

Desert Island Meditation

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Have you ever played that game where you ask yourself: If you were to go to a desert island, what would you take with you?—assuming that there wouldn't be much space on the island, and you'd be limited in your luggage, and you'd be there by yourself. In a way, that's what you're doing every time you meditate. As the Buddha said, you're supposed to "Make yourself an island." And what are you going to have on this desert island? What companionship? What treasures?

As thoughts come up while you're trying to stay with the breath, you have to ask yourself, "Is this a desert island thought or is it just a garbage thought?—a thought that I could entertain if I had a large house with lots of room for all kinds of guests and all kinds of things and a whole train packed to carry my luggage. Because that's the way most of our minds are. They're not desert island minds. They're like those huge garbage heaps you see outside of Manila or Bangkok, with people who go sorting through the garbage heaps and occasionally finding some good things, but there's an awful lot of garbage. But here when we sit and we meditate, we don't want to be a garbage heap. We're trying to make ourselves an island.

And the island the Buddha recommends, as we chanted just now in the sutta on the path, is the act of right mindfulness: keeping track of the body in and of itself—ardent, alert and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Or feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves: That's our island.

And what are you going to take on that island? Hopefully, things that don't clutter it up, things that don't weigh your island down and make it sink. A good way to phrase the question is, "What kind of mind would you like to take along on your island?"—because there's no companion more constant than your mind. And you have no treasures that are more yours than the treasures of the mind. So what treasures do you have? What kind of companions do you have in here? Meditation is a good way of sorting them out, to throw away the fool's gold and just keep the genuine gold—to throw away the fools and keep the wise people.

When a thought comes up, ask yourself, "What kind of thought is this?" Is this someone you want on your island, or is this someone you want to leave behind when you're looking for an island that even death can not overcome. Because death, when it comes, is like a sudden evacuation order: sudden, absolute, no time to pack your bags. It's just you. All you really have is your skill-set, the companions you have in your mind, the treasures you have in your mind.

It's like the story of Joseph, thrown into a well, naked and bound with ropes. He gets fished out of the well by some traders. They buy him from his brothers, and take him off to Egypt. He finds himself in Egypt, sold to be a slave.

He had no choice in the matter, and all he had was his skill-set. But fortunately he had

some good skills. He could read, he was fluent., he knew how to charm people with his words, and he knew how to keep his mind buoyant. When you read the story, this is one of the characteristics that you see as most striking. Even when he was down in the well, after the initial terror of finding himself bound in a well, likely to die, he was able to keep his spirits up. When he went to Egypt and became a slave, Potiphar's wife accused him of having attacked her, so he found himself in prison again—and again he was able to keep his spirits up. In other words, he was able to keep his energy going, so that when opportunities presented themselves, he was able to apply his persistence, his energy, all of his efforts, all of his skills to make the most of those opportunities. That's an important quality we want to build into our minds.

In Pali, the term for that confidence is *pasada*. It goes together with *samvega*. *Samvega* is the scary realization that life, even though it seems to be going along smoothly, is not always going to go along smoothly. It's like walking on a tightrope over an abyss: You could slip at any time, which is why you have to be careful, why you have to be heedful, why you have to be very choosy of what kind of luggage you carry with you, what kind of treasures and companionship you encourage in your mind, knowing that when everything else gets stripped away, you will have something good to depend on. *Samvega* is what forces you to be honest and strict with yourself. *Pasada* is what gives you the confidence that this path is going to be worth it, that you're up for it, and that no matter how bad things get, there is a way out.

So those are two of the treasures you want to keep in your luggage to take with you on the island. *Samvega* helps you recognize what's garbage, and *pasada* reminds you that the mind contains some potential jewels, valuable qualities, valuable friends who you want to foster in your mind. And here's your opportunity to develop them, as you sit here and meditate.

So look at the various voices going through the mind right now. Which ones are helpful, which ones are not? Which ones are true friends, which ones are false friends? Be very picky about what you're going to take along on this island. If you choose wisely, you find that you've got a situation where you can survive. It's not like you're sitting there under the palm tree waiting for a little bottle to come, or a ship to come. You look inside your luggage, you look inside the mind, you find that you've got all the treasures you need. In this way, as you go through this life, you're well prepared for whatever life throws at you, and you'll be prepared for whatever death throws at you.

So learn how to recognize the treasures inside and the garbage inside. Sometimes the garbage is very appealing. It doesn't even look like garbage. It's bright and shiny. But remember that a lot of junk is bright and shiny. When you start thinking in more absolute terms, you have to ask yourself: Is this something you really want to take with you? You find that one question, right there, pares away, peels away a lot of things, so that you're not loaded down with excess baggage. Because it's not the case that if you have a lot of money you can pay an excess baggage fee. They just strip it away from you, baggage, money, and all. They won't even give you the chance to go back and pick up your bags. It's just what you have on you, right at that point.

That's what you take with you.

So make sure the mind is well stocked, and that you've been training good voices in the mind, so that when things get down, you can lift your spirits. As the Buddha says, "Know how to gladden the mind when it needs gladdening, how to steady the mind when it needs steadying, how to liberate the mind when it needs liberating." These are skills we learn as we meditate. And they're skills that will serve us in good stead, so that our island won't be a barren place but will really be something special—something that rises above any flood, and where we won't have any sense of lack at all.