

Stopping, Calming, Resting, Healing

The Heart of the Buddha's teachings

CHAPTER SIX

Buddhist meditation has two aspects — shamatha and vipashyana. We tend to stress the importance of vipashyana ("looking deeply") because it can bring us insight and liberate us from suffering and afflictions. But the practice of shamatha ("stopping") is fundamental. If we cannot stop, we cannot have insight.

There is a story in Zen circles about a man and a horse. The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, "Where are you going?" and the first man replies, "I don't know! Ask the horse!" This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don't know where we are going, and we can't stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others.

We have to learn the art of stopping — stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. When an emotion rushes through us like a storm, we have no peace. We turn on the TV and then we turn it off. We pick up a book and then we put it down. How can we stop this state of agitation? How can we stop our fear, despair, anger, and craving? We can stop by practicing mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, and deep looking in order to understand. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.

But our habit energies are often stronger than our volition. We say and do things we don't want to and afterwards we regret it. We make ourselves and others suffer, and we bring about a lot of damage. We may vow not to do it again, but we do it again. Why? Because our habit energies (vashana) push us.

We need the energy of mindfulness to recognize and be present with our habit energy in order to stop this course of destruction. With mindfulness, we have the capacity to recognize the habit energy every time it manifests. "Hello, my habit energy, I know you are there!" If we just smile to it, it will lose much of its strength. Mindfulness is the energy that allows us to recognize our habit energy and prevent it from dominating us.

Forgetfulness is the opposite. We drink a cup of tea, but we do not know we are drinking a cup of tea. We sit with the person we love, but we don't know that she is there. We walk, but we are not really walking. We are someplace else, thinking about the past or the future. The horse of our habit energy is carrying us along, and we are its captive. We need to stop our horse and reclaim our liberty. We need to shine the light of mindfulness on everything we do, so the darkness of forgetfulness will disappear. The first function of meditation — shamatha — is to stop.

The second function of shamatha is calming. When we have a strong emotion, we know it can be dangerous to act, but we don't have the strength or clarity to refrain. We have to learn the art of breathing in and out, stopping our activities, and calming our emotions. We have to learn to become solid and stable like an oak tree, and not be blown from side to side by the

storm. The Buddha taught many techniques to help us calm our body and mind and look deeply at them. They can be summarized in five stages:

1. Recognition — If we are angry, we say, "I know that anger is in me."
2. Acceptance — When we are angry, we do not deny it. We accept what is present.
3. Embracing — We hold our anger in our two arms like a mother holding her crying baby. Our mindfulness embraces our emotion, and this alone can calm our anger and ourselves.
4. Looking deeply — When we are calm enough, we can look deeply to understand what has brought this anger to be, what is causing our baby's discomfort.
5. Insight — The fruit of looking deeply is understanding the many causes and conditions, primary and secondary, that have brought about our anger, that are causing our baby to cry. Perhaps our baby is hungry. Perhaps his diaper pin is piercing his skin. Our anger was triggered when our friend spoke to us meanly, and suddenly we remember that he was not at his best today because his father is dying. We reflect like this until we have some insights into what has caused our suffering. With insight, we know what to do and what not to do to change the situation.

After calming, the third function of shamatha is resting. Suppose someone standing alongside a river throws a pebble in the air and it falls down into the river. The pebble allows itself to sink slowly and reach the riverbed without any effort. Once the pebble is at the bottom, it continues to rest, allowing the water to pass by. When we practice sitting meditation, we can allow ourselves to rest just like that pebble. We can allow ourselves to sink naturally into the position of sitting — resting, without effort. We have to learn the art of resting, allowing our body and mind to rest. If we have wounds in our body or our mind, we have to rest so they can heal themselves.

Calming allows us to rest, and resting is a precondition for healing. When animals in the forest get wounded, they find a place to lie down, and they rest completely for many days. They don't think about food or anything else. They just rest, and they get the healing they need. When we humans get sick, we just worry! We look for doctors and medicine, but we don't stop. Even when we go to the beach or the mountains for a vacation, we don't rest, and we come back more tired than before. We have to learn to rest. Lying down is not the only position for resting. During sitting or walking meditation, we can rest very well. Meditation does not have to be hard labor. Just allow your body and mind to rest like an animal in the forest. Don't struggle. There is no need to attain anything. I am writing a book, but I am not struggling. I am resting also. Please read in a joyful, yet restful way. The Buddha said, "My Dharma is the practice of non-practice." Practice in a way that does not tire you out, but gives your body, emotions, and consciousness a chance to rest. Our body and mind have the capacity to heal themselves if we allow them to rest.

Stopping, calming, and resting are preconditions for healing. If we cannot stop, the course of our destruction will just continue. The world needs healing. Individuals, communities, and nations need healing.