

# *A Light in the Darkness*

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Let the mind settle down in the present. Sometimes you can use the word, “let.” Other times you have to force it because the mind sometimes has its moods where it’s not willing to settle down. It’s got all kinds of other issues to think about, all kinds of other agendas, and now it’s got a whole hour when it can think of those things, things that were suppressed in the course of the day because other things captured your attention. Now they can start popping up to the surface, so you need tools to keep them from getting in the way.

One effective tool is simply the desire to be still. For example, when the mind is tired, it really wants to rest. In cases like that, all you have to do is give it a good resting spot. Your main concern then is to make sure it doesn’t fall asleep or drift off into a zone where it’s not really aware of what’s going on. If the body’s tired, do some good deep in-and-out breathing to make sure there’s enough oxygen in the brain. Then gradually allow the breathing to settle down to a more comfortable rate. Once it’s comfortable, spread that sense of comfort to fill the whole body and then try to stay very consciously aware of the whole body. Don’t let your awareness shrink.

There are other times when the mind has more energy to think, and in that case you’ve got to cut it off in other ways, partly by explaining things to it, partly by having values that will cut off the thoughts. All too often our values go in the other direction – encouraging thought – especially with the idea we have that if we figure out things beforehand, we don’t have to do the work. So many of us come to the meditation with that attitude: If you read enough books, if you think things through, reason things through ahead of time, then you won’t have to do all the work. You just settle down, insights will pop into the mind, and the job will be done. But it doesn’t work that way, because a lot of the insights we’re trying to gain deal with the way the mind functions, and you can’t really see the functioning of the mind until you wrestle with it to know its ins-and-outs, to know where the tricks it plays on itself are coming from.

And you also have to develop some good retorts. Sometimes there’s a conversation, an argument going on in the mind. Part of the mind wants to think about this, think about that. Well, you’ve got to argue with it, give it good reasons for *not* going there. And keep the reasons short and sharp, for otherwise you’ll get drawn into endless conversations. Remind yourself that knowledge, at least the knowledge that we’re looking for in the meditation, isn’t something that comes from thinking things through.

Ajaan Suwat had a good line on this. He said, "It's like darkness. You don't like the darkness, but you can't attack the darkness. You can't scratch a hole in it, you can't rip it, you can't tear it. You have to light a light. The light will then take care of the darkness." All of the other things we might do to try to grab hold of the darkness or rip it away just don't work. It's the same with the mind. We can't think our way out of ignorance. We have to watch so that we can give rise to discernment. The discernment here is precisely that: the awareness that comes when you really watch things carefully, when you observe what's going on in the mind.

So you have to set up the right circumstances. Again, it's not a matter of thinking things through. The proper preparation for the meditation, the part that explains it beforehand, simply tells you how to set up the right situation, and then you just have to watch. A good analogy is with a hunter: The hunter does what he can to prepare to go out hunting, to get all his weapons in the right order. Then he goes out and has to sit very still. He can't decide beforehand that the rabbit's going to come along at two p.m. so that he can come back at three and have dinner before dark. The hunter goes out and all he can do is sit there very quietly and yet at the same time be very watchful. Whether the rabbit comes at noon or two or four or if it doesn't come that day, the hunter still has to be very watchful all the time. He can't let his attention slip, can't make a noise, and can't schedule events beforehand. He can't, through the force of his will, make the rabbit come at a particular time or at a particular place. The hunter just does the best he can to set up the right circumstances, along the path where rabbits ordinarily come, and then he sits still and watches.

The same with the meditation: You get the mind as still as you can and then you have to watch. That's the only way you're going to get any really new insights into what's going on. Actually, as meditators, we're better off than hunters because the mind is constantly sending out little signals. It's always giving us something to catch as it deals with this, deals with that, makes this choice and that. The problem is that we're not still enough to notice these things. We're not attentive enough. We don't focus our attention in the right places. We don't ask the right questions. As a result, we don't see, even though everything's happening right here before our eyes.

So you have to be very, very careful, very, very still, and then ask the right questions. The Buddha gives instructions on this: the questions that surround the four noble truths. Where is there stress? Where is there craving? When is mindfulness present? When is it absent? Can you see these things? When mindfulness is present, how can you keep it going? When it's absent, how can you give rise to it? These are the questions he has us ask about the present moment. Aside from that, he tells us to put everything else aside – all your other concerns, all the other distractions that come along – and focus on the real issue at hand, which is how to deal with suffering, how to deal with stress. Once that issue is dealt with, everything else is taken care of.

I recently received a letter from a doctor who was claiming that modern psychology has made an advance over Buddhism in that Buddhism deals only with the problem of suffering, while modern psychology deals with suffering *and* also gives meaning to life. I don't think he understands the depth of the problem of suffering. Once you really eradicate suffering, what remains to your life, the meaning of what you want to do with it, is very clear. And it will vary from person to person. But the big issue facing everybody is digging out the roots of suffering. Once those roots are dug out, then the question of meaning is no longer a problem. Why does the question of meaning bother us? There must be some suffering, there must be some stress surrounding it. We look into it. Why does there have to be a meaning to things? What's the suffering that comes from there *not* being a meaning? Dig into it. Look into it.

And if that's too abstract or too subtle, focus on where you *do* see the suffering, where you *do* see the craving, because developing your powers of observation is a process just like anything else: You work from the crude to the subtle, from the gross to the refined. You don't sit there and say, "This issue is too crude for me. I'm going to wait until the subtle ones come." You have to handle the crude ones first, the blatant ones first. Get practice with them and then your sensitivity, your awareness, will grow more and more subtle. You have to start where you are and accept where you are as your starting place. You can't say, "I wish my concentration were better. I wish it was the way it was years ago." You have to put those thoughts aside and say, "Where is it right now? What are my abilities right now? What issues are presenting themselves right now?" If you get used to handling what's here right now, you're focused on the right spot. You're developing the habits you need.

After all, this is a skill we're working on. It's not an intellectual puzzle where you can just think things through. Skills require dedication. They require time. They require commitment. There's an interesting story they tell about choosing candidates for the brain surgery program at a famous university. As you can imagine, everybody who applies to be a brain surgeon has to be smart, but not everybody who's book-smart is going to succeed in the program. So the question is how to weed out the people who are not going to succeed. They found that one of the most useful questions to ask the applicants is, "Could you tell me about a recent mistake you made?" The candidates who say, "I can't think of any mistakes I made recently," are immediately crossed out. The ones who say, "Oh, yeah, just the other day I made this mistake," are the ones who pass the first question. Then the follow-up question is, "What would you do differently if you had another chance?" The ones who showed that they had already thought of this question and had come up with a few alternatives were the ones who were accepted into the school.

The people who are going to succeed are not the ones who have everything figured out beforehand; they're the ones who keep learning all along the way. The same principle applies to meditation. You have to learn to put your mind in

a learning mood all the time, because only then will you see the things that you didn't see before, that will light the lamp that will drive away the darkness of ignorance.

So, keep on watching.