

The Mind on a Leash

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In the Buddha's teaching on dependent co-arising, it's very easy to get tied up in some of the complexities and to miss the really blatant features of the series of factors. One of the most blatant is that the causes of suffering come prior to sensory contact. This means that suffering doesn't arise because we have bad sights, smells, sounds, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. It arises from the way we approach our senses: the way we look, listen, smell, taste, touch, and think about things. The problem is not out there. The trouble is the way the mind *looks* out there.

Essentially, the mind is looking for food, for things to feed on. However, it tends to feed on all the wrong things. No wonder it's sick. It looks for and finds plenty of things to lust over, to get angry about, to be deluded about. You can compare it to a sick person who likes to eat precisely the food that makes his illness worse.

As a result, we've got to control the way the mind looks and listens; otherwise, it's very difficult to settle down and meditate. If you've been looking for things to lust about or get angry about in the course of the day, that habit will stick with you. When you close your eyes, there's no one monitoring your thoughts, so you can think of anything. Part of the mind is tempted to pick up the thread of its old defilements. So we need to get some control over the mind.

A common image in the Canon and from all the great teachers is that of putting the mind on a leash. In one of the most vivid suttas, the Buddha talks about putting six different kinds of animals on leashes and then tying the ends of the leashes together. Each animal runs off in the direction it wants to feed. The crocodile wants to feed down in the river. The monkey wants to feed up in the tree. The hyena wants to feed in the charnal ground. They all pull in their different directions, finally getting dragged in the direction of whichever animal is strongest at the time.

The solution to this problem is to tie all the leashes to a firm stake so that no animal can pull the others in any direction. They can't get to where they want to feed. Eventually, they'll settle down right next to the stake. The Buddha identifies this stake as mindfulness immersed in the body.

Mindfulness immersed in the body covers lots of different meditation practices, but two here are especially important. The first is the reflection on the different parts of the body. This works in two ways: First, you start thinking about what you've got in your own body. Peel the skin off and put it to one side. Look at what's left. Neither the pile of skin nor what's been under the skin looks very appealing. Yet, when we put it all together, why is it so attractive? You can obsess and fantasize about it for hours. But what is there of any substance? It's all a trick of perception. Because the mind wants to lust over something, it selectively chooses certain parts of the body to think about, to look at, to obsess over, obscuring the other parts. Basically, the mind lies to itself to generate more lust.

The same with anger: You refuse to consider any of the good qualities of those who displease you. You'd rather stir up the anger. What are you doing? You're setting fires in your own mind. You're feeding on precisely the food that's going to make you sick, taking your current illness and making it worse. You can devote your whole life to pursuing things of no substance or value. All that effort, much of it unskillful, piles up lots of bad kamma for the sake of some very fleeting sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. You end up with nothing. It's not worth it.

Analyzing the body into its different parts is a very good way of counteracting a lot of the unskillful motivation we have for flowing out, looking for sights, sounds, smells, and tastes to feed on. That's one way mindfulness of the body acts as a good post for holding you back.

The other way is in developing a sense of wellbeing with the breath. You don't feel so starved. The mind goes rushing out to feed on things because it's hungry. To assuage that hunger, you focus on the breath,

developing a sense of ease, wellbeing, and fullness, either through the in-and-out breath or through the general spread of breath energy throughout the body. Focus on whichever is most attractive and gratifying at the moment. Some people focus successfully on the breath energy in the different parts of the body first, rather than on Ajaan Lee's seven steps. This gives a larger frame of reference. Then, in the midst of the breath energy, notice the impact of the in-and-out breathing on the different aspects of breath energy through the body. Use whatever works to create a really good, gratifying, satisfying sense of fullness that you can feed on. As the Buddha said, "We feed on rapture like the radiant gods." Rapture may be too strong a word for what you might feel. There may be simply a feeling of refreshment or fullness. That, too, counts as *piti*, rapture, as well as whatever else gives the mind a sense of satisfaction and wellbeing in the present moment. Stay with whatever way of breathing is causing this rapture, let it permeate and refresh the body, so that when the temptation arises to feed on other things, you can ask yourself, "Why go?"

When you're well-situated like this, you can actually watch a thought head out toward something. Because you feel a sense of solid wellbeing, you don't need to follow your old habit to run along with the thought and go sliding with it like people in luges. Instead, you can step to one side and watch it go, realizing the danger in going down iced slopes. That way, free from hunger, you can step back from your thought worlds to a good place to stay rather than engaging in old feeding habits. You've got a good source of food inside. When the impulse arises to feed on things that are unhealthy, you can step back and see it as it is. You no longer feel the compulsion, the need, the drive to act in old ways.

That way you can watch the mind in a way that sees through its old tricks. You can see how it selectively focuses on certain details and blots out other details, just to inflame itself. You see the whole process coming from the ignorance within. You weren't really paying attention to the issue of stress. You noticed only what you wanted to feed on and what was relevant to pursuing that desire. When you're sensitive to the breath, though, you can sense how oppressive feelings of lust and anger are, and you notice how all the other unskillful states affect the breath energy in the body. You become more sensitive to the damage done by these outflows, or effluents.

Learn how to use the body as that firm post so when the impulse comes to go feeding in the river or in the charnel ground, you have a way of reining in the mind. A little thought may go running out in that direction, but if you don't go out running along with it, it can't go very far. It just drops to the ground and disappears. You see how the impulse to feed in unhealthy ways accomplishes nothing. It creates a lot of needless suffering. Doesn't the world have enough pointless suffering already? Why create more? Develop a sense of *nibbida*: disenchantment, disgust, revulsion—however you translate that sense of not wanting to eat unhealthy food anymore. You don't want to feed that way anymore. You've got something better. This way you can begin to exercise some restraint over the mind. The ability to stay mindful of the breath helps you with sense restraint which, in turn, helps when it's time to engage in more formal meditation.

Because you've been keeping the mind under skillful control—not tight or unpleasant—and feeding it well in the course of the day, it's a lot easier to feed it properly as you're meditating. The mind stays firmly with its one object. You've kept it on a short leash for the day. You don't have to engage in all the difficulties that come from having your dog on a long leash where it can wind around all kinds of things. If it's been on a long leash all day, you have to unwind it from telephone poles, bushes, trees, park benches, and who knows what else. However it made its way to the charnel ground, you've got to pull it back from that. Sometimes it carries horrible things in its jaws as it comes back. But when you keep it on a short lease throughout the day, you can hang back when any thought rushes out for food. The thought may go, but you don't.

And now, when it's time to meditate, you're right here.