

Paying the Boatman

Why would you choose to measure your life by endings

when all the experience, the felt sense of being alive, is in the journey?



LIKE MANY PEOPLE WHO STUDY HATHA YOGA in the United States, I practice a Buddhist form of meditation called vipassana, or insight meditation. In this particular practice you first learn to stabilize the mind by focusing on a single object such as the breath. Once concentration is strong, the mind is allowed to move as it chooses while you stay mindful of what it is doing, not getting lost in thought. Of course, you do get lost in thoughts as well as feelings and body sensations, over and over again, but each time you return to awareness. Gradually the mind becomes much more steady. You begin to develop the capacity for choiceless awareness in which all thoughts and feelings can be experienced without the mind contracting, and you

get a taste of the inner freedom that is available to you. When you keep your mind awake and stable in this manner, you are also able to see yourself more clearly, and various insights about yourself arise. There is a sense of “seeing things as they are,” as one of my teachers, Ajahn Sumedho, likes to say.

Vipassana meditation and hatha yoga work well together because hatha yoga helps you ground yourself in the current moment through increased body awareness, which greatly enhances the meditation experience, while mindfulness practice brings new insights and meaning to your hatha practice.

One of the benefits that can accrue to you if your hatha yoga practice includes the element of mindfulness is the ability to start making wise distinctions in both thinking and behavior. This ability to make distinctions is sometimes referred to in vipassana meditation as “clear seeing” or “clear comprehension.” Achieving this access to clarity is most important in making those hard decisions in life which muddle the mind so much that you no longer know what you really care about. However, it can be hard to grasp these distinctions when they involve the emotions, so it is helpful to start to see how they work in terms of the body and your hatha yoga practice. For instance, when you have a recurring injury or one which happens without a clear origin, it is important that you make the distinction between the symptom and the underlying condition.

It is very tempting when dealing with a recurring back injury or a mysteriously injured shoulder or hip to approach your yoga teacher wanting to just be fixed, to be relieved of the discomfort and the limitation it imposes. It's easy to focus your attention on the symptom and contract your identity into the discomfort. So often in these situations yogis succeed in getting the pain to go away in the short term only to end up with a chronic pain or a much more serious injury. By bringing mindfulness to bear on the injury, it becomes clear that your body's natural balance has been disturbed due to certain conditions coming together. The discomfort is just a message warning of this imbalance. There is no reason to contract or organize around the

discomfort; rather, you can use it like a navigational tool whose diminishment will indicate that you are on the path of healing. Once this distinction is made, the wise course—with the help of your yoga teacher and maybe a doctor and a well-trained bodyworker—is to start investigating the underlying conditions, including how you hold and move the body, your emotional life, and your beliefs concerning your body. You can change the underlying conditions so that the whole chain of cause-and-effect is altered.

There is another reaction to injuries that yogis who don't make wise distinctions between symptoms and underlying conditions often have, and this one drives yoga teachers to distraction. A yoga student will come to class and tell the teacher she has such-and-such an injury and therefore she does not do x, y, and z poses. End of discussion. The yogi is constructing her identity around what is merely a symptom, making it into a permanent unchanging Self. What's so frustrating for the teacher is that the student has no interest in exploring the underlying conditions to see if it is possible to bring about change. The essence of hatha yoga is the exploration and evolution of the body. How ironic that a student would choose to do yoga and yet not really be open to the yoga. Deep exploration of the condition can be slower and more frustrating than just trying to get rid of the symptom, but it can also be a far more meaningful and enduring experience because it requires that you come into contact with your Self, and from this contact wisdom grows.

Caring vs. Attachment

MAKING WISE DISTINCTIONS in the realm of the emotions is even more challenging. Try being mindful of how little distinction you make between caring about something or somebody and being attached to that thing or person. The Buddha taught that one of the fundamental characteristics of the universe is *anicca*, meaning that everything changes. We all know that this is true from our own experience, yet often we hold onto something or someone as though what we care

about should be exempt from this fundamental law.

There is a wonderful story that makes this distinction between caring and attachment in a very wise way. There was once a yogi who had the job of tending to his teacher's food bowl and cup, the latter being the only object the student had ever witnessed his teacher seeming to care about. One day while washing the cup, the yogi's mind wandered and the cup smashed to pieces on the floor. The yogi was horrified because this cup had been his teacher's teacher's cup, and he in turn had received it from his teacher. So three generations of mindfulness lay in ruins, and the student was sick with regret and grief. Finally he gathered enough courage to stammer out a confession to his teacher. The teacher just smiled and said, "Don't be so distraught. I always drank from that cup as though it were already broken."

Imagine making such a distinction in your own life—to venerate the things and people you love with your caring while appreciating them in the manner that only feeling their loss can provide. In yoga class, in your romantic relationships, as a parent, and in your work, you are gathering your attention into little cups of intention, values, and effort. It is wonderful that human beings have this capacity, but if you are to have any freedom in your life, drink from each of those cups as though they were already broken.

The Journey vs. the Destination

ANOTHER WISE DISTINCTION that relates both to your yoga practice and the other aspects of your life is understanding the difference between the journey and the destination. Our culture is obsessively goal-oriented. Observe for yourself how much of the time you measure how well you are doing in regard to your destination while ignoring how you really feel in the moment. First it's being able to do Headstand, then being able to hold it for 10 minutes, then trying to make it more perfect. The same with money or recognition: If only you had this much, then you would be happy; but, oh, if you had this much more, you'd really be happy.

In your own experience does life really work this way? Where are all the actual minutes, hours, and days of your life? Do they wait for you at some destination, or are they rapidly passing right now? Ask yourself, would you rather have a feeling of happiness in the moment-to-moment experience of your life, or in a few big bang-up episodes upon reaching various goals? You know the final destination of the physical body is decay and death, so why would you choose to measure your life by endings when all the experience, the felt sense of being alive, is in the journey?

Goals are tools that are useful for orienting yourself—they provide meaningful structure if they reflect your values and if you stay awake in this moment to your actual experience, whether it is on the yoga mat or in an office, in seeking love or trying to have a baby. Only in *this* moment are you alive—all the others are only mental constructs, concepts which the person who is present at this moment will never experience, for the one who arrives at some distant goal will be different than the one who is here today.

One of my favorite stories illustrates all the hidden dimensions and the true wisdom of this distinction. There once was a renowned meditation teacher who attracted the best students from all over the land. Each student was more brilliant than the next, but one student stood out above all the others. He could sit longer, experience deeper absorption, had the most beautiful yoga poses, and was erudite and dignified. All the other students were in awe of him. They assumed he would one day succeed their master.

One day the teacher announced it was time for this talented student to leave the monastery, as did all his students. Each was sent away for a period of seven years to seek his own experience of what he had learned. A student was welcome to return any time after the seven years. From the day the exceptional student left, the others continually talked among themselves about how he would return in triumph to take his rightful place beside their master.

The seventh year came and went, and there was no sign of him. Finally, on the 10th anniversary of his leaving, he was

spotted walking up the path and the entire monastery dashed into the meditation hall where the master would formally receive the returning student.

The student arrived, older yet vibrant as ever. The master came in, took his seat, and said, "One who left and has returned, please share with us the wisdom you gained in these years away." With just a hint of pride in his voice, the student replied, "I wandered to a distant valley high in the mountains where a great wide river ran through. There I shared a hut with a boatman who took people across the river in his raft for three rupees. Each day I did my practices as you taught me, then for hours each day I practiced walking on the water. At first it seemed impossible, but after a few years I was able to walk 5 feet on top of the water, then I increased the length each year until I could walk all the way across." Upon hearing this the other students gasped in amazement. They had been right. He was the best; he could walk on water.

They quickly realized they had broken the noble silence in the hall and fell silent waiting for their teacher to question and praise the returnee. Much to their wonderment the teacher stayed silent for a long time, his face impassive. At last he spoke gently, his voice filled with compassion: "You know, you could have just given that boatman three rupees and saved yourself 10 years."

Looking back over your life, how many weeks, months, even years have you wasted anguishing over something you didn't get from a parent, a spouse, or in life? Did all of that anguish serve you, or would it have been more skillful to have received fully the experience of the loss, accepted it as what is, and then allowed your emotions to go on to experience what is possible in the present moment? More importantly, are you still caught in an endless cycle of wanting mind, imagining that it is the next accomplishment, change in relationship, or piece of recognition that will make you happy? Pay the boatman at the river of loss and sorrow his three rupees and cross over to the other shore. Your life is here, *now*. ■

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