

Adbusting the Mind

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If you look at advertisements in the way that, say, an anthropologist might, you learn a lot about defilement—because that’s what advertisements are for: to take advantage of your defilements. They illustrate a lot of the principles that the Buddha taught about defilement.

The first principle is that it’s very easy to be taken in by defilement when you’re distracted. Apparently, there’s a book that just came out, telling how it’s been a conscious policy among advertisers to keep you as distracted as possible. They throw too much information at you—too many things for you to take in—to shorten your attention span. As your attention span gets shorter, you can’t think straight. And when you can’t think straight, you buy their stuff.

Of course, the same principle applies to your greed, aversion, and delusion. They try to distract you, and because you’re distracted, you give in to them. You don’t think things all the way through and you don’t notice what’s actually going on in the mind. Your attention is diverted someplace else.

So you can think of meditation as a defiant political act against the corporate state. You’re here trying to extend your attention span so you can see things all the way through. When something arises in the mind, where does it come from? Where does it go? The present moment isn’t just an isolated dimension that has no reference to the past or the future. It comes from someplace and it’s going someplace. You want to see that. That’s why we have mindfulness as the precursor to concentration. You want to keep something in mind.

In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath, and you keep in mind all the other lessons you’ve learned about staying with the breath, either through what you’ve heard or read, or what you’ve observed on your own as you’ve meditated before. Think of those lessons as being at your fingertips. You don’t have to sit around and memorize them all the time or run them through your memory. But when a problem comes up, see if you can ask yourself, “What was the way I dealt with that problem in the past? Where is this problem coming from right now?”

That’s what alertness is for: to see what things are happening—and in particular, to see what you’re doing while you’re doing it, along with the results you’re getting from your actions. And of course, ardency is your desire to shape things in a good shape. The mind is out of shape? Okay, what can you do to bring it back into shape? If the breath feels distorted, what can you do to normalize it?

If your breathing feels constricted, what can you do to expand your rib cage all the way down?—so that the entire area of your lungs gets used, so you feel more and more refreshed by the breath. And then be alert to see what happens as a result.

You want to see cause and effect. This was the Buddha's first teaching to Rahula. When you act, remember that your actions are going to have consequences, so you want to anticipate them. Follow through with actions only when you anticipate that the results will be harmless. And then notice, when you actually act, what are the results? If they're not what you like, go back and make some changes. This is a principle you can apply from your outside actions all the way into your inside actions, particularly with meditation. This is how meditation becomes a skill. You see things through consistently from cause to effect, and then apply the lessons to the next cause, and then the next.

As your attention span gets stronger like this—as you're able to observe for longer periods of time and see the connections—it's a lot harder for your defilements to come sneaking in, to whisper a little something in your ear and then run away. Then whisper a little more and run away. Now you see them coming; you see them going. And you begin to see the processes by which the mind decides to take them in or to reject them. You get more in control.

So that's one of the adjusting principles you learn: that the less distracted you are, the more you can see and the more clearly you can think things through.

Another principle, of course, is that when advertisers present an object to sell to you, they're showing not just the object. They try to create all kinds of connotations around it. I remember years back, they were selling the "Ford experience" almost as if they weren't selling Fords. The experience of owning a Ford: They tried to make it attractive. Well, BMW was doing a better job. They had that really obnoxious commercial where this guy comes out to a rooftop parking lot. His BMW parked off in the distance, and it's just glowing like no other car in the parking lot. And he shivers. That's the BMW shiver, the BMW chill, and that's what they were selling.

That's what your mind does to you, too. As the Buddha said, it's not so much sensual objects that we get carried away with. It's the fantasies we weave around them. You can fantasize all kinds of things about almost any kind of object. Now, some objects are more conducive to that effect than others, but it's always the fantasy around them: That's what gets you. And you want to see why you indulge in this—because, as the Buddha said, this is what sensuality is all about. It's not so much the objects or the pleasures. It's our plans and fantasies about them: That's what we're hooked on. So we have to figure out: How do we unhook ourselves?

The first way, of course, is to see the drawbacks of the object. This is one of the reasons, say, if you're attracted to another person, that contemplation of the body is a good theme to have mastered. But it doesn't do the whole job. It helps to poison the fantasy, but it may turn out that the object was not what the fantasy was about for you. It may not be what the allure was all about. The image of you, or the things that you get to do, and your sense of who you are in the fantasy may be a larger part of the attraction. But that principle of poisoning the fantasy by pointing out the drawbacks of the object is a good way of testing what the real allure is. Just as something seems to be getting good in the fantasy, try to inject something bad in.

Think of Ajaan Lee's story about the time he was fantasizing about disrobing and getting married. In his fantasy, he was able to get a job and he was able to get the daughter of a nobleman as his wife. And what did he want to do? He wanted to take her back home and show her off to his friends. He said that's when his fantasy started to take on some class. So his attraction to her had very little to do with her. A lot of it had to do with how he would look in the eyes of his family and friends back home.

But then he started to poison the fantasy. After all, she was the daughter of a nobleman. Her parents would like him as a son-in-law, so they wouldn't support her. She would have to work. But because she was delicately brought up, she couldn't work hard. And she died in childbirth or soon afterwards. So there he was, stuck with a child he'd have to raise without a wife to help him. Then things just got worse and worse and worse until he finally got to the point where he thought, "Boy, I wish I hadn't disrobed." Then he realized, "I haven't disrobed. Here I am, still a monk."

That's one way: Just let the fantasy get really bad. You'll find that part of the mind resists that. In that way, you learn some really interesting things about the different parts of the mind. One thing I've noticed is that there's a part that engages in magical thinking, believing that if you can fantasize about something, it's going to happen. And that's absolutely crazy.

We're not living in the world of Barney, the dinosaur, where everything you imagine can happen. But parts of the mind do think in that way. So when you unearth them—if that's what the problem is—you weaken the tendency to want to keep going back to the fantasy because you realize you're not gaining anything from it. You're not establishing the fact that this will be the future. Or if it is the future, you've got to watch out. Remember that old principle, "Beware of what you wish for, because you may get it."

Our fantasies and ideas lead to a lot of unintended consequences because they contain so many blind spots. So be careful. They do bend the mind, as the Buddha says. You think about sensuality, and the mind gets bent in that direction. And is that the kind of mind you want to have—bent? It gets bent by ill will. It gets bent by greed, aversion, and delusion. But these things can make you do really stupid things.

Of course, a lot of the appeal of your fantasies—of being someone who loved someone else or was loved by someone else—has to do simply with the fact that you’re lacking a sense of well-being in the present moment. And this, as the Buddha said, is one of the reasons we have to do concentration practice. With concentration, you get a sense of well-being here. If meditation doesn’t give you that sense of feeling viscerally really good sitting here, then it won’t be able to do all the things that meditation should. So work on getting a sense of real comfort right here. This, too, can be your protection against the parts of the mind that like to indulging in weird fantasies that pull you away.

Another way of poisoning the fantasy, of course, is that contemplation the Buddha mentions. He says, “You know, there are people in the world who can read minds. Suppose they were reading your mind right now. What would they think?” Now, there are teachings where the Buddha says not to be concerned with other people’s opinions. Don’t be worried by their criticism or praise. But he also says to take into consideration the counsel of the wise, what their opinion would be on things. This basically comes down to a sense of honor, the kind of honor that’s coupled with a healthy sense of shame. You’d be ashamed to do things that are beneath you.

After all, we’re trying to work on the precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones, so that if they could see our behavior—and our attitude toward our precepts—they would be pleased. One of the contemplations the Buddha recommends that the monks engage in every day is, “Can I criticize myself with regard to my precepts? Could those who are knowledgeable criticize me with regard to my precepts?” There’s part of our mind that thinks it’s living in the eyesight of somebody, so make it the noble ones whose eyesight you’re in.

For a sense of honor to be healthy really depends on who you want to look good to. There are a lot of stupid things people do because of their sense of honor, because they want to look good in the eyes of the wrong people. But there can also noble things that their sense of honor makes them do—ultimately based on whose eyes they want to look good in. So choose very discerning eyes, the eyes of the noble ones, as your standard.

So remember, these are tricks of the defilements. This is how advertising agencies make their living: by figuring out people's defilements. Years back, I read a student profile in the alumni magazine from the college I went to. The student was talking about how he was planning to do something really original: He was going to use his degree in psychology and go into advertising. I said to myself, "That's not original at all; they've been doing that for decades. What you want to do is take your knowledge of psychology and use it for the sake of freeing yourself from the defilements. That would be more original in our society."

As that chant said just now, we're slaves to craving. We think the craving is our friend, but it's ordering us around. Think of those images that Ajaan Maha Boowa and Ajaan Mun used. Ajaan Maha Boowa said that our defilements get up on top of our heads, and then they use our brains and our minds as their toilet. Or as Ajaan Mun said, the defilements have been laughing at us for a long time. They get us to do what they want. Then they run away, and we're the ones left holding the bag.

So use these other ways of thinking to poison your fantasies. Call into question the magical thinking that if you can imagine something, it's going to become a true pleasure. Now, to engage in adusting the mind in this way requires that the mind can get settled down and have a sense of belonging right here and have some nourishment right here, so that it's willing to enjoy busting the ads of the defilements.

So look at your breath right now. Does it feel as nourishing as it could be? What could be more nourishing than it is right now? Where is there tension? Where is there tightness in the body that's constricting things? Can you think of it opening up so that you're breathing all the way down to the soles of your feet, and everything inside is getting nourished? That puts you in a really good vantage point so that when other potential pleasures come up, you've got this to hold onto.

And learn to get quick at this as well, because sometimes greed, aversion, and delusion come in when you're feeling weak and tired, and you want some pleasure right away. So learn how to tap into this right away. One good exercise I found is that, as you go through the day, stop every now and then and tell yourself, "Okay, I've got five minutes to settle down." And stick with it as consistently and as rigorously as you can. Try to figure out where's your spot in the body that feels really good as you breathe in and really good as you breathe out. Go right there. Get quick about this. That gives you one more tool or one more weapon in your arsenal.

That's another trick of the advertisers: They want to force you to make a quick decision: Call now while supplies last! So again, as your act of defiance, be quick in getting the mind still. See if you can keep it still for long periods of time because that's an act not only of defiance, but also a path to freedom.