

Mental Experiments

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Meditation is like running a series of experiments in the mind, trying to see what happens when you focus it on one thing for long periods of time, trying to see what happens when you really take seriously the idea that the way you use your mind may be causing unnecessary suffering. So you want to see clearly what you're doing, where the suffering is, and what you can change. This is why it's important that you get accurate results from the experiment.

And as with any experiment, one of the most basic things – in fact it's so basic that we hardly even think about it – is that you don't want the scientists to be starving. If they're starving, they'll eat up the endowment before it even gets to the experiment. Or they'll fudge the findings to get quick results so that they can print them and make a name for themselves. Or if they're really starving – say the experiment involves feeding bananas to apes – the scientists will eat up the bananas first. They'll never get to the apes.

What this means is that, as a meditator, you have to come to the meditation with a sense of wellbeing. This is why the path doesn't begin with meditation. It begins with generosity and virtue, because generosity and virtue help you gain a sense of self esteem. When you're generous, you see the good that comes from being able to give things away. That, in and of itself, gives the mind a sense of wealth. Generosity is one of the forms of noble wealth. It gives the mind a sense of contentment. You're not constantly gobbling up your profits. You take part of the profits and share the rest. That provides a different kind of wealth inside.

The same with virtue: You see the things you could do that might give you an immediate advantage over somebody else, but you realize that you'd rather not do them because they're harmful – not only to the other person, but also to yourself. As you learn to say No to yourself more and more consistently in situations like that, you can begin to trust yourself. As your precepts gets tested in more and more difficult situations, you gain a greater and greater sense of their worth. If someone were to offer you a thousand dollars to lie, you realize you have a precept that's worth more than a thousand dollars. If they offer a million dollars, you still can say No. You've got a precept worth more than a million.

And you learn a lot of other skills as well in the course of practicing generosity and virtue. For one thing, you learn deferred gratification, realizing that there are solid pleasures to be gained from putting aside or forgoing quick and easy pleasures that end quickly and easily as well. As you find yourself able to forgo the easy pleasures, you gain a sense of responsibility, a sense of self-

worth, a sense that you can trust yourself. This translates into a sense of inner wealth, inner wellbeing.

This is what you want to bring to the meditation, so that you can watch what's happening in the mind with a sense of dispassion. Bad things come up in the meditation and you don't get worked up over them; good things come up and you don't grab at them. You can watch them, instead of saying, "Wow, this must be something really great!" and trying to grab them only to find that they're already gone.

It's like a woman I once knew in Thailand. She lived down the road from the monastery but was new to meditation. I'd gotten to know her over time, and had noticed that she was pretty mercenary. And sure enough, one day as she was sitting and meditating, she reached out in front of her, grabbed the air, and fell over. Later she admitted very sheepishly that she had seen a vision of a golden tray floating right in front of her, and she wanted it. This is what happens when you meditate with a sense of hunger. You grab at everything that comes by and it just slips through your fingers. You destroy whatever it was.

So. Try to come with a sense of wealth, that you're not hungry for things, so that when something good comes up you can just watch it for a while, and say "What is this? Is this really good or not?" If you can develop the patience to watch things, then you begin to get a better sense of what's worthwhile. When something really good does come along, you can just watch it for a while and not try to gobble it up right away.

Even when you can maintain a particular state of ease or rapture, you don't want to start jumping to conclusions about it. That's like the scientists who get a few results from their experiments and then are in a great hurry to publish them so that they can make a name for themselves. If you're wise when something comes up in the meditation, you're not too quick to interpret it. You just watch it for a while to see what happens, to see what it does. What good does it do for the mind? This is what makes all the good things in the meditation good: They do good things for you. We're not here to hoard up the jhanas the way you'd hoard up houses on Baltic or Ventnor. When something comes, just watch it for a while, see what it does. How is it useful in the practice?

Ajaan Fuang once pointed out that even states of Wrong Concentration can be useful if you know how to use them. For instance, you can get yourself in states of concentration where you totally lose any sense of the body – and here I mean *strong* states of concentration, not that kind of floating, deluded concentration where you just lose your bearings. I'm talking about the state of non-perception, where you really focus on a very minute spot and refuse to deal with anything that comes in through any of the senses. As a result, you can totally blank yourself out. You lose the sense of the body, you can't even hear anything, and you can stay there for long periods of time. If you make up your mind beforehand that you're going to stay for two hours, you'll stay for two hours and then come out right on target. Two hours will seem like two minutes. It's Wrong

Concentration because there's no way you're going to be able to develop any insight while you're in that state. But it has its uses. As Ajaan Fuang told me, he once had to go into surgery. They were going to remove a kidney, but he didn't trust the anesthesiologist so he put himself in this state so that, no matter what happened, he wouldn't have to suffer pain.

So even Wrong Concentration can have its uses. All the more so with Right Concentration. But even Right Concentration, as I said, is not an end in and of itself. It's part of the path. And the path is worthwhile because it takes you to where you want to go.

So whatever comes up in the mind, just put a post-it note on it, saying "This seems to be x ." Then watch it for a while, to see what x does. Maybe after a while, as you get more and more familiar with the territory of the mind, you have to shift the post-it notes around. But you haven't lost anything because you've learned what these states are useful for.

This is why you want to come to the meditation with a sense of wellbeing. Try to keep the mind on an even keel, so that no matter what happens, good or bad, the mind doesn't have to zoom up with the good things or crash down with the bad. You simply watch. If the mind is centered, you can ask yourself, "This seems good. Where did it come from? Where is it going to go?" If the mind is scattered, ask yourself, "Where did this come from?" Try to trace it out. Try to understand what's happening in terms of cause and effect. This requires that the mood not take total possession of your mind. Try to maintain a sense of the observer that's just watching the mood come and go. Of course, that observer itself will have its own mood, which is a mood of patience, a mood of wellbeing, but also a sense of urgency: This is important work that we're doing here – we don't want to suffer.

So it's important that you strike the right balance. You want accurate results. Sometimes that takes time, so you're willing to take time – the idea being that when you finally publish your results they really are worthwhile, they really are dependable, rather than being just a flash in the pan.

This requires that you bring a sense of contentment, a sense of wellbeing to the meditation. Develop attitudes of generosity, virtue, and self-restraint. Practice them in your daily life. And try to get a keen sense for the rewards that come: the sense of wellbeing and inner wealth that comes when you know that you can give things away, that you can abstain from what you know to be harmful actions. No matter how much you'd like to do something harmful, you just don't do it, and in that way you build up a sense of inner worth and inner wealth.

This puts you in a position where, as you watch your mind in the course of the meditation, you're really going to see what's happening. You're not going to eat up the endowment; you're not going to eat up the bananas before they can get to the apes. You're going to wait until your results are solid and sure before

you try to publish anything. That's when the experiment really will be a gift of knowledge, both to yourself and to everybody else.