

Where Your Mind Gravitates

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You may remember those old commercials: “It’s ten o’clock: Where is your child right now?” Okay, it’s time to meditate: Where is your mind right now? Where does it gravitate? If you weren’t to tell it to meditate, if you weren’t watching over it carefully, where would it go?

It might be going to lust, to anger. Here it is, your own mind, and when you’re not riding herd on it, it seems to have a mind of its own. When the Buddha talks about being sensitive to the mind as you breathe in, sensitive to the mind as you breathe out, this is what he’s talking about.

The ajans will talk about how when you sit down to meditate you should ask yourself, “Where is your mind leaning?” Leaning to the future; leaning to the past; leaning to things it likes; things that it doesn’t like? When you get a sense of the mind as it would operate without any control, that’s when you get an idea of where you have to exert control—and the direction you have to go. If it’s heading toward lust, you have to ask yourself, Why? What do you get out of it?

Think of all those images the Buddha has for the drawbacks of sensuality, like the dog gnawing on a bone that doesn’t have any meat. You can think, and think, and think, but there’s really nothing there. Or as Ajaan Lee would say, “The only flavor you get out of it is the flavor of your own saliva.”

You’re making your happiness depend on something that’s totally out of your control, and something that when you really look at it carefully doesn’t really correspond to your desires for it. To lust for the human body requires that you turn a blind eye to many, many things in the human body. It’s just not an appropriate topic for lust, and yet we turn it into something like that.

Why? You realize that it has a lot to do with the perceptions you build up around it. As the Buddha said, when you want to understand craving, you have to understand where its real location is. There’s that passage where he asks: *A sight that you haven’t seen, a place you haven’t seen: Do you have any lust or desire there?* His answer is No, but you might say, “Well, there are a lot of places I’ve never been and never seen that I would like to see,” but that’s not the Buddha’s point. The desire is not there at the place. The desire is in your *perception* of the place: what you’ve heard about it, the narratives you’ve created around it. And the same thing applies to lusting for other people: It has nothing, or very little, to do with them, and a lot to do with your own preconceived notions.

So the problem is in here. We focus on the parts of the body to remind ourselves that this really is not where you’re going to find any true happiness, any true beauty, without a lot of downsides. So that turns you around, and you ask, “Well, what am I doing this for?” The mind

is very changeable, so you have to watch for it. It'll say, "No, no, no I don't like it," then a second later it goes back. Why? The same with anger: You can get really worked up about something that someone has done or said, and a minute later you've forgotten about it and you're off someplace else. What's going on?

It's as if the mind is just looking around for something to feed on, and if it can't find anything really good it'll take whatever it can get—until it finds something better, then it drops what it had and moves on.

Ask yourself why. Look for the allure. And you have to dig down many, many levels to find the allure, because often the mind likes to lie to itself. In fact, that's often one of the first things you begin to realize as you try to get sensitive to the mind. It simulates: It pretends to want one thing when it actually wants something else. Well, who is it performing for? Look into that.

Who's in charge of the conversation? It's because the mind is so quick that you have to be quick, too, to figure out where it's going, why it's going, and what you can do to counteract it. All too often the mind makes its decisions when it's really out of control: When the body is weak; when you're sleepy; or you're tired; generally in a grouchy mood—you can do and say things that you ordinarily wouldn't do. Yet it's at times like that that important decisions are being made.

After all, think of the decisions that'll be made as you get older, as you begin to get sick, and as you're dying: The body is going to be weakened in all those cases. The synapses may be firing a little bit slow, and it's all too easy just to fall in line with your old habits. Whatever direction the mind has been gravitating so far, that's where it's going to go.

One of the reasons why we practice meditation is to keep training the mind in new habits, because its old gravitational center is based on old habits—and you've got to learn new ones. These new habits have to go deep, and they have to be quick if they're really going to counteract the unskillful ones. So we get the mind into concentration, give a few karate chops to the things that would pull it out of concentration—in other words, deal with these issues in a way that gets you past them quickly, so you get the mind in a position of strength—and then you're going to have to turn around and look more carefully at its distractions.

Ajaan Lee's image is of the difference between cutting down a forest and burning up the logs: When you cut down the forest, you can see things you couldn't see before, but you've still got a huge pile of dead trees. If you want to walk across the forest floor, all these fallen-down trees are going to get in the way—so you have to burn them up. In other words, go back and look in more detail at your lust, at your anger, at your delusion, but come from a position where the mind is feeling relatively well fed, relatively secure, more soundly based, more soundly grounded, so that you can see things a lot more clearly. It'll be less and less inclined to want to fall in with your old ways.

If you catch yourself suddenly slipping, you've got to go back. Just plant the mind in its object of concentration. Make sure it stays there for a while, and when it feels solid enough again, then you can entertain some of your other thoughts again. It's in this way that you get more and more sensitive to the mind in a way that's really useful, because building on the step of being *sensitive* to the mind, the Buddha says then you *gladden* it if you find that it's down. And then you concentrate it or *steady* it if you find that it's wandering around too much. But in particular, you *release* it from whatever its attachments may be.

Then you go back to that step of being sensitive again. It goes around and around and around. All too often you deal with a problem once and it's not really dealt with. It's going to have another angle the next time around. The mind's like a little child: If you thwart it in one direction, it's going to look, and look, and look to find another way to get around you. So you have to keep coming back to these topics again, and again, and again.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa used to like to say, you may have contemplated the body many times, but you can't say, "Well, I've contemplated it twenty times, or a hundred times, or five hundred times. That should be enough." You have to keep doing it again, and again, until finally something gets understood that wasn't understood before. Because it is a question of understanding. It's a question of *discernment*.

You can't just browbeat the mind into not having lust or not having anger. You have to understand where it was coming from to begin with—why it was gravitating in that direction, and what the gravitational pull was. When you finally see it—and you see that it was based on some really stupid ideas—that's when you let go. That was Ajaan Suwat's favorite translations for the word *avijjā*. It's usually translated as *ignorance*, but he said it's basically *stupidity*. It's not simply not knowing. It's doing stupid things even when you know better.

So that's what you've got to get sensitive to. That's why it requires some good strong concentration, because we don't like seeing our own stupidity. We cover it up. But when the mind has settled in, has a sense of refreshment, a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home here, then it's harder and harder to knock it off balance. That's when you're more likely to see and more likely to be willing to admit what you see, because it's only then that you'll really be able to work yourself free.