

Subduing Greed & Distress

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The Buddha's instructions on mindfulness are basically instructions on how to get the mind into concentration. And they describe two activities: One is remaining focused on a particular frame of reference in and of itself. Like right now we're focused on the breath: That's the body in and of itself. The second activity is subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.

What that means is that if any thoughts come up that are related to the world, you subdue them, you learn how to put them aside, at the very least get them under control.

To get the mind focused you have to do both of these activities side-by-side. The focus is what gives you a center in the mind, and the act of subduing greed and distress is like putting a fence around the mind to protect that center. You'll find as you practice you'll be switching back and forth between these two activities as needed.

The emphasis, of course, is on getting focused. Try to be with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Maintain that focus as continually as you can, even in the spaces between the breaths. Start out with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. As you breathe out, breathe all the way out, until the breath starts coming in on its own. Take an interest in what the breath is doing in the body and how you can relate to the breath. The more interesting you find the breath, the less likely you'll be to wander off.

So you can play with the breath. Think of it being long, think of it being short. When we talk about adjusting the breath, it's not so much that you put pressure on it. You simply think *longer, shorter, deeper, shallow*, and see how the body responds. Stick with a particular kind of breathing for a while to see what kind of effect it has on the body and on the mind. That way you learn. There are times when you're sleepy and the mind begins to drift off, that's the time to breathe more heavily, more deeply. It's also a good time to explore the subtleties of the breath in different parts of the body that you tend not to look at.

We each have the parts of the body that we tend to go to automatically as we focus on the breath. But there are other parts of the body where breath as the energy in the body is moving around as well. There may be patterns of tension here and there that you haven't noticed, or blockages that you haven't noticed. Sometimes the blockage can last for a long time. You think it's actually a bone, something solid in the body, but then you learn to release it and you realize, "Oh, that was just a dead area in the breath energy." So try to explore those areas. With some of those dead areas you can't attack them directly, you have to sidle up to them. But be open to the fact that there's more going on in the breath energy than you might have imagined. This gives you something to explore.

There are other times, though, when issues of the world begin to impinge so much that you've got to deal with them. These can be issues of the day, plans for tomorrow, or old things that tend to come up as you meditate. Sometimes you find memories from way back coming in. And you have to learn how to subdue greed and distress with regard to those, as the Buddha says. If you remember something stupid or something bad you did in the past, there's going to be some distress. If you remember some things you want out of the world, there's going to be greed.

It's interesting that those are the two emotions that the Buddha focuses on as our main hooks in the world: greed and distress. You've got to do what you can to take them apart. One of the techniques is to think of the world in the Buddha's definition where he says the world is just input at the six senses and the feelings and perceptions that arise based on that input. That's all it is, just sensory input. We have a very strong sense that the world is a real thing out there. Even the past can take on a huge reality. It's as if it's still there someplace. But where is it? It's just there in your memories. So remind yourself, these are just memories, these are just thoughts. At the moment, they're just memories of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Learn how to deconstruct things in this way.

In other words, this is not just a definition of the world, it's a strategic definition to help you deconstruct the world so that it doesn't have such a huge impact on the mind.

As for all the old stories and old narratives that would pull you away, take those apart, too. Or think in terms of karma: What you've done in the past was done in the past; there's nothing much you can do about it. But you can put the mind in good shape right now, so that when bad things come in from the past, you're much more prepared to deal with them.

As the Buddha said, if your mind is expansive, if you've developed discernment around how to not be overcome by pleasure and not be overcome by pain, and you can extend thoughts of goodwill to everybody, then the impact of past bad actions is going to be a lot less.

This is why the brahmaviharas are another way of dealing with greed and distress with reference to the world. We start out the meditation with that chant—thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity—as a way of disentangling ourselves from the narratives of the day and the narratives of our lives. Whatever anyone has done to us, we have goodwill for them. Anyone who we know is suffering right now, we have compassion. As for people out there who are happy, we're willing to spread empathetic joy. And as for things in the world that we have no control over, that's where we have to develop equanimity.

Use those thoughts to disentangle yourself from thoughts of the world, so that you can come back to your frame of reference—i.e., the body in and of itself. That *in and of itself* here is important. We're not thinking about the body in the world—in terms of how it looks to other people or what jobs it can do, what jobs it can't do, just the fact that we have a body sitting here right now and it's breathing. So look at the breath on its own terms. You want to

maintain that frame of reference. If you start slipping back to the frame of reference of the world, things are going to blur out.

At the same time, though, you want to make sure you do stay with the breath. Don't go floating away into the sense of pleasure. Sometimes the pleasure surrounds the breath like a nice cloud, and it's as if you want to jump on the cloud and ride away. Well, either you fall through or you stay in the cloud and it gets very cloudy. You get into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration, where the mind is still, and things are pleasant, but you're not really sure where you're focused. In the heaviest cases, when you come out you're not even sure if were really awake or asleep or what was going on. The problem is that you lose a sense of what you're focused on and you slip into delusion.

So make sure that even though there may be strong feelings of pleasure in the body, you're not going to leave the breath for the pleasure. The pleasure will do its work. Whatever refreshment you need right now, whatever soothing sensations you need in the body to calm you down, they'll do their work without your jumping on them. Stay with the breath, because your attention to the breath is what's causing them. The more attentive you can be to the breath, the smoother it becomes.

It's like a thread as you run your finger over as it's running past you. You've got to smooth out the thread so that any frayed edges get smoothed back into the thread. The continuity of your attention is what smooths things out in the breath.

As the breath energy in the body gets full, and you spread that sense of awareness and ease through the body, then the breath will naturally grow more calm on its own. You don't have to force it. In fact, if you do force it, you're going to have trouble. Just think of everything connecting up in the body, all the breath channels. Your awareness comes in and nourishes the body, and the breath gets more and more calm on its own. You actually get to the point where it stops. You don't have to worry. You're not going to die. As long as your awareness fills the body, as long as the breath energy fills the body, you're fine. The body will breathe when it needs to.

So our main focus is on that first activity, i.e., remaining focused on the body, in this case, the breath in and of itself. But remember you also have that fence for the times when you need to put up the fence, or if you find that the mind has jumped over the fence, you've got to get it back. But remember that the world that it's going out to, as far as you're concerned right now, is just a construct, something you've constructed out of your memories of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. That's it, just those things. Feelings that arise from those things are just inconstant feelings, too. Use thoughts of goodwill to rework the narrative around the world, and then use this contemplation of the world as just events at the six senses as a way of deconstructing it. That makes it easier to get back to your original focus, and to stay with that focus.

Because there's a lot more nourishment here than there would be in going out and feeding off the scraps of your memories or your plans. The real nourishment is right here.

So when we engage in these two activities of mindfulness, the purpose is to get the mind well-fed with concentration. Remember that this is where the real nourishment for the mind lies.