



The practice (3)

Thoughts, thoughts and once more thoughts

by Kim Nataraja

What to do about all those thoughts crowding in when you are longing for interior silence? An image comes to mind: I remember hearing years ago about an advertisement for meditation. On a poster was a picture of an Indian Guru standing, in typical attire and appearance, on his surfboard, perfectly balanced, riding the waves. Underneath was the phrase: You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf!

We cannot suppress or get rid of our thoughts; they will be there just like the waves. We need to accept them as an inevitable part of ourselves and just ride them skilfully. In Christian meditation our surfboard is the mantra. At times the thoughts calm down; our mind is still, we rest peacefully on our surfboard. At other times there are so many thoughts whirring around that we keep losing the mantra. And yet we need to persevere; every time we have fallen off our surfboard we just need to get back on.

The tradition stresses the inevitability of thoughts: "A brother came to Abba Pastor and said: 'Many distracting thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger because of them.' Then the elder thrust him out in the open air and said: 'Open up the garments about your chest and catch the wind in them.' But he replied: 'This I cannot do.' So the elder said to him: 'If you cannot catch the wind, neither can you prevent distracting thoughts from coming into your head.'" (Sayings from the Desert Fathers)

When thoughts keep distracting you and taking you away from your mantra, just name them: work, shopping, friends etc or just 'thoughts' and gently return to your mantra. Don't judge, don't criticize yourself; befriend the part of you that is your thoughts. It is a way of learning to accept yourself with all your preoccupations. Slowly, your thoughts get quieter, less demanding and when we take up our mantra we become aware of the gaps between the thoughts, which allow the mantra to sound uninterruptedly. Acceptance of our thoughts as a natural part of ourselves allows us to be more accepting of the way things are in our ordinary life. We learn to accept life as it is, not as we would like it to be.

The breath is the bridge between the body and the mind. We know that when we are stressed or agitated, our breath is shallow and fast. When the body is at rest, the breath slows down and the mind stills. Therefore if we work to still not only our body but also our breath, we will still our mind. Focusing on the breath is the best way I know of leaving the world outside alone and turning within. Just put your attention on the breath entering the nostrils. Feel it coming in cool and feel it going out warm: just focus on the sensations near the nostrils. Don't alter your breath, just feel it, coming in cool and going out warm. Just breathe.

These breathing exercises are very useful as a preparation for meditation; once the breath has quietened down, focus your attention on your mantra. You may still find it helpful to join your mantra to the rhythm of your breath, to let your mantra float on your breath, as this can help to root the mantra in your being. But if this distracts or seems to present difficulties, just let go off the breath. Put all your attention on the mantra and accept what happens with equanimity. It is worth it: inner silence creates the awareness and centredness we are missing in everyday life.