

Leaving Distractions Alone

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When Ajaan Suwat was a young monk, he went to stay with Ajaan Mun for the first time. One day, he went to complain to Ajaan Mun, saying that his mind couldn't settle down. He'd sit there meditating and all he could see was his mind running off. Ajaan Mun said to him, "Well, at least you're practicing the foundations of mindfulness. Knowing the distracted mind as a distracted mind is practicing mindfulness of the mind in and of itself."

When Ajaan Suwat was telling me about this, he said he realized that Ajaan Mun was just trying to encourage him. He wasn't praising him for having achieved anything great in his practice. He was pointing out that that's the beginning of the meditation: learning how to watch your mind and notice what it's doing. For most of us, when we're distracted, we don't even know we're distracted. We're off living in our little thought worlds really very little clear sense of what's happening in the present moment.

So this is the beginning: Just noticing that you're distracted. If you find that trying to drive the distractions away makes them even worse, then you can use one of the Buddha's techniques, which is to ignore the distractions. You know they're there, but you just don't go with them. You don't try to drive them away; you don't try to run them out of the mind. You simply don't have to get involved. The image he gives is of seeing something you don't want to look at, so you just turn your eyes away.

There are other images that you could use as well. A beggar is coming up, asking you for something. You know that if you pay any attention to the beggar, he'll latch on to you. So you pretend the beggar's not there. Or a stray dog comes around the house and keeps sniffing here and sniffing there, hoping for food. You know that if you feed the dog, the dog will never go away. So you don't feed it. If you pay attention to your distractions, that's one way of feeding them. Then they'll hang around, and bit by bit, they'll pull you in.

So think of the mind as a very large room. There may be people off in one corner of the room, conversing. What they may be saying may be really interesting, but you realize you've got work to do. Even if you go over and try to drive the people away, they'd ask you to join them. Soon you'd find yourself sitting with them and having a good time, totally forgetting the fact that you have some important work that has to get done, i.e., the mind has to get trained. If it's

not trained, it's not going to be a help; it'll just keep causing you more and more trouble.

So keep remembering: Even though there's a conversation going on back in a corner of the mind, you don't have to get involved. The breath is still here, still coming in, still going out. The conversation doesn't destroy the breath.

At a meditation workshop I was teaching years back at a college, they had assigned us a room that had a really loud clock. After the first 20 minutes of meditation, we stopped, and everybody opened their eyes all at once and said, "That clock!" That's what they'd been meditating on for the past 20 minutes: the sound of the clock. So I had to remind them that the sound of the clock didn't destroy their breath. The breath was still right there. Meditation is a matter of focusing in and just learning to stay focused despite all the distractions around you.

Or take the music school I visited to Seoul one time. A friend of mine had been studying there with a living national treasure, so she invited me to go visit the treasure. The music school was not divided off into nice little rooms like ours tend to be. It was one large room with little open booths lining the walls. In each booth, someone was practicing music of one sort or another, either playing the kayagum or doing Korean opera or Korean drum, and everyone could hear everyone else. But they had to stay focused on what they were doing. One of the important parts of learning how to be a good musician was learning how to stay focused precisely on what you were doing and not getting distracted by the people in the booths on either side.

It's the same with meditation. It's nice that we have a nice quiet place here and can get out in a good place of physical seclusion. But you can't hope to always be in physical seclusion like this. You have to learn how to maintain your focus, ultimately, in all kinds of situations, peaceful and not.

One of the reasons we come into physical seclusion like this is so that we can deal with the distractions in the mind—learn how not to be pulled away by thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, or thoughts of other places right now. There is that temptation as soon as a thought comes up. You see it's unfinished, and you want to complete it—like trying to tie it up with a little bow before you send it off. That's one of the first impulses you have to fight. Learn how to leave your thoughts unfinished. Half sentences, half ideas: Just leave them as they are. If the mind keeps churning up more unfinished ideas or more unfinished topics, just leave them there. Remind yourself: You want to establish an anchor in the breath.

Try to breathe as fully into the body as you can. Think of the whole body breathing. This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee recommends starting out with

some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, to wash out all the little potential thoughts hiding in the nooks and crannies. It's like taking a fire hose to wash out a place that has lots of little pockets of dirt here and there. Keep that up as long as it feels good.

Then if you find the breath is too subtle or too gentle to keep the thoughts out, you can use the word *buddho*. Keep repeating it to yourself. You don't have to coordinate it with the breath, just say *buddho, buddho, buddho* over and over in the mind until the mind has had enough of that. Then you can settle down and just be with the physical sensation of breathing.

The important principle is that you can't wait until everything is really quiet and settled and all taken care of before you can meditate. You have to live with the fact that there's a lot of unfinished business in the world. If you sit down and think about what you've got to do tomorrow, what you've got to do the next day, tell yourself: You could die before tomorrow or the next day. The last thing you want at the moment of death is to be thinking about the unfinished business you've left behind. As Ajaan Lee said, these things are like a magnet. They'll pull you back. Here it's good to practice with the thought, "Okay, there's always unfinished business in the world." When people stop working, it's not because the business is all finished or their work is all finished. It's usually because they get too old, or too tired, or too sick to do the work and just have to leave it.

So this is an important principle for keeping your meditation on track: realizing you can't wait until everything is all nicely taken care of before you're going to let the mind settle down. You have to learn how to get the mind to settle down in the midst of a lot of unfinished stuff. If you survive the meditation, you can go back and do your work. You're not being totally irresponsible. But the mind needs this ability to learn how to just let go, put things down, and take time for itself.

It's like working with a machete. You do your work and suddenly you find that the machete isn't as sharp as it used to be. You can't say, "Well, I'll just keep on working and then sharpen the machete when the work is done." You've got to stop the work, sharpen the machete, and then the rest of the work will go a lot easier.

It's the same with the meditation. You can't say, "I'll take care of all my business and then I'll have time to train my mind." You need a trained mind in order in order to do your business well—whatever the business may be. So when you find that the mind is getting dull, you've got to learn how to stop and give all your attention to training it. When it's in better shape, you can go back to work. This is a basic survival skill.

So as you're sitting here and different thoughts are churned up, you don't have to work with them. You don't have to deal with them. No matter how much they may seem to be calling to you—"Finish me off, tie me up, get me all settled, tuck me into bed"—whatever they may seem to be saying, just leave them alone. Remember they're that stray dog that wants food, or the beggar who wants to tie you in and take something from you. They're not as innocent as they might seem.

You've got the breath right here. Keep the breath full, ventilating the whole body. Try to take interest in what the breath energy is doing for you from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet, between the toes, between the fingers, up your arms, all around in the chest, in the neck and the back, shoulders, down in your abdomen. Go through the small intestines, large intestines—all the different parts of the body. Learn how to take an interest in what's going on here.

Sometimes one of the reasons the mind starts wandering off is because it gets bored. Well, there's nothing boring about the present moment. It's simply a question of whether you learn how to take advantage of the opportunity to really look at what's going on. It doesn't offer your typical entertainment that comes from thought bubbles, thought worlds that will pull you off some place else. But there's a lot of interesting, fascinating stuff going on here in terms of how the breath energy is working in the body, how it interacts with the other elements in the body, how thoughts are getting formed, how the mind likes to deceive itself, how it puts barriers between one part of the mind and another. There's a lot to explore here; there's a lot to learn.

Even though it may be discouraging to keep coming back to the breath, you're offering a gift to your future self. You're working on a skill. At some point, the skill will finally take hold. Then you'll be glad that you worked on it and spent all that time.

So it's not the case that the only good meditation is a meditation that feels good, calm and serene. Sometimes the meditations where you have to work the hardest are actually the best ones. You learn a lot. You're developing new habits. You're developing your stick-to-itiveness, which is an important skill, an important attitude.

So don't let the distractions get you down. Don't let them hijack your meditation. Even though it may seem that you have only a tiny, little foothold here—not even a foothold, maybe just a toehold or a fingernail-hold—it could be the beginning of something big. So hold on to whatever you can.

As for all the other things going on in your mind and around you, just let them go, let them go. They're not where your future well-being lies.