

Flexibility

A reflection offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 10-29-2015.

In the Middle Length Discourses sutta 19 (the Discourse on Two Kinds of Thought), the Buddha offers a simile about a cowherd. During the summer months when crops were growing in the fields the cowherd would stay close to his cows making sure that they didn't stray into the fields with growing crops, because if they did he would get into trouble with the farmers. But once the crops were harvested the cowherd would rest at the edge of the field. He would still monitor the cows to make sure they were safe and not causing problems, but he didn't need to be constantly vigilant as he was in the summer.

One way of understanding this simile is as a description of two different ways of being mindful. When the possibility of slipping into unwholesome thoughts, words or deeds seems strong, then there is a need to pay close attention and to be vigilant like the cowherd in the growing season. Or, when we are trying to see with precision the arising and passing of moment to moment experience, then it is necessary to give very close and vigilant attention to the object of attention. But, when we're confident of the wholesomeness of our thoughts, words and deeds and confident of our ability to recognize in our bodies and minds the signs when an unwholesome thought is beginning to arise, then like the cowherd after the harvest, we are able to bring a more relaxed and spacious form of mindfulness to our experience.

Similarly, there are times when it is most skillful to focus attention on a single object again and again in order to collect and stabilize the mind. But at other times it is more useful to focus attention on the stream of experience that changes from moment to moment.

The art of practice is learning for ourselves the flexibility of knowing when to use these different forms of mindfulness and concentration so that we can be present for our lives with ease and so that we can overcome the impediments that keep us from being present with ease.