

## *Mind Control*

*June 25, 2006*

Okay, time to focus on the breath. If you're going to think, think about the breath. As for any other thoughts that might come into the mind right now, just let them go, no matter how important or how compelling they may seem. This is not the time and a place for them.

One of the most important principles of the practice is having a sense of time and place. You look at the Buddha's instructions, and they're fairly complex. After all, there are four things to look for in the present moment. He's not the sort of teacher who says, "Just be mindful," or, "Just be fully present, and everything else will take care of itself." You've got to look for where the suffering is, where there's a cause of suffering, what events in the mind actually have the potential to become the path to the end of suffering. These are things you've got to look for.

And there are tasks for each of the things you look for. You try to comprehend your suffering. You want to let go of the cause when you recognize it. And as for any elements of the path, you try to develop them. That means there's a time and place for all these different functions. The main skill in the practice is learning that sense of time and place, what works and what doesn't work when and where. You learn this through trial and error.

This is why it's a skill. The Buddha didn't just put you in a pressure cooker and say, "Okay, when the pressure gets enough, and you have a neurotic breakthrough, that's going to take care of everything." We're working on a skill here. It starts from very simple things, learning how to observe your actions to see what gives good results, what doesn't give good results.

You start by learning to observe your speech, because the Buddha's instructions on right speech are very useful guide to right meditation. Once he was pressed on the issue of whether he would say things that would be displeasing to other people. The person asking the question, a prince, was hoping to catch him, as this was a trick question. If the Buddha said he wouldn't say anything displeasing, well, the prince had evidence that the Buddha had said displeasing things to Devadatta, the cousin who was trying to take over the Sangha. And if he said that he *would* say displeasing things, then the prince would say, "Well, what's the difference between you and ordinary people everywhere?"

But the Buddha didn't fall for the trap. He said, "That's not a question you answer categorically." He went on to say that there are different kinds of speech. There's true speech, and then there's untrue speech. There's beneficial speech,

unbeneficial speech. There's speech that's pleasing and speech that's not pleasing. Basically what it came down to is that he would say only things that were true and beneficial. As for whether they were pleasing or displeasing, he would find the right time and place to say the pleasing things, and the right time and place to say the unpleasing things.

In other words, there are some instructions that are true across the board. When you speak, you speak only things that are true, and speak only when they are beneficial. That's an across-the-board kind of rule. As for things that are pleasing or displeasing, you've got to see what's the right time and place. But even then, with that issue of beneficial, somethings that are true, but they're not beneficial right now, so you've got to have a sense of time and place for that, too.

This principle applies to your thinking, too. The mind just keeps churning out thoughts, churning out thoughts, as if it were a 24-hour factory that just didn't stop, didn't stop. We don't realize that there's an alternative: that we can stop thinking about things, or if you're going to focus your thinking, you focus it on the present moment, instead of doing any discursive thinking. Only when you realize you have these alternatives and you've practiced them so that you can do them when you want, then you begin to gain a sense that a lot of the thinking that goes on in the mind is really useless. It just wastes your energy. So you want to make a rule in mind, as you would with your speech, that you'll think only things that are true, and you'll think only things that are beneficial, when they are beneficial. And you'll tell yourself pleasing or displeasing things whenever appropriate.

Otherwise, you bring all your thoughts back to the breath and try to get as directly *with* the sensation of breathing as possible. This means that you have to learn to turn off your distracting thoughts. The Buddha gives some instructions on how to do this. He recognizes that there are five different ways you can approach the issue, and each approach will work in different cases.

The first one is very simple. When you notice that your mind is wandering off, you bring it back. You give it something better to think about. You're sitting here focusing on the breath and suddenly find yourself thinking about tomorrow's meal. Bring your mind back to the breath. That's it. Remind yourself, "That's not why we're here for. We're not here to think about meals. We're here to think about the breath." Sometimes just that is enough. In other words, what has happened is simply a lapse of mindfulness. You correct that by reminding yourself to come back here. Then you reinforce the lesson by making the breath a pleasant and interesting place to be.

That'll work in some cases, but not in all. There are other cases when a particular pattern of thinking is really compelling. It pulls you away again and again and again. That's when you've got to take another approach. In this case, you focus on the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. If you were to think that way for 24 hours, what would it do? It would waste your time, waste your energy. What's worse is that it would get you tangled up in greed, anger, pride, fear, lots of different kinds of unskillful thinking, lots of different unskillful states. Do you really want to go there? Sometimes you can remind yourself, "This is a pattern of thought I've done many, many times. I know where it's going to go, and it's not going to go to a good place. Why bother? Why go there? If this were a movie, would you pay to see it?"

Often that's enough to get you disinterested in that kind of thinking. You come back.

There are other times, though, when the mind just seems to be intent on to churning out thoughts—good, bad, different, it's not interested. It just wants to churn out thinking. So you make up your mind, "Well, it can think if it wants, but I'm not going to go along with it." It's like a crazy person coming up to you. You know that even if you try to drive the crazy person away, as soon as you get involved in a conversation with the crazy person, the crazy person sets the agenda, and you're suddenly in that crazy person's agenda. What you have to do is to ignore the crazy person. The crazy person will chatter away and do everything he can to get you interested. But you've just got to make up your mind: "No, I'm not going to go there." You focus on the breath. If there's going to be any chattering, let the chattering be in the background. You don't have to get involved.

It's like those tar traps they talk about the Pali Canon. They smear tar on a stump, and a monkey comes up. He sees the tar and he touches it. As soon as his paw gets stuck on it, he uses his other paw to pull the first one off. That doesn't work. Both paws get stuck. Then he uses back his paws. His back paws get stuck. Then gets upset and he bites it. His mouth gets stuck.

In other words, there are some kinds of thinking you just can't touch. Don't go there. They'll churn away in the back of the mind, but just let them be there in the back of the mind. You've got your breath here in the foreground. You'll find that, after a while, as long as you stay with the breath, that thinking will just gradually drop away, drop away, because it was feeding on your attention. If you don't give it any attention, it starves and fades away.

If that doesn't work, then when you're in touch with the breath, you can begin to notice that when you think a certain thought, there's going to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It may be in your arms, in your legs, in your back,

in your head. As soon as you notice the pattern of tension that goes along with that thought, just breathe through the tension. Allow it to relax, and the thought goes away.

But if those four approaches don't work, you can just grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and tell yourself, "I'm not going to go with that thought." It's like jamming the radio circuits. This is the blunt instrument in your toolbox for dealing with distracting thoughts. It's the tool of last resort. But sometimes you need it. So make sure you have this blunt instrument at hand for when you need it. After a while, you can let back on the pressure, and you find that your interest in going with the thought has gone away. Then you can go back to your meditation.

So when you find the mind wandering around, even if it's useful thinking—the things you have to do today, the things you have to do tomorrow—you don't have to think about them all the time, and especially not right now. Get out your list, write it down, and say, "Okay, I've done that. Now is time for the mind to rest."

Think of your mind as a machine that needs to be taken care of. It needs to have its oil checked, it needs time to rest so that it doesn't overheat. Don't let it just keep churning, churning, churning away all the time, because that way it just keeps churning out garbage. It may churn out a few good things every now and then, like hundreds of monkeys typing away for hours and hours. Occasionally they'll type a sentence. But wouldn't it be much better to have a person typing for five minutes and then resting? Try to be more deliberate in your thinking.

This is a basic principle in meditation. We have a lot of habits that, because they're random, can be harmful. Occasionally they'll come up with something good, but if you learn to be more deliberate about them, you can get more use out of them with a lot less input.

Like the whole issue of inhabiting your body: We know that ultimately you have to let go of your attachment to the body, but in the meantime, learn how to inhabit it purposely. Be fully aware of the whole body. This is part of the path. Breathe into the body. Think of the whole body breathing. Every cell in the body, your whole nervous system, is engaged in the flow of energy. Think about that. Then look at what sensations you have in the body that would correspond to that. Look at whatever sensations are blocking that sensation. In other words, there may be tightness here, tightness there, that's getting in the way of the sense of flow in the body. Well, relax the tightness. As long as you're going to identify with something, identify with this sense of the whole body, inhabit the whole body, and then learn how to stay there.

What usually happens is that we inhabit part of the body for a while, then we run off to something else. If you could take a picture of your sense of your self, it would be like an amoeba oozing around, or like a reflection skittering across the water—all very erratic. And because it's so erratic, you can't really observe it. You need to give it a good place to stay for a longer time so that you can start observing: What is it to inhabit the body? What is it to identify with the body? Learn to get some use out of that habit. If you're with the body, then when thoughts come, you have a better place to stay where you can just watch the thoughts come and go, and not get involved. You see people saying other things and it goes right past you. It doesn't have to get sucked in.

Most of us have a mind like a vacuum cleaner. It picks up all the dirt in the room and leaves all the good things behind. That's because it's out there hungry. But if it's in here inhabiting the body, it's not hungry anymore. It's not sucking up the dirt. It's fully inhabiting the body. You begin to notice that the words people say, the things they do, just go past, past, past. You notice them but you don't get involved. You don't put yourself in the line of fire, and you don't run with them. You have no inner emptiness that would create the vacuum that would suck them in. This puts you in a position of strength.

In this way, you take this habit you occasional have of inhabiting your body, having a sense of identifying with the body, and you put it to good use. You're deliberate about it. It gives you a place to take a stand and watch your thoughts and gain a better sense of what's the time and place for a particular kind of thinking.

In other words, an important lesson in meditation is being more deliberate in what you do. Be more deliberate in your thinking. Be more deliberate in how you inhabit your body. Gain a sense of time and place, so that your thinking becomes right thinking, just like right speech. You think what's true. You think what's beneficial, *when* it's beneficial. Otherwise, you drop it.

That way, when the time comes that you really do have to think through difficult problems, the mind has the strength it needs. It hasn't been worn down by all its random, chaotic thoughts, the random ways you inhabit the body, inhabit the breath. Keep your grounding here as much as you can because this is your resting spot for a healing awareness: this awareness that suffuses the body, allows the energy in the mind to move in ways that feel right. You allow this healing awareness to have the space it needs to do the healing work it needs to do. You make this your home base.

Our minds, for most part, keep traveling around in their thoughts but without any home base. Here you've got a home base. You've got the choice. A thought

comes along and you can decide: “Do I want to go with it or not? Is it worth going with it or not?” You’ve got the choice because you don’t feel compelled to jump into everything that comes by.

Once you’ve got this grounding and you’ve learned to make it the basis for a healing awareness, you get more and more sensitive to how the energy flows in the body, where the energy is healthy and where it’s not, and how your awareness can affect that, to make it more and more healthy all the time. Then, when a thought comes up, you’ve clearly got the choice. You’re not hungry for the thinking. You’re not desperate for the thinking. You’ve got the luxury of deciding, “Do I need to go with that or not?” The better and more solid you make this grounding here, then the more picky you can be about what kind of thoughts you’re going to go with. You can choose to go with only thoughts that are really beneficial, really helpful. Your choices become more deliberate, more beneficial. You make them with a clear mind, based on what you’re able to see about cause and effect, what kind of thinking goes to a good place, what kind of thinking goes to bad places.

The Buddha once said that he really got on to the right path when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two classes: thoughts that were harmful and thoughts that were not. So learn to put yourself in a place you can make the same distinction, and go with the harmless thinking when it’s useful, and learn to abandon harmful thinking at all times. And give the mind a place where it doesn’t have to think at all, where it can just stay with the sensation of the present. That’s what transforms mundane right resolve—the resolve not to do anything harmful—into transcendent right resolve, the resolve to stay in a state of concentration as your home base.

So when the Buddha talks about disciplining the mind, he’s not getting ready to drag out the chains and the whips. What he has you do is learn how to get the mind into a state where it can just be still with the breath, fully inhabiting the body, strengthened by that awareness. When you’re strengthened in that way, then you’re not so susceptible to every little whisper of a thought that comes along. You’re more in charge because you’ve got something better to do than just think all the time. You’ve got a better place to be.