

One

The Rock and the Flower

Many of us are slaves to our minds. Our own mind is our worst enemy. We try to focus, and our mind wanders off. We try to keep stress at bay, but anxiety keeps us awake at night. We try to be good to the people we love, but then we forget and put ourselves first. And when we want to change our life, we dive into spiritual practice and expect to see quick results, only to lose focus after the honeymoon has worn off. We return to our state of bewilderment. We're left feeling helpless and discouraged.

It seems we all agree that training the body through exercise, diet, and relaxation is a good idea, but why don't we think about training our mind? Working with our mind and emotional states can help us in any activity in which we engage, whether it's sports or business or study—or a religious path. I've been riding most of

my life, for example, and I love horses. When riding a horse, you have to be awake and aware of what you are doing each moment. The horse is alive and expecting communication, and you have to be sensitive to its mood. To space out could be dangerous.

Once when I was staying with friends in Colorado, I took one of my favorite horses, Rocky, on a trail ride through some back country. I had ridden Rocky before, mostly in the arena. He was very intelligent, but he didn't know how to walk a trail. This was a new situation. I was leading the group, and that also made him a little nervous. I coaxed him over certain rocks and shifted my weight to indicate to him to go around certain others, but he kept stumbling.

We came to a narrow place in the trail. On one side was a steep shale cliff and on the other, a long drop into a river. Rocky stopped and waited for my direction. We both knew that one wrong move would plummet us into the river below. I guided him toward the gorge, subtly shifting my weight toward the high wall of shale. I thought that if he slipped, I could jump off and save myself.

The moment I shifted, Rocky stopped cold and craned his head around to look at me. He knew exactly what I was doing. I could tell that he was shocked and hurt that I was planning to abandon him. The look in his eye said, "You and me together, right?" Seeing how

terrified he was, I shifted my weight back. He swung his head forward in relief and we negotiated the trail together with no problems.

On that ride, Rocky and I created a synergistic bond, a wordless rapport. It's that kind of connection that I think we can all have with our own minds. In *shamatha* meditation—"peaceful abiding"—we train our minds in stability, clarity, and strength. Through this most basic form of sitting meditation, we discover that we can abide peacefully. Knowing our natural peace is the basis for any spiritual path—the beginning and the ground for anyone courageous enough to seek true happiness. It is the first step to becoming a buddha, which literally means "awakened one." We all have the potential to awaken from the sleep of ignorance to the truth of reality.

Training our mind through peaceful abiding, we can create an alliance that allows us to actually use our mind, rather than be used by it. This is a practice that anyone can do. Although it has its roots in Buddhism, it is a complement to any spiritual tradition. If we want to undo our own bewilderment and suffering and be of benefit to others and the planet, we're going to have to be responsible for learning what our own mind is and how it works, no matter what beliefs we hold. Once we see how our mind works, we see how our life works, too. That changes us.

That's the point of talking about mind and meditation. The more we understand about ourselves and how our mind works, the more the mind *can* work. The Tibetan *leu rungwa* means that the mind is functional. My father used to sometimes translate this as "workable." It means that we can train the mind to work in order to use it to do something particular. For example, if we want to generate compassion and love, that's work.

There is an old saying that bringing Buddhism to a new culture is like bringing a flower and a rock together. The flower represents the potential for compassion and wisdom, clarity and joy to blossom in our life. The rock represents the solidity of a bewildered mind. If we want the flower to take root and grow, we have to work to create the right conditions. The way to do this—both as individuals and as people in a culture in which the attainment of personal comfort sometimes seems to be the highest standard—is to soften up our hearts, our minds, our lives. True happiness is always available to us, but first we have to create the environment for it to flourish.

We might have a deep aspiration to slow down, to be more compassionate, to be fearless, to live with confidence and dignity, but we're often not able to accomplish these things because we're so set in our ways. Our minds seem so inflexible. We've been touched by the softness of the flower, but we haven't figured out

how to make a place for it. We may feel that our ability to love or feel compassion is limited, and that that's just the way things are.

The problem for most of us is that we're trying to grow a flower on a rock. The garden hasn't been tilled properly. We haven't trained our minds. It doesn't work to just throw some seeds on top of the hard ground and then hope for the flowers to grow. We have to prepare the ground, which requires effort. First we have to move the rocks and hoe the weeds. Then we have to soften up the earth and create nice topsoil. This is what we're doing by learning to peacefully abide in sitting meditation: creating the space for our garden to grow. Then we can cultivate qualities that will allow us to live our lives in full bloom.

A society of hard and inflexible minds is a society that is incapable of nurturing the flowers of love and compassion. This is the source of the dark age. We tend to question our goodness and our wisdom. When we question these things, we begin to use seemingly more convenient ways to deal with our problems. We are less ready to use love and compassion, more ready to use aggression. So we have to continuously remind ourselves of basic goodness. If we want to help alleviate suffering on our planet, those of us who can make our minds pliable must plant a flower on the rock. This is how we can create a society based on the energy we get

from experiencing our own basic goodness. In Tibet we call this energy *lungta*, "windhorse."

It is important to look at what actually works, what inspires people to meditate, to study, and to put the teachings into effect. As a lifelong student of meditation, I have a deep respect for its profundity as a spiritual path. I am interested in what people can really use in their life, and how to prepare people to truly hear the potency and depth of what an enlightened being like the Buddha has to say. I am grateful to my teachers for passing these teachings on to me, and grateful for the chance to share them with you.

The teachings are always available, like a radio signal in the air. But a student needs to learn how to tune in to that signal, and how to stay tuned in. We can begin the process of personal development now by including short periods of meditation as part of our everyday lives. Tilling the ground of our own minds through meditation is how we begin to create a community garden. In doing so we are helping to create a new culture, a culture that can thrive in the modern world and can at the same time support our human journey in an uplifted and joyous way. Such a culture is called enlightened society. Enlightened society is where the flower and the rock will meet.

Two

Bewilderment and Suffering

My father and mother were born in Tibet, but I was born in India and didn't visit my parents' native land until 2001. When I was in Tibet, I traveled through some of the most vast, spacious, and beautiful land in the world. Our caravan of land-cruisers drove through remote valleys surrounded by endless mountain ranges. For mile after mile we would pass no sign of civilization. There were, of course, no bathrooms, so we would stop to relieve ourselves along the side of the road. No matter how isolated we thought we were, someone would always come walking around the bend. Then another person would come close to check out this strange group of travelers in his valley. By the time we stood there for more than a minute, the equivalent of a whole village would have gathered, laughing and

1. Placement

Placing our mind on the breath is the first thing we do in meditation. In the moment of placing our mind, we're mounting the horse: we put our foot in the stirrup and pull ourselves up to the saddle. It's a matter of taking our seat properly.

This moment of placement starts when we extract our mind from its engagement with events, problems, thoughts, and emotions. We take that wild and busy mind and place it on the breath. Even though we're placing our consciousness, which isn't physical, placement feels very physical. It's as deliberate as placing a rock on top of a leaf.

In order for placement to be successful, we have to formally acknowledge that we're letting go of concepts, thoughts, and emotions: "Now I'm placing my mind upon the breath." What happens in that moment? Our attachments are uprooted. If we can even attempt such a thing, our discursiveness is greatly reduced. At the same time, by placing it on the breath, we're gathering that mind that's spread thin all over.

For beginning meditators the first stage is where we learn how to balance the focus on breathing, recognition of thoughts, and holding the posture. It's a grace period during which we develop good meditation habits. As we continue in our practice, placement is

Eleven

Nine Stages of Training the Mind

As the lineage of meditators sat on their cushions and worked with their minds, they saw the same unfolding process: nine ways that the mind can be true to its inherent stability, clarity, and strength. In their descriptions of nine stages of training the mind, they left us signposts of that process. These guidelines are helpful because the mind is so vast that if we're left to our own devices, we'll usually just wander in thought. These nine stages are a map of the meditative process.

The first four stages—placement, continual placement, repeated placement, and close placement—have to do with developing stability. Stages five and six—taming and pacifying—have to do with developing clarity. And the last three stages—thoroughly pacifying, one-pointed, and equanimity—have to do with building strength.

always the first step. It's that moment at the beginning of each session when we recognize and acknowledge that we've begun meditating. Because it establishes our attitude toward the rest of the session, it's the most important stage. The moment of placement gives our meditation a crisp, clean start. If we begin in a vague or ambiguous way, then our meditation will only continue to be vague and ambiguous. Like placing a domino, how carefully we place our mind in the first stage will directly affect the development of the next.

After that first moment, each time you choose to recognize and acknowledge a thought and return your consciousness to the breath, you're learning placement. It's such a small act, so innocuous, but it's one of the most courageous things you can do. When you recognize and release that thought, you can take pride in yourself. You've overcome laziness. You've remembered the instructions. You can feel happy coming back to the breath. Don't worry that you're going to have to do it again—you're going to do it thousands of times. That's why this is called practice.

Each time you remember to place your mind on the breath, you're moving forward. Just by letting a thought go, you're extracting yourself from concepts, negative emotions, and bewilderment. You're letting go of the need to be endlessly entertained and consumed. You have to do it again and again and again. Change

happens one breath at a time, one thought at a time. Each time you return to the breath, you're taking one step away from addiction to discursiveness and fear and one step forward on the path of enlightenment, beginning with developing compassion for yourself.

I love golf. I play it whenever I can. No matter what kind of game I'm having, I can hit only one ball at a time. Each ball is the only ball; my mind has to be fresh every time. If I think of the balls I've hit or the balls I will hit, I'm not really hitting *this* ball. I'm only ingraining bad habits. It's the same with placement. If you're not crisp and fresh in recognizing and releasing thoughts, you're not really meditating; you're ingraining sloppiness. Those thoughts will gain power, and eventually you won't be meditating at all. You'll just be thinking.

Recognizing, acknowledging, and releasing a thought is like reaching the top of a mountain. It's worthy of the warrior's cry, "*Kiki do do!*" What we celebrate is leaving behind the self-indulgent fantasies that will rob us of our life unless we work with them properly. Inspiration, view, effort, trust, mindfulness, and awareness support us in this.

The more we're able to gather our attention and focus, the stronger our mind becomes, the stronger the experience becomes, and the stronger the result becomes. We know we're able to place our minds properly when we can hold our focus on the breathing for

roughly twenty-one cycles without our mind becoming enormously distracted.

2. *Continual Placement*

Placing our mind on the breath is now fairly easy. We've learned to mount the horse, and now we feel comfortable being in the saddle. The horse is walking along the trail. We're experiencing how it feels to be on the breath, to be continually in placement. When discourisiveness and distraction take us off the trail, by and large we're able to implement placement to get back on. What allows us to do this is further development of mindfulness and awareness, lack of laziness, and remembering the instructions.

Another reason we're able to successfully place our mind on the breath is that we have confidence in the reasons why we're meditating. We do it with enthusiasm because we know it will bring us peace. We see the futility of outside concerns, fantasies, thoughts, and emotions. We're willing to give them up at least for the period of our meditation because we see the benefits of doing so. Placement has become a reasonable thing to do.

When resting our mind on the breathing and relating to our thoughts with ease becomes the norm, we're coming to the end of this stage. A benchmark is that

we're able to rest our minds for roughly 108 cycles of the breath without being caught in distraction. Through 108 breaths—in and out—we can be mindful of the breathing. Although we may experience some discourisiveness, the thoughts aren't bothersome or large enough that we lose mindfulness and forget the breathing altogether.

At this stage our mindfulness and stability last only so long: then our mind drifts off. But when the mainstay of our practice is that we can stay on the breathing for 108 breaths, giving ourselves a little wiggle room in that we will be neither completely still nor completely distracted, then we've graduated from the second to the third stage, which is known as repeated placement.

3. *Repeated Placement*

We might feel like we have been doing "repeated placement" since the beginning. But the landscape of meditation is vast, and the stages progressively subtle, because they describe our experience, which becomes more and more refined. The Tibetan word for this stage is *len*, which means to retrieve, to gather, to bring back. We've learned how to place our mind and how to continue to place our mind, but occasionally a thought still breaks out like a wild horse galloping across the plains.

In the first two stages this happened incessantly. By the third stage it happens only occasionally.

During the second stage, we learned to enjoy the ride. We're delighted that we can stay in the saddle and enjoy the scenery. In the third stage we become more confident. But the horse still has spontaneous moments of excitement and wildness. Now and then it rears or bucks or leaves the trail. We have to bring it back. We practice occasionally retrieving it throughout the third stage, and by the end we do it less and less. Our mindfulness is maturing into stability.

Now we're able to focus on our breathing, on being present. When the mind departs, it's usually to chase fantasies of little pleasures, from food to better weather to romantic adventures. This is elation: we're holding our mind too tightly. We're focused on the breath so hard that the mind suddenly departs. As this stage progresses, the speed and efficiency with which we retrieve our mind increases. By comparison, the way we extracted ourselves from thoughts in earlier stages looks messy. Sometimes it was like quicksand—the harder we tried to get out, the more we were embroiled. But now, because mindfulness is so strong, we're able to remove ourselves with precision. By the end of this stage we've achieved one of the milestones of shamatha: stability. Mindfulness is so potent that we're able to remain on the breath without ever being fully dis-

tracted. Awareness is also becoming more astute. We're beginning to catch thoughts before they occur.

Our meditation isn't as clear and vibrant as it could be, but it feels good and peaceful because we've stabilized our minds. Throughout the course of a session, our mind always remains in the theater of meditation. This is an admirable accomplishment. In Tibet it is likened to a vulture soaring high in the sky over a dead animal. This bird now always keeps its eye on the food. It may drift a little to the left or right, but it never loses sight of the food. Similarly our minds may drift here and there, but never away from the breath.

Before the end of the third stage, sometimes we were present for our practice and sometimes we weren't. Now we're there for all of it. This is stability. It didn't happen because we hit ourselves over the head with an overly simplified meditation technique. We achieved it gently and precisely through repetition, consistency, view, attitude, intention, proper posture, and good surroundings.

4. Close Placement

The entry to the fourth stage, which is known as close placement, is marked by nondistractedness. We always remain close to the breath. That's when we know we've crossed the border. This is stability. We know that even

though the horse will wander here and there, it won't be leaving the trail.

Our meditation now takes on a different twist. Previously our main concern was not to be distracted from the breath. We were worried that our mind was going to be sucked back into everyday problems. We were always wondering if we'd be strong enough to return to the breath. Now we're more relaxed. We're no longer wondering if we can stay on the breath because we know we can. We're no longer concerned about outside influences pulling us away from meditation because we know they won't. Our confidence is heightened. Now we're concerned about the quality of our meditation—the texture, the experience. Before we were worried that we couldn't get a cup of coffee; now we want a mocha cappuccino. How can we make our minds stronger, more vibrant? This is our new priority. By and large, we've overcome the obstacles of laziness and forgetting the instructions. These obstacles were bad because they kept us from meditating. By the end of the third stage and into the fourth stage we're dealing with the obstacles of elation and laxity. Either extreme has distracting results. However, since by now we're always remaining at the scene of our practice, these are considered good problems to have.

In Tibet we're warned that at the fourth stage we might be fool enough to think we've achieved enlight-

enment or high realization—the mind feels so strong and stable and good. Because the struggle with our mind has been reduced greatly, there's a quality of joy and ease. But if we enjoy the stability of the mind too much, it will become too relaxed. We might not reach the other stages. Hence the obstacle of laxity. Our mind is stable but not clear. The bird can't land on the meat; it can only fly around it. We need awareness to home in, sharpen sensibility, pull our mind in tighter.

5. *Taming*

Even though the accomplishments at the third and fourth stages are heroic, there's further to go. In the fifth stage we're able to tighten up our meditation by bringing in more clarity. This stage is known as taming because we begin to experience the true fruits of a tamed mind, something that we began to cultivate long ago in the first stage. Taming here is the experience of *leu runqwa*, being able to make our mind workable. In the fourth stage, we might still feel awed by the fact that we've tamed the horse. But now a strong, stable, and clear mind feels natural. Our mind is not perfectly still. We still have discursive thoughts. But we're feeling true synergy with the horse. We're feeling harmony. We're no longer struggling.

The harmony and synergy create joy. A traditional metaphor for what we experience at this stage is the delight of a bee drawing nectar from a flower. Meditation tastes good, joyous. If you've ever had a hard time and then suddenly felt the pressure lift, you might have briefly known such bliss and liberation.

6. *Pacifying*

The sixth stage is known as pacifying. A great battle has taken place and there is victory. We're seated on the horse surveying the field. We know we've won. We feel tranquil and vibrant like mountain greenery after a thunderstorm. Everything has been watered and energized. There is tremendous clarity.

We're still working with a mind that is sometimes tight and sometimes loose. In our practice we still have to make many little adjustments. But in making these adjustments we're no longer frantic, as we might have been in the first few stages. Then it was questionable that we would ever make our mind an ally, and now the peace we feel tells us that we have. Our meditation is joyous and clear. We begin to experience not only mind's natural harmony, but also its inherent strength.

At this stage we also feel excitement. We begin to see the possibilities of what we can accomplish with

our tamed mind. Before, this relationship was a burden, but now it's full of possibilities. The wild horse has been tamed.

7. *Thoroughly Pacifying*

The battle may be over, but there are still a few little enemy soldiers running around in the form of subtle thoughts, mostly about pleasure. We may be slightly attached to how good meditation feels. There are little dualistic runblings. Although we know that they're not going to disrupt our meditation, we can't just sit back and ignore them. In thoroughly pacifying, we don't dispel the thoughts as we did in stage four. Now we seduce them, like snow falling into fire. Our meditation is becoming so strong that when thoughts and emotions encounter its heat they naturally dissolve.

Remember the waterfall of thoughts we felt when we first sat down on the cushion to tame our minds? It's become a lake with only a few little ripples.

8. *One-Pointed*

By the eighth stage, known as one-pointed, the remnants of discursiveness have evaporated. We're sitting

there completely awake, clear, and knowing. This is possible because we're no longer distracted. Our meditation has developed all the attributes of perfection, which is what we will accomplish at the ninth stage. The only difference is that at the beginning of meditation we still have to make a slight effort to point our mind in the direction of the breath.

9. Equanimity

Our meditation has come to perfection. When we sit down we engage with the breath in a completely fluid and spontaneous manner. Our mind is strong, stable, clear, and joyous. We feel a complete sense of victory. We could meditate forever. Even in the back of our mind, there are no traces of thoughts. We're in union with the present moment. Our mind is at once peaceful and powerful, like a mountain. There's a sense of equanimity.

This is perfection. Like a finely trained racehorse, our mind remains motionless but alive with energy. The mind has actually grown—in strength as well as size. We feel magnanimous, expansive. This is the fruition of peaceful abiding. Now we have a mind that is able to focus in any endeavor. We feel centered and confident.

Three



TURNING THE
MIND INTO
AN ALLY