

Directing & Not Directing the Mind

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Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a comparison of different kinds of meditators. Some people, he says, have a mind like a tree out in the middle of a meadow. If you're going to cut the tree down, you don't have to use much skill or any great insight. You don't have to figure things out much. Just decide which direction you want the tree to fall, cut it, and it falls down. It's not entangled with anything else, so it falls easily.

Other people, though, have a mind like a tree in the forest. Its branches are entangled with the branches of a lot of other trees. If you're going to cut that tree down, you have to figure out which branches to cut first, and figure out the right angle to cut it, so that the tree will fall down and not get caught on other trees.

The people in the first type are those who don't have to use a lot of discernment in getting the mind to settle down. Just focus on the breath, focus on *buddho* or whatever your topic is going to be, and the mind immediately takes to it. Other people are not like that. They have to figure things out first. They have to have reasons: 1) for wanting to settle in with the breath or whatever their object may be; and 2) for letting go of outside preoccupations.

To help give the mind these two types of reasons, the Buddha teaches two approaches to meditation: You either have to direct the mind to get it to settle down, or you can practice not directing the mind.

Directing the mind means giving yourself reasons to settle down. You try to stay with the breath, but you can't stay with the breath. You try to stay with the body, but you can't stay with the body. As the Buddha says, you get a fever in the body as you try to focus on it. In other words, there's not a good fit between the mind and the object. So you have to back off a bit and take a more indirect approach. Give yourself good reasons for settling down. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, or any other inspiring them. Think about the principle of karma— about why the mind needs to be trained. Or you can work with the breath itself, changing the way you breathe, changing the place where you focus, trying to use different concepts of the breath to see what creates a sensation of ease and well-being right here. You can see that by settling down here, it really does feel good. You can see the benefits coming in the body.

If you find that you have a tense spot in the body or a place where things feel blocked, you can spend your time working through the blockage, which requires first that you get at least some sense of comfort in the breath someplace else in the

body. Take that as your touchstone. Then try to apply that same sense of ease, well-being, and easy flow of the breath to the parts of the body that are not so comfortable. If you have an injury, try to work the breath energy through the injury. Don't let it get stuck there.

In other words, you give your mind reasons for wanting to focus in right here because you see that it actually does accomplish something important.

Not directing the mind basically means giving yourself reasons not to wander. If you see yourself wandering off to someplace else, you remind yourself of why you don't want to go there. You can look at the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. Thinking about the past: What does that get you? You can't go back to the past and change it. You can't go back and live there. I heard someone say a while back that one of his ways of trying to get the mind to have a sense of well-being was to think of how healthy he used to be. I can't see how that would be a useful way of getting the mind to settle in and feel good about itself, because the health is gone. As you get older, things begin to fall apart. So what does getting tied up in the past do for you? It does nothing.

As for the future, you don't really know what's going to happen. There are so many uncertainties out there. What you *do* know is that if anything challenging comes up in the future, you're going to need mindfulness, you're to need alertness, and you're going to need discernment in order to deal with it. So rather than think about dealing with this or that eventuality, you want to develop the qualities that you'll need regardless of the eventuality. And that kind of contemplation brings you back to the present. In other words, if you find your mind getting stuck on anything, you just learn how to cut, cut, cut your fascination with that object, and the mind automatically settles in here.

In terms of the Buddha's classic ways of dealing with distractions, this falls under just not paying attention to any distraction or relaxing any tension in the body around the distraction that would correspond to the thought. Because when you're thinking of something that's not right here, right now—something not immediately apparent to your senses—you've got to create a little false world in the mind. The creation of that false world, in order to stay anchored, needs to have a little spot of tension in the body. So when you find yourself thinking about something, ask yourself: "When that thought arose, what tensed up? What happens if you un-tense that spot in the body?" Or you can use the method of clenching your teeth, pressing your tongue against the roof of the mouth and deciding, "I'm not going to think that thought." And as you do whatever you can to blot out that thought, you're not directing your mind in that direction. And

where will it go? It'll have to settle down in the present moment, and there you are, with the body in and of itself.

So there are two ways of getting the mind into the present if it doesn't settle down easily. One is to think of ways that will encourage you to settle it down, to see the value of focusing on the breath, the value of getting the mind in the present. And the other is to reflect on how you really don't want to get entangled with anything else. You see the drawbacks of any other kind of thinking. You just let it go, let it go, let it go. In the process of letting go, where are you going to land? You land right here. The breath is always here.

I've read people explain these two different methods in a different way, as the difference between concentration practice and mindfulness practice, which they divide into two radically different modes of practice. Concentration, they say, is where you willfully focus your mind in the present moment and keep it in a very narrow range. Whereas mindfulness, according to them, is more wide open and accepting, not focused on anything at all. Well, that's not how the Buddha taught either concentration or mindfulness.

Concentration, remember, is full-body awareness. It's actually quite broad. Concentration on goodwill extends not only through the body, but out in all directions to all beings. And it's both concentration and a kind of mindfulness. As for mindfulness practice, the Buddha calls it a kind of concentration, which you can do with directed thought and evaluation or without directed thought and evaluation, with a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture, a sense of equanimity. In other words, there's no clear line between mindfulness and concentration.

And mindfulness is very much directed. None of the Buddha's analogies for mindfulness suggest a mind open and accepting. They all suggest a very focused on its task, acting within clear boundaries, doing what needs to be done to get the mind centered. Take, for instance, the Buddha's analogy for mindfulness in the body. You're carrying a bowl of oil filled to the brim on top of your head. And the path you're walking along has, on the one side, a beauty queen singing and dancing, and on the other side, a crowd of people really excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing. Following right behind you is a man with a sword upraised. He's determined that if you spill a drop of oil at any point, he's going to cut your head off right there. As the Buddha said of the person carrying the bowl of oil on his head: Would he allow his mind to get distracted over to the crowd or over to the beauty queen? Not at all. He's got it focused right there on the bowl of oil. And that, he says, is an analogy for mindfulness immersed in the body.

There are many other similes where the Buddha points out how mindfulness is very directed, very focused. So it's not that mindfulness is undirected and

concentration is directed. They're both focused; they're both directed. It's simply that mindfulness shades into concentration when it finally does settle down.

Now the ways of getting the mind to settle down, as I said, are two. One is thinking your way in by trying to get the mind to want to latch on to the object of mindfulness. If it can't, you use other ways of thinking that get it there: consciously not thinking about this, not thinking about that. Anything comes up; you drop it. Anything comes up; you drop it. By letting go in this way, you land naturally on the breath. You land on your awareness of what's happening here in the present moment.

So this particular instruction is not meant to show the difference between concentration and mindfulness. It's simply showing two different ways you can get the mind to be mindful and concentrated. So if you find yourself having trouble settling down, remember these two ways of doing it: thinking in ways that will get you more interested in the present moment, and thinking in ways that can get you uninterested in anything that would pull you away from the present moment.

The first method is more closely related to *pasada*, gaining a sense of confidence that this is something you really want to do. The second method is more closely related with *samvega*, realizing that all the different thoughts that you could think, that would pull you away from the present moment, are not really worth it. They don't go anywhere. They take a lot of energy, and they don't give you much in return.

So at any one point, you'll find yourself using one method or the other to get the mind to settle down. Just remember that you have these different tools at your disposal. When there are days the mind doesn't want to settle down easily, you've got lots of different approaches to take, lots of different ways to try to get it to settle down. You're not limited to just one or two techniques.

That way, you can cut the branches of the entangled other trees and get that tree to fall right where you want it: right here.