

Don't Believe Everything You Think

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Start out with the intention to stay with the breath. Make up your mind that no matter what else comes into your mind—whatever thoughts, intentions, feelings—you're not going to go with them. You're going to stay with the breath.

Now, this doesn't mean the other thoughts and intentions won't come. They don't get scared away simply by one intention. There will be other thoughts, other feelings, other intentions coming in. So you've got to be prepared for them.

One way is to try to be as interested as possible in the breathing. Remember that it's not just air coming in and out of the lungs, it's the whole energy flow in your body. The top of the head down to the tips of the toes, tips of the fingers, your arms, your legs, your torso, your neck: Every part of the body has breath energy.

When the breath comes in, think of it lighting up the whole nervous system. There are different levels of breath energy, and this is something you can explore. There's what Ajaan Lee calls the common breath, which is the breath coming in and out through the nose. There's a subtler breath, a breath energy that flows through the nervous system. As soon as the in-breath starts, this breath energy has already flowed all the way down instantaneously throughout the body. And there's still another breath energy that's totally still all the time.

So there are different levels of the breath that you can tune into. Focus on whichever level of the breath energy you can observe most clearly. Some of the subtle ones take a lot of concentration for you to sense their presence. Focus on the ones you can notice right now and try to keep them as comfortable as possible. Think again of the breathing as a whole-body process. You focus your awareness on one point, but that one point is connected to every other part of the body. Keep that in mind.

And try to make an examination, an exploration, to see what kind of breathing feels best for the different parts of the body. This gives you something to do. When you have something to do with the breathing, you're less likely to go running off with other thoughts, other ideas.

It's like hanging out with a friend. If your friend is boring or if you're bored with your friend, then no matter who comes along down the street, you're going to run off with that person if they seem the least bit interesting.

So try to take an interest in your friend here. After all, the breath *is* your friend—it's been keeping you alive all this time. So try to take an interest in it and see

what it has to offer. That's one way of defending yourself from contrary intentions, intentions that go against your original intention to stay with the breath.

Another way is to have the right attitude toward those other intentions. Be prepared. They're going to come and you have to remind yourself that just because a thought has appeared in your mind doesn't mean you have to go running with it. You don't have to sing along with what Ajaan Mun calls the mind's song.

The fact that an idea or a thought comes through the mind doesn't mean that it has any real meaning or any importance. Sometimes it's caused simply by the way the blood flows through the body or through the brain, or by a certain rhythm of the heart.

In other words, there are lots of physical things that can cause thoughts to go through the head. They could be just random the firing of the synapses in your brain. Or one thought may arise or one feeling may arise through the breathing and that's going to remind you of how you used to feel at some other time, and all of a sudden you find yourself back there.

Actually, there were several stages in the process. And one of them had to do with the mind's tendency just to go running with anything that comes along. It does this partly because of a lack of mindfulness but also a lack of understanding.

When thoughts come through, even when strong emotions come through, it's not necessarily the "real you" that's feeling those things or thinking those things. It's just that this mind-body complex has churned up that particular image.

You have to remind yourself: You have the choice to go with it or not. Even when the emotion is strong and has a physical component—in other words, it's begun to stir up different breath energies, different hormones in the body—that doesn't mean it's real or that you have to go with it. Remind yourself that there are alternatives.

So as soon as you catch yourself running off with a thought, just drop it. You don't have to tie up the loose ends before you drop it. Just drop it. Come back to the breath.

Remind yourself that even if it seemed important or interesting, you don't have to go with it. If it's really important, it'll come back after you've left the meditation.

In the meantime, your duty is to allow the mind some time to settle down. You have to keep in mind the importance of keeping a good, solid, calm state of mind as a skill that you want to develop. You're going to need this in your everyday life, as aging comes, illness, as death comes. Your best defense in the face of any pain or danger is a calm mind.

Especially if your mind tends to operate on fear and worry: Remind yourself that this is your best defense, this is your best preparation for any difficult situation—the ability to keep your head.

And these are some of the skills needed for keeping your head: Learn how to breathe calmly no matter what; learn how not to go running off with any thoughts that may come into the mind.

When we talk of people who are brave and fearless, it's not that fears don't go through their head. It's just they don't go running with the fears, they don't sing along with them. They see the fear and they learn how to just put it aside, not let it get involved, not let it get in the way.

And these two processes of learning to make the breath interesting and learning how to put down thoughts: As the meditation gets subtler, you find that they start coming together. The breath grows more and more calm, more solid. There's a sense of fullness in the body, and then ease, and then finally, total equanimity.

Everything is very still. And when you've tuned into that level where there's a still breath energy filling the body like this, then it's very easy to see how thoughts form. There's going to be a stirring in the breath which at the beginning you'd be hard put to say whether it was physical or mental. You realize you have the choice of labelling it one way or the other.

In other words, when we go for a distraction, we actually exercise more choice than we're usually aware of. A lot of these decisions for the most part tend to be under the radar, down in the basement, out of the light of consciousness. But as you become more alert and sensitive, what used to be unconscious or subconscious gets brought into the light of day. You see that you do have choices, and your choices are informed by your understanding.

This is why teaching yourself the right attitude toward distraction is an important part of the meditation: realizing it's not you, it doesn't necessarily have to be you. Just because a thought comes into the mind doesn't mean it has any meaning. Or just because it looks like it might be entertaining or interesting doesn't mean that it's going to take you to a good place. Some thoughts are very attractive to begin with but then can cause a lot of problems.

Years back when I was a layperson, I was standing at a corner by a road in Bangkok. A car drove up with two very pretty women sitting in the back of the car and they motioned for me to get in the car with them. I looked at that and I said, "That's trouble." A lot of attractive thoughts are like that. Who knows where they would have taken me, what would have happened, or if they were even women to begin with.

Just because a thought looks like it might be entertaining is no reason to go with it. Even if it looks like it's important, you don't believe in its importance. If it seems meaningful or pretentious, you don't have to believe it. After all, thoughts really can be very random—and very deceiving. They look like they're going one place, and then they take you another.

So you've got to learn how to say No. Just ignore the thought. Many thoughts are like a crazy person coming to talk in your mind. If you look at them that way, then you learn how not to touch them.

You know how crazy people are. If you try to chase them away, they've got you. So you just ignore them. They'll say more and more outrageous things to catch your attention. But finally when they see that there's no reaction at all, then *they* get bored and they go away.

Many of your thoughts are like this. The mind will stir up these things, and if you latch on to them, then they'll stir up some more.

Or you can think of these thoughts as the mind offering wares for sale. If you buy the thought, okay, then it'll keep on producing more of the thoughts of the same kind, and you buy those. But when it puts its wares out on the table and nobody buys, after a while the mind just stops putting them out. It realizes it's a waste of time.

So remind yourself that distractions as they come are pretty random. You don't need to go with them. You've got a more important intention, which is learning how to maintain a sense of ease, a sense of stillness with the breath. And that really is your most important defense.

Because sometimes deep down inside you believe, "I've got to worry about this, worry about that, to prepare for the future." Well, remind yourself: Your best defense against future dangers is present awareness, present mindfulness.

So no matter what the reasoning may be for wanting to go with the distraction, you've got to have good reasons to counteract it.

When you see how arbitrary these thoughts are in their formation, how arbitrary they are in your choice of what to make of them, that helps to dispel a lot of the attraction, the sense of importance they seem to carry. And that makes it easier not to go running with them.

So do your best to remember the importance of staying with the breath and the triviality of your thoughts that pull you other places. When you think in these terms, it's a lot easier to stick with your original intention, which is to stay right here.