

A Master of Your Thoughts

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Ajaan Fuang used to say there are three important parts to concentration practice. The first is learning how to do it; the second is how to maintain it; and the third is how to use it. The “doing it” is a simple matter of bringing the mind to the breath—or if you want, to *buddho*, to the parts of the body, or to any of the recollections.

If you choose the breath, try to bring the mind to the breath and then evaluate it. Is this a good place to stay? Then you make adjustments. If the breath doesn't feel quite right, you can breathe in a different way. Or if you find that making the mind stay focused in a certain part of the body gives you a headache or gives rise to a sense of discomfort, you can focus someplace else. There's no law that you have to stay at the nose or that the breath can be felt only at the nose. After all, the breath is the energy in the body; it's not just the air coming in and out. The air coming in and out: That's the effect of the breath. The actual breath is the movement of energy. You can feel it in the lungs, in the ribcage, in your back, in the shoulders.

So anywhere you notice—“Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out”—where you can *feel* the energy, stay focused there. And try to keep your focus just right: not so strong that it blocks things and not so weak that it drifts off.

These are things that you evaluate and adjust. This is an important part of the concentration. We're not just trying to blank out our minds. We're trying to use our powers of thought for a good purpose: to give the mind a place where it can settle down.

Then, once it's settled down, you don't want to jump up and run to the refrigerator or run off to the computer or run outside. You want to train yourself to stay right here. That's the maintaining part. And here again, it requires some thought. Thoughts will come up, distractions will come up, and you have to learn how to see them just as that: as distractions. They're something you don't want to get involved with, something you don't want to have overcome the mind.

Part of this means keeping in mind the fact that you don't want to go with them, and another part is learning how to find a greater sense of ease and well-being in the breath so that you feel attracted to staying here. Again, this requires using your powers of thought and observation, along with your sensitivity, to getting the mind into balance and then maintaining that balance.

Now, some of the lessons you learn in the doing and the maintaining will come more to the forefront in the using. In other words, part of maintaining your concentration means seeing thoughts simply as events in the mind without a lot of meaning. You may have a thought of your mother, a thought of your family, a thought of home. Instead of getting involved in all the meanings and narratives that go around those thoughts, you simply say, “Oh, there’s that thought.” It’s an event. It may have been triggered by who-knows-what, but learning to see it as an event, as something that you have the choice to get involved with or not get involved with: That’s a necessary skill in the maintaining. Then in the using, you start developing that skill even further.

You begin to realize: This thought that came from who-knows-where—you’re going to find out where, what triggered it, and how the mind gets involved in these thoughts. What are the stages of a thought developing? For instance, there’s a little stirring of energy and you decide to explore: What is this little potential here? What could it be? What’s the thought about? To what extent does the thought actually have a predetermined concept or meaning or a topic? And to what extent do you just go ahead and decide, “Well, the thing I want to really think about right now is x ,” and you go with it. You turn this thought into a thought about x . That’s one of the things you should try to see, because you want to see how arbitrary it all is.

We’re attached to our thoughts because they have meaning. It has its uses, the act of giving meaning to these little impulses that go to the brain. That’s an important part of functioning in the world. But we have to see how that functioning is not always good, not always skillful, not always necessary. There are times we’re better off when we can let it go and not get involved. You want to have the skill to learn how to turn these things off and really understand them. When you really need them, you can turn them on. When you don’t need them, you can turn them off again.

As the Buddha said, when you master thoughts, you think the thoughts you really need and want to think, and you don’t think the thoughts you don’t want to. Most of us are subject to whatever comes up. We start thinking, and then it turns into objectification. There’s the “I” in there that’s doing the thinking, and then there’s the world in which this thinker lives. And how do these thoughts relate to either the “I” or the world in which this thinker wants to move around in? Once you get thoughts of that sort, they turn around and attack you. They overwhelm you. There’s one passage that says they *assail* you. We end up being a victim of our thoughts. It’s like the people who raise little tiger cubs at home.

When the tiger cubs are little, they're cute. Then they grow up and turn into big tigers, and one day they get angry, they turn around, and they eat you.

So you have to be careful with your thinking. This is why it's good to have a place where you can step out of it for a while so that it doesn't automatically take over—doesn't automatically rule the mind. You want your alertness and mindfulness to be more in charge. This is the meaning of the word *faculty*: something in charge, or *indriya* in Pali. The word is related to *Indra*, who was the king of the gods—the dominant god. You want to turn mindfulness and alertness into dominant factors in the mind so that they're in charge rather than just whatever arbitrary thought or arbitrary desire comes popping up.

The use of the concentration here is so that you can gain some control over your thoughts and your emotions. You can step back from them. If there's a thought of boredom, a thought of distress, or a thought of depression, you can step back from it. You don't have to be ruled by it.

You begin to see the role that your own passion plays in all this. We really have a passion for thinking. It's why we fabricate our thoughts. Without the passion, thoughts wouldn't get fabricated. They'd be these little impulses that wouldn't go anywhere. But we pick them up and run with them, so we're complicit in what's happening. It's only when we see that we're complicit in our own suffering that we begin to step back from it, let it go, and develop the disenchantment and dispassion that the Buddha was talking about.

So when disturbing thoughts come up and move in, you've got your raw material for developing your concentration. In the beginning, it's just a matter of learning how to fend them off. Give them quick karate chops so that they don't come in and take up a lot of time in your meditation, and you do have the time to develop a foundation. If the foundation starts to crumble, it's usually because you've just gotten complacent. It's going well. Things are fine. You sit back, relax—and it all just falls apart.

So the maintaining is an important skill. In the course of maintaining, you're going to gain at least a certain amount of insight into these processes that normally take over the mind but don't have to. You learn how to see them simply as events that arise that you don't have to identify with and you don't have to follow. Then as your powers of concentration get better, this line of thought will become more and more useful, and will go deeper and deeper into understanding the wellsprings of these thoughts—where they come from and why you go for them—until they lose their appeal. Once they've lost their appeal, then you're in charge.

It's not that the Buddha's trying to make you dead and lifeless, unable to think. It's simply that you're not carried away with the tools you've got. You realize that you've got tiger cubs and you've got to be careful around them. When you learn how to declaw them and defang them, then you're safe.