

How to Leave Meditation

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We hear so much about how to get the mind into concentration that we tend to forget the skill of how to leave it. Because these talks come at the beginning of the period, the skill in how to leave doesn't often get mentioned, although how you leave concentration is relevant to how you get back into it. This talk basically is about what you should have done the last time you left concentration, as a way of getting you more quickly into concentration this time.

The first thing to do when leaving concentration is to think about the sense of peace or ease you got from the concentration. Then, do two things with that sense. First, dedicate it to others. After leaving concentration, you'll be dealing with others, so you want to come from a sense of well-being, ease, a source of happiness from inside so that, when you approach others, you're not primarily concerned about what you can get out of them—emotionally or otherwise. You feel more in a position of having something to offer them. When your goodwill for them comes from a sense of well-being inside, it's stronger.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a tank of water. If the tank is full, you open up the spigot and cool water comes out of the faucet. If there's no water in the tank, nothing but air comes out. Although the air coming out may be cool, it's not nearly as cool and refreshing as the water. So, remember in your dealings with other people to treat them with goodwill. If any ill will sneaks in, it'll make it harder to settle down the next time you come to concentrate.

Spread thoughts of goodwill, reminding yourself that you're coming from a good place and you see no need for anybody to suffer. What would you get out of their suffering, especially if you're coming from a position of well-being? Most of the time, if we want to see other people suffer, it's because we're suffering. "As long as I'm suffering, let's see everybody else suffer as well": That attitude simply leads to more suffering. Focus on whatever sense of ease and well-being you've already experienced, and be willing to share it with others. This doesn't deplete your well-being; it augments it. If you can maintain that attitude of well-being, then when you come to meditate again, there's not a lot of garbage to clear out of the mind. You simply think thoughts of goodwill to everybody, connect up with that initial intention, and you're back where you were.

The second thing to do as you reflect on that sense of well-being you may have gained during the meditation is to ask yourself how it came about. What was the breath like? Where was the mind focused? What had you done leading up to that point where the mind began to settle down? In other words, look for what worked, and then make a mental note to try the same steps again the next time.

As you're meditating, if you have a sense of where you want to go, you can get there a lot

more quickly if you can remember what it was like the last time it was good. Whether you're focused on the chest, the middle of the head, wherever, there's some spot in the body where you should feel most natural in your focus. And some ways of breathing are particularly conducive to get your mind to settle down. If you notice that, make a note of it. As you sit down to meditate the next time, remember what worked last time. Go there first to see if you can induce that sense of well-being in the breath, not only the in-and-out breathing, but also your whole sense of the energy flow in the body. In fact, that larger sense of the energy flow is much more important than the in-and-out breathing, because the sense of the breath energy suffusing the body provides a home that allows you to settle down in the body as a whole. You need this larger frame in order to keep the mind from wandering off. If the mind has a very small frame of reference, it can wander off easily, get knocked off its center easily.

If you can notice how the body feels when things are settled in and feeling good, refreshed, nourished, at ease, energized, relaxed, or whatever feels good for you, see if you can remember that and try to recreate it the next time around. This is especially important if you have a tendency to regard the whole hour as a time to settle down. This is a common problem in the meditation. If you have five minutes, you tend to be a lot more serious and focused about it, realizing that you have to make the most of the little bit of time you have. But if you have an hour, you think of it as a long easy slide down. It doesn't need to be too fast, just a nice gradual settling-in time, arriving five minutes before the hour ends.

That's the wrong attitude to have. You have to remind yourself at the beginning of each session that you don't know how long you really are going to be able to sit through the session. You may get a coughing fit and have to leave. Somebody else may get a coughing fit. You may die. It can happen at any time. There are people who have died while meditating. So you want to remember where your spot was and what good breathing felt like, and then go right there. If the mind doesn't settle down, at least you have something to work with to make it easier to settle it down quickly.

The third step at the end of the meditation is to remind yourself that even with the eyes open you can still stay with your breathing. Even while watching the visual realm, your attention doesn't need to go out into the visual realm. You can still maintain a sense of the breath realm in the body. This accomplishes a lot of things. The more sensitive you are to the breath as you go through daily activities, the more you'll be able to see when the mind leaves, what kinds of things knock it off, and how you can bring it back in. If there's a sense of ease in the breath, it's a lot easier to stay with the body. You can give yourself some task to do. Remind yourself that when anger, fear, or any unskillful emotion comes into the mind, there's going to be a corresponding tension in the breath. The rate of the breath will change. The quality of the breath energy in the body will change. If you're sensitive to that, you can catch these things quickly. Wherever you notice any tension or irregularity, breathe right through it. Try to calm it down again, ease it up again.

This way, as you try to stay in the present moment, it's not just a matter of forcing the mind to stay there. You're giving it something to do, something that shows results. This is especially important when you begin to notice that there are certain trigger points in the body, certain places that tend to tense up first and then create a chain reaction, where other parts of the body tense up as well. If you can hover around these initial spots, making sure they stay open and relaxed, then those other patterns of tension won't have a foothold.

As you give the mind something to do, some way to maintain its frame of reference as it goes through the day, you can see clearly when and why the mind is moving and what catches it or sets it off. Maintaining your frame of reference, your center, a point of reference, allows you to develop discernment. If the mind doesn't have a point of reference, it sloshes around. With a lot of movement going on in the mind and no reference point, you can't always realize why the mind moves. However, if you have that focal spot, then you can see the movements clearly.

If you've been staying with the breath as you go through the day, then when the time comes to sit down and meditate again, you're right here. It's like keeping the mind on a short leash. You don't have to unwind the leash. You've probably seen dogs on a long leash. They get wound up around trees, bushes, and all kinds of things, and it takes a lot of time to unwind the leash. That's a mind that's been allowed to wander through the day, which may be one of the reasons why it takes so long for it to settle down. Once you decide that you're going to meditate, you have to keep unwinding the leash from the bushes and the trees. But if you've kept it on a short leash all along, it's right here. You close your eyes and you're ready to go right back to the spot where you feel at home, where you feel at ease.

So it's important to remember that if you're going to settle into the meditation, you have to know how to leave the meditation skillfully. In other words, you don't totally leave it. You keep one foot in the door. If you think of concentration as a home for the mind, make it a mobile home, so that no matter where you are or where you go, you've got a safe, restful place inside. Although it may be a little bumpier than a solid home, or a home that's got a good strong foundation, you still have a place of refuge as you go throughout the day. Then, when you park it, you're right here. Things are solid again. As the practice becomes more continuous and not chopped into little pieces, it can develop momentum.

As Ajaan Fuang said, you have to learn how to make your meditation timeless. That means staying with it regardless of what time of day it is. Our problem is that we have too many times: a time to eat, time to work, time to rest, time to go the bathroom, time to whatever. The day gets chopped up into times. As the meditation gets chopped up into times, it's given only a little time of the day to really do its work. But if the meditation is timeless and other times are secondary, then all the time is time to meditate, develop concentration, mindfulness, and all the right factors of the path.

When you learn how to leave meditation properly, it makes it a lot easier to enter meditation the next time. You realize, as you leave meditation, that you're coming from a

position of strength and well-being that you're happy to share with others, so you're more likely to say and do skillful things in the course of the day. This means that there's less to clean up the next time you sit down.

When you reflect on how the meditation went well, it gives you some pointers on what to do the next time you sit down. Remember where you centered the mind, when it really felt settled in, what the breath energy was like, and any other factors that seemed to have an impact on allowing the mind to settle down solidly. These give you a starting point for the next time. You may have missed some points, it may not work quite the same way the next time, but at least you've got a place to start. Remind yourself to develop more precise powers of observation, to see what really works, or why it really works. It's only in taking an interest in cause and effect, which is a lot of what discernment is, that the meditation can become a skill and a good foundation for deeper discernment.

Finally, remind yourself that even though the visual field may be really interesting, you've got to maintain a sense of the breath-field as well. That's what allows your frame of reference to be more continuous, so that meditation does become timeless, *akaliko*, as they say in the chant. Ultimately, you realize you never really have to leave meditation. It's a question of how to stay with your foundation even though you open your eyes and engage in other activities.

This is why understanding the skill of how to leave meditation is an important part of learning how to enter and how to stay.