

Leaving Meditation

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This is going to sound like a dumb analogy, but leaving meditation is like turning off your computer. You can turn it off without going through the protocol, you can turn it off by going through the protocol, or you can just put it to sleep. When then you come back to use the computer, the ease with which you can get back into the computer depends on how you turned it off.

In other words, if you just jump out of the meditation, it's going to be hard to come back. If you go through a little protocol it'll be easier. And if you really don't turn it off, just put it into a different mode, that's easiest of all.

So it's important when you get into meditation to think about how you're going to leave. If the time comes to end the period—say it's the end of the hour here, or you've set a certain time for yourself when you're meditating alone—and the time comes, you jump out and you think about other things, get back to business, then it's as if you've totally abandoned the meditation. You've cut it off midstream. When the time comes to come back, it's going to be hard to pick up the pieces.

So at the very least, have a kind of protocol for when you leave meditation. Notice what the first thing is that you focus on when you leave the breath, when you open your eyes, when you start thinking about other things that have to be done. Notice how the mind moves to those things, and try to notice what's the first thing that really knocks it off balance. See how long you can maintain your sense of being centered inside.

This way, you learn interesting things about the mind, because if there's no connection between your concentration and your daily life, not only is it hard to get back into the concentration, but you're also not getting the benefits of your concentration as you go through the day. You may be able to keep your greed, anger, and delusion under control while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but if they go running wild when your eyes are open, then you've lost the benefits.

And sometimes the concentration makes it even worse. Your mind gets stronger as it sits here and rests in concentration, but if you go out and apply that strength to your greed, anger, and delusion—running with them instead of counteracting them—you've got a big problem.

One way of dealing with this is trying to notice: Where does the mind go when you loosen up the leash a little bit, when you let it out of the pen? What things does it go running to? Okay, those are big issues.

Learn to notice how the mind engages them, and how they engage the mind. You'll start seeing how the mind is not simply the victim of outside events, but it's a troublemaker that goes running out and stirring up things. When you see that, it gives you a different perspective on what it means to be dealing with the world.

It's not the case that you're just sitting here perfectly fine, perfectly still, and the world comes in and causes trouble. You run out and cause trouble to the world, too. As a meditator, you want to see that in action. Because if you don't see it in action, you don't really believe it. You can hear it and say, "Yes, reflecting on the past, I can see how that might be true." Which is better than not seeing at all, but still, you want to see it in action in the present moment. See the mind as it runs out and grabs hold of something: How does it do that? What exactly are the steps when a particular topic is proposed in the mind, and then the mind goes, "Yes, let's go!" How does that happen?

The best way to watch it is as you're coming out of concentration, because you have some stillness with which to compare the movements of the mind. That's called coming out of meditation by going through the protocol.

Even better is when you don't *really* turn off the computer; just put it into a different mode, although "sleep" is not really a good name for it here. "Centered" would be better. Just try to maintain your sense of being centered in the body, no matter what you do. Make it a comfortable center.

Try to notice when issues get the mind stirred up: Where does tension first appear in the body? Where are its main nodes? If you can, concentrate on keeping one or two of those main spots in the body relaxed. If you hit the right spots, you find the tension doesn't really have a chance to take hold and spread.

So try to get to know where your tension spots are. They may be the back of the neck, the back of your hands, the area around the sternum. Make a mental note that you're going to stay there, and at least keep that spot relaxed all the time. If you can't keep the whole body relaxed, at least have your trigger points relaxed. If you get the right points, it'll have an affect all over the body.

So even when you can't maintain full-body awareness all the time, at least have those trigger

points in mind. Keep them relaxed.

They say that the mind can't think of more than one thing at a time, but that's not really true. It keeps scanning here and there. It's like those security systems where you have cameras all over the perimeter of the building, and you've got one room that has, say, five or six screens, and the mind keeps checking the different screens. This is what it's been doing all along. So just focus one of the screens on those tension points, the trigger points in the body. Keep those points relaxed.

It's not as if you're adding one more extra duty for the mind to do. You're simply replacing the normal chatter of the mind with something that's actually useful. And as you get more and more used to it, you find you can stay centered here for longer and longer periods of time, until the point where if you're not there, something feels wrong. You're off balance.

This way, when the time comes to sit down and meditate, you're right there. There's not a lot of pushing and pulling, fighting off distracting thoughts, because you've made a habit of staying with that one point and letting your awareness spread out from that one point.

It's the same skill you want to develop as you're sitting here with your eyes closed. When you can keep this continuity, then the meditation can develop momentum. It's not stop-start, stop-start, like city traffic.

This is what's called really having a home for the mind, and staying home. So remember that the skills of meditation are not just skills for when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. They're survival skills for the mind all through the day, through all your activities.

This is how the well-administered mind is administered, a well-managed mind is managed: by giving it a foundation spot and keeping it there.

In other words, when you leave meditation, you don't really leave, you just go into a different mode. That's when it's most effective.