

Two Hands Washing

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We often understand meditation as an exercise in learning how to stop thinking. That's not really the case; meditation is an exercise in learning when to think, having a sense of time and place for your thinking, learning to develop the sensitivity to tell when that time and place is.

For instance when you try to keep the mind with the breath, sometimes you find that the mind settles down very easily. They seem to fit. There's very little problem: direct the mind to the breath and it settles down. Other times, though, it won't settle down. You've got other issues going on. So, the first question you have to ask yourself when you find this happening is, "What's going on in the mind?" What attitudes, what ideas left over from the course of the day, are getting in the way right now?

Sometimes you find there's residual anger, sometimes discouragement, sometimes frustration, sometimes restlessness. So the first question is how to deal with these factors. In some cases there are specific meditation exercises available. Recollection of the Sangha is good for when you're feeling discouraged. Think about all of those stories in the *Thera-* and *Theri-* *gathas* about people who have been frustrated in their meditation. There's one story about a monk who had been ordained 20 years—20 years—and still had no peace of mind. And yet, he was able to get past that obstacle. So this gives you encouragement. You realize, "If he can do it, I can do it. My frustration is nothing compared to his." That kind of thinking helps give you perspective.

If there's lust, we have the 32 parts of the body. For anger, we've got goodwill. Restlessness requires not so much a thinking exercise as it does calming that energy, or at least putting it to use. In other words, if you find your mind all over the place, filled with a lot of restless energy, you say to yourself, "Ok, if it wants to think, give it something to think about." You can go through the body, go through the bones. Start with the tips of the fingers, go up through the wrists, forearms, elbows up to the shoulders, and then, starting with the bones in the joints of the toes, go up through the foot all the way up to the skull.

You can go through the body as many times like this as you find necessary—not only visualizing the bones, but also asking yourself "Where, right now, is that particular bone?" In other words, when you're thinking about the bones in the joints in the fingers, think about the sensation at those joints right now. If you feel any tension or tightness, realize: that's not a bone feeling. The bones don't

have any tension or tightness. That's just the muscles around the bone. So you relax them. You go through the whole body this way. This is a very systematic way of relaxing all the different patterns of tension in the body. So at the same time that you're taking that energy and putting it to use, you're also learning how to relax the energy, the nervous part of the energy, so the mind finds it easier and easier to settle down. Then it can finally settle down with the breath when it's had enough of this thinking.

What this means is that, if the mind doesn't want to settle down, your first step is to figure out why, and then to figure out an antidote. You'll know the antidote has worked when the mind finally does become willing to settle down. Then once you're with the breath, you can ask questions on a different level: "Exactly what sensations are breath? How does the body relate to the breath? Where does the in-breath begin? How do you tell if the breath is comfortable or not? What are your standards for comfort?" Again, you ask these questions when the mind is still having a little trouble settling in. If it's finding it easy to settle down, the only question is, "How much stillness do you need? How much stillness is Right Concentration? When do you reach the point where you've gone beyond Right Concentration, lose your mindfulness, and everything blanks out?"

In this case, there's a minimal amount of thinking involved there, just enough to make sure you're alert. Otherwise, you don't want to analyze things too much, because you'll destroy the stillness.

So you see that there's a time and a place for thinking. The question is learning how to get a sense of what that time and place is. This sense is something you can gain only through observation. In fact, one of the purposes in the meditation is to develop just that sensitivity in your powers of observation.

The reason for this is that you're trying to learn how to think in terms of the four noble truths. When the Buddha talked about appropriate attention, he defined it in terms of the four noble truths. Learning to see where the stress is, where's the cause, where's the cessation of stress, and what you're doing to help the stress stop. The questions should be aimed in that direction. And you use those standards to judge the answers, the results that you get.

The answers you get, many times, are not verbal answers. What you get is a state of mind. We're dealing here with realities. The noble truths are not just words about stress and suffering. You're dealing with the actual sensations. The same holds true with the path: it's not just thoughts about the path; it's the actual experience of the mind in Right Concentration, learning to recognize what that is, getting a sense of when your energy is too much, when your energy is not enough.

So the four noble truths function in two ways here, one in framing your questions, one in judging the answers, the results, that you get. As your mind goes through the various levels of concentration, it begins to get more subtle insight into these questions. The four noble truths continue as your standards, but your understanding of them, your sensitivity toward them, gets more and more refined. Still, the basic framework is always the same.

Some people find it easy to think in these terms. Others find their minds going off in other terms, getting into more metaphysical issues, more abstract issues. That's when your thinking has gone off the deep end. It's unskillful thinking for that particular time. You have to keep coming back to the issue, "Is there stress right now? What can I do to eliminate the stress I'm conscious of?" That means, "What am I doing to create that stress? Is it necessary? How can I learn to stop?"

Those are the questions coming from the noble truths. When you get an answer, check it against the noble truths. Has the stress actually gotten less? Has your concentration gotten stronger? Has your mindfulness gotten stronger? Is your discernment sharper? If so, you're headed in the right direction. You're getting more and more skillful in your thinking. That's something a lot of people don't like to hear. We like to think, "I'm pretty good at thinking things through, all I need to do now is to learn how not to think."

And with some people that *is* the case. They do have a tendency to analyze things pretty skillfully and all they need is the stillness of mind that enables that insight to go deeper. But most of us—and this includes many very intelligent people—need to learn how to think in new ways, getting a sense for which kind of thinking is really counterproductive, which kind is helpful.

Meditation gives us the time and the space to watch, to get a sense of cause and effect in our thinking. We learn to see thinking as the Buddha saw it: as an action, as part of a causal chain. "Where does this thought come from, where is it going?" Instead of getting carried away with the content of thoughts that are really mind-blowing, or new, we simply watch them as part of a cause and effect chain, a process, to see what they *do*. Sometimes new thoughts are very helpful, sometimes they're not, so you have to be very careful about them.

What this means is that we're learning to use our thinking process as part of a skill. When the time comes that you've thought yourself to a good, still place in the mind, you can stop thinking. Stay with that stillness for a while, a good long while. When you've had enough, ask yourself what new perspective that stillness gives you on the perspective of suffering and stress. This way your stillness and your thinking help each other along.

Ajaan Lee makes the comparison to a right and a left foot. We need both to walk. Kee Nanayon talks about two hands washing each other. You can't have

one hand just washing itself. You need the right hand to wash the left hand, and the left to wash the right. When they work together, they both get clean.