must be watched, because whatever is not being watched becomes the watcher.

Eihei Dogen Zenji

We have already seen how a contemporary Hindu teacher teaches the contemplation of the mind stream. This practice is so basic, and yet so powerful, that it can be found in any number of contemplative traditions. One Mahāyāna Buddhist teacher who saw this practice as central to meditation was the great thirteenth century Japanese Zen teacher Eihei Dogen Zenji, who summed up his instruction on *zazen* (seated meditation) in this way:

Sit solidly in *samādhi* and think (*shiryo*) not-thinking (*fu-shiryo*). How do you think not-thinking? Non-thinking (*hi-shiryo*). This is the art of *zazen*.

Zazen is not learning to concentrate. It is the *dharma*-gate of great ease and joy. It is undefiled practice-awakening.

Ordinary thinking (*shiryo*) is our normal dualistic thought, in which we are constantly creating narratives where “I” am the central character, where we believe in and act out our dramas from moment to moment, day to day, and year to year. This is how we create and maintain a self-identity, for our identity is not something that is given to us, but something that cannot survive without us constantly tending to it. It takes a great deal of energy to be the Master (or Victim) of the Universe. Not thinking (*fu-shiryo*) is a state of *samādhi* in which thought comes to an end, where the mind is so absorbed in the meditation object that thought simply does not arise. To “think not-thinking,” which is non-thinking (*hi-shiryo*), is an experience in which the mind continues to generate thoughts, which is entirely natural, but where we no longer believe and therefore no longer cling to these thoughts. We have a new relationship to thought. Thoughts arise and cease, but we no longer identify with them, and we no longer use them to cultivate our normal relentless self-obsession. Identification is the strongest and most subtle form of clinging, and since we are no longer clinging to thought, we are no longer clinging to the sense of identity generated by thought. When we cease creating a separate self through craving and clinging, we no longer cause *dukkha* (suffering; pain; unsatisfactoriness) to arise, and are liberated. When we are not clinging we experience “great ease and joy,” which is awakening, the goal of practice. But this ease and joy is not a state to be attained outside or beyond practice, but rather it *is* the practice - the practice of objectifying, and therefore of watching, thought.