

Open Door Meditation

April 3, 2018

There's a good reason why we sit still with our eyes closed as we try to get the mind still: to teach the mind a lesson from the body. Not too much is coming in and particularly not nothing is coming in through your eyes, and there's a lot less to distract you. Then you can tell yourself, that any thought that comes up that's not related to the breath, you're not going to think that thought at all. The rules are clear, and it's simply a matter of living by them. That way, eventually the mind can settle down.

It's like having a refrigerator that you keep the door closed to. You open it up, close and open it up and close it, the refrigerator has to do a lot of extra work. And things don't get really cold. Or on a day like this, you don't want to think about being cold. So think about an oven. If you open the door to the oven again and again and again, what you have inside is not going to get baked. So, you try to keep things closed.

Make the rules for the hour very clear. If you have something important you want to think about, save it for the last five or ten minutes. But in the meantime, put it aside and just be right with the breath.

The problem comes when we get up from the meditation. The rules change. All too often we feel that because it's not really meditation time, it's kind of quasi meditation time, we don't have to be as strict with ourselves. But again think about the refrigerator. If you're going to keep things cold in the refrigerator when the door is open you've got to generate a lot of cold. Which means that you have to be extra careful as you get up and try to maintain the meditation.

The image the Buddha gives in the Canon is of a man walking between a crowd or people on the one side, the beauty queen on the other side. The beauty queen is singing and dancing, and the crowd is excited about her singing and dancing. The man is walking between the two. He's got a bowl of oil on his head filled to the brim. Behind him is another man, with a sword raised. And if the first man spills any drop of oil at all, the man with the sword is going to cut off his head. Which means that the first man has to be extra attentive to that bowl of oil. In the same way, as you get up from meditation you've got to be very attentive to the center in the body where you've focused, where you find a sense of comfort.

If it's one of the spots that Ajaan Lee talks about, it's an area where the breath energy there connects with the breath energy throughout the body. So if you keep watch over that one spot, you've pretty much got the breath energy problems in

the body covered, at least in a very general way. Because the spots are sensitive, if you really pay attention there, you're going to be able to detect when something's come up in the mind when it's not paying full attention. When there's the least little bit of tension in there, if you can detect it, you let it go, let it go. That way, staying in the present moment, even though it involves extra energy, rewards you, because of the sense of ease and well being that come with it. So it's not just a matter of telling yourself, "I'll just be in the present." Be in the present in a way that generates a sense of well-being to compensate for the fact that you've got your eyes open. And you're walking around.

In other words, you can't take it for granted that once you've attained a state of concentration with your eyes closed, you can get up and it'll maintain itself as you go through the day.

Ajaan Fuang had a student, a laywoman who had very strong powers of concentration. But she was always complaining that when she left meditation, her anger was just as bad as it was before. He told her that the concentration on its own is not going to be able to do it. You can't expect that the fact that you sat and meditated for an hour to cover you for the rest of the day. You've got to learn to maintain a sense of center, and it's going to involve some discernment. Because as you're changing the rules, one of the new rules is that certain things have to be thought about as you get up and move around. Particularly if you have a specific job to do. There are things you've got to think about.

And as you open the door to your skillful thoughts, other thoughts are going to sneak in. This is where discernment is necessary. You've got to see what it is, this flow of thoughts that's coming in, and who's sneaking in behind the shadow of a good thought. Because those are the thoughts that are going to derail you. So it requires extra discernment and extra concentration to maintain your center as you go through the day.

Which means that meditating in daily activities is a somewhat different skill from sitting here and concentrating with your eyes closed. But they connect, and they do nourish each other. And there are rewards that come with staying centered as you go through the day. Your concentration may not be as solid, but the opportunity for discernment arise becomes more and more available. This is because, as you're moving around, you've got to keep one eye on your center and one eye on what's happening around you; one part of your mind thinking about staying with your center and another part having to think about whatever your issues are. And as you move between these things if you're attentive, if you're alert, you see things that tend to slip through the cracks. Things you didn't notice before.

Ajaan Suwat would often say that his best insights came while he was doing walking meditation. His students have been led to believe that he gained final awakening while he was walking from the sala here down to his hut. And it was in this watching the movements of the mind between its center and going outside the returning to its center then going outside again, catching something that he hadn't see before: That was the discernment would be.

So even though the concentration isn't as solid, there are rewards. And, of course, the simple fact that you've been trying to maintain a sense of center from one sitting to the next sitting makes it a lot easier to settle down the second time, because you've kept the mind on a short leash. It's right nearby.

If it's been all over the place, then as soon as you sit down one problem may be that it's off someplace else. And even if it does come back, it's coming back with a the habit of wandering off again at the slightest provocation. But if you've been keeping an eye on it—with your alertness working all the time, your mindfulness working all the time, your ardency working all the time—than when you come to sit down, everything is right there. And the mind has developed some good habits that it's maintained throughout the day.

So this is one of the reasons why we do walking meditation, because walking and getting the mind still is a somewhat different skill from just sitting with the mind still. You've been learning how to chew gum. Now you have to learn how to chew gum and walk at the same time. And then from there, you chew gum and do the dishes at the same time, chew gum and do work around the monastery, work around the house, work around your job.

The range of your skill keeps expanding. But it requires that you bring the same level of intensity to looking after the mind that you maintain while you're sitting here with your eyes closed.

So it's not automatic that sitting and getting the mind still is going to carry into the rest of your life. You've got to carry it, but in carrying it you learn a lot of important skills, necessary skills for understanding your mind and getting some control over it. And of course there's the fact that if you're fully present to what's going on in your mind, then when unskillful things come up, you're prepared. You can detect them more quickly than you could otherwise. Because it's not the case that your defilements are going to, crop up only while you're sitting here meditating. They can come any time of the day. Which means that you have to be on the alert any time of the day.

So once you've mastered the skill of getting the mind still while you're sitting here, then try to expand that skill. If you find that you've lost it as you've gone around the day, just stop what you're doing. Get yourself centered again and be on

the lookout—as you continue with your jobs, your duties, or whatever you’re involved in—for the next time it’s going to leave, because you want to detect why it leaves. You learn a lot about the mind’s defilements this way: what things set it off, what things try to sneak in behind the shadow of a legitimate thought. This is where a lot of insight arises.