

## *Beneficial Thinking*

*October 18, 2011*

The mind isn't something that you can push around roughly. If you want it to stay in place, you have to make it want to stay in place. Which is why, in the beginning of concentration, you don't just order the mind not to think. You know it's going to think. It has to have its reasons for doing things. So what you want to do is put its thinking to good use: Think about good reasons for not thinking. Make your thinking conducive to the mind's settling down.

Now, part of this may involve a fairly general process of talking to yourself about why meditation is a good thing, why you want the mind to settle down. You need the mind to be trained if it's going to find any real happiness in life. It's been looking for happiness in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations and ideas for a long time now, but it hasn't found anything lasting yet.

It's like the person looking for the sweet pepper in the big basket of peppers. He keeps trying this pepper, that pepper. This one's hot, that one's hot. But he keeps eating the hot peppers in the hopes that someday he'll find one that's sweet.

That's the way the mind is when it's looking for happiness outside. Not that there aren't pleasant things or good things outside, but they're not solid enough to form a foundation for a happiness that you can really trust.

Sometimes it's good to think about these things in a general sort of way. That's why we have the chants about aging, illness, and death, and the chant on the unattractiveness of the body.

Some people resist that. They feel they have a bad enough body image as it is, they don't need to make it worse by thinking about what's inside the body. But there's a difference between a healthy negative image of the body and an unhealthy negative image. Most of us have an unhealthy one. We see somebody else as having a really nice body, but ours is not. That's unhealthy. It gives rise to feelings of inferiority.

But as the Buddha said, when people exalt their bodies as being something special, "What is that if not blindness?" They may be beautiful, they may be strong, they may be whatever, but it's still blind to think of yourself as being better than somebody else just because of having a nice body. The same principle applies to thinking that you're worse than other people because your body is not as nice as theirs.

The healthy negative body image is reminding yourself that we're all in the same boat. If we took our livers and lungs and intestines and everything and

placed them out on the floor right here, we wouldn't be able to tell which liver and lungs came from the good-looking people and which ones came from those who didn't look so good. They'd all be pretty disgusting.

The purpose of this is to remind ourselves we have a lot of suffering around the body in one way or another. Each of us is attached to the body in a different way. But in every way, the attachment is a cause of suffering.

Which doesn't mean we're going to take the body out and throw it away. We use it. But again, it's all for the purpose of having the right attitude, a useful attitude toward the body—and learning how to think your way around some of the things that are going to get in the way of your meditation.

It's all too easy, once the mind begins to settle down, for the mind to start telling yourself, "Well, now you've got some free time here. There are all kinds of things you can think about." And you go wandering off into your old ways.

You've got to establish a sense of values. This is why we have the reflections on aging, illness, and death, the reflections on the body, the reflections on suffering: to remind us that the way out is something really valuable.

That's a general kind of thinking that helps get the mind to settle down.

Then there's the more specific thinking about what's happening in the body and in the mind right here, right now. For the mind to settle down, it needs a sense that it belongs here, that it gets some enjoyment out of being here.

This is why we work with the breath. Try to find a way to make the breath interesting, comfortable, refreshing—energizing if you need energy, calming if you need to be calmed. Make use of the fact that you can breathe in lots of different ways, and they'll have an impact on the body in different ways as well.

Another problem you're going to come up with as you sit here, especially if the body's not used to sitting in this position for a long period of time, is that pain is going to develop because the flow of the blood is cut off. If you know that you tend to get numbness, say, in your knees or in your hips or in your feet, then from the very beginning of the hour you should start thinking about how you can improve the circulation to those parts of the body.

You might look at your posture. Is your posture putting undue pressure on different parts? Always keep in mind that when there's a pain or a sense of numbness in one part of the body, the problem may not be coming from that part of the body. Sometimes a pain in your neck might be related to a blockage at the base of the spine, or vice versa. Numbness in your legs might be related to the fact that your back isn't straight enough.

So try to make a survey of how your posture is. If you find that there are certain patterns of tension in the body that keep you from sitting up straight or

make it difficult to sit up straight, can you relax them? You want to relax into the straightness rather than clamping yourself into a straight posture.

You may find that, as you breathe in, certain parts of the body tense up. Well, ask yourself, “Can you breathe in without tensing them up?”—so that you can keep them open all the way through the breathing cycle.

In this way, you’re preparing a place for the mind to settle down. It’s like spreading out your bedding. If you’ve got a sleeping bag and a mattress, it’s a lot easier to lie down on the ground than if you don’t. So you want to make the breath your sleeping bag and your mattress to give rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of ease here.

These are some of the things you have to think about as you meditate. Especially when you’re beginning, you may spend the whole hour thinking about these things—which is perfectly fine. You’re training the mind to use its thinking in the right way.

You may be in a real hurry to get into a nice still state of mind where everything is perfectly, perfectly silent. But it works best not if you try to rush in. If you lay all the groundwork—get everything nice and easeful in the mind, easeful in the body, nourishing in the mind, nourishing in the body—then when the mind does settle down, it’ll be willing to stay.

Now, it is possible to keep the mind clamped down on the breath for a couple of breaths, but it’s going to be quick to leave if it’s not there with any sense of well-being. So use your thinking to create that sense of well-being here in the present moment, so that you can keep reminding yourself and showing yourself that when you’re here, it feels really good. This makes it a lot easier to meditate the next time and then the next time. You begin to associate meditation with a sense of refreshment. It becomes the time when the mind really feels that it’s snugly in its home, in a place where it really does belong.

So don’t think of thinking as an obstacle. Learn how to use it as a factor in your meditation. When you’re thinking about issues surrounding the breath and about the way the breath relates to the mind, the way the mind relates to the breath, and the way the breath and the mind relate to the body, then you’ve got your mind secluded from all kinds of unskillful things. You’re not getting involved. The potential for those unskillful thoughts is there. But for the time being, you’re not touching them. This gives the mind a sense of well-being in and of itself. And it’s good to learn how to appreciate that.

All too often, we tend to overlook the subtle levels of pleasure, the almost ordinary-seeming sense of well-being that comes when the mind is quiet and at ease like this. But it’s important that you don’t overlook these things, because

greater states of concentration come from allowing these more ordinary states of stillness to settle in and gradually grow and grow and grow.

So when we're training the mind, it's not just a matter of forcing it. We're training the mind in how to use its thinking—in fact, to use all of its faculties—in a skillful way. We're not trying to become zombies or people with frontal lobotomies, i.e., people who don't think at all. We want to learn how to use our thinking so that it really is conducive to getting the mind to settle down.

And so that it has an understanding of what the problem is. The problem is not things out there, it's the mind's own way of not recognizing that the trouble is inside.

So it's good to have a clear sense of the values that go along with the meditation technique. The Buddha was not just a meditation technician. He had a very clear sense of values: that the best use of your discernment is to put an end to suffering, and this involves looking at all the forms of suffering, even the ones that you tend to like.

There's a story in the Canon of a woman who had gone through an extremely long pregnancy and finally gave birth to a child after a very long labor. In the story, the pregnancy was so long that when the kid came out, he could speak. He'd been in there seven years.

So she arranges to give some meals to the Sangha, and she gets the boy to come in and bow down to the Buddha, bow down to the monks. Ven. Sariputta asks the child, "Are you well?" And the child says, "How could I be well? Seven years in that cauldron of blood."

The mother's filled with rapture that her son is talking to this great arahant. The Buddha notices her sense of rapture, so he asks her, "Would you like to have another child like this?" She responds, "I'd like to have seven more children like this!"

A spontaneous verse comes to the Buddha's mind about heedlessness, how people are totally deluded. The things that cause them to suffer: Those are the things they love the most, that they want the most.

So you have to look at the things you're really attached to, to see to what extent they're actually getting the way of having a deeper and more gratifying and more reliable sense of happiness inside.

This is why we have Dhamma talks. Not just to give you pointers on the nuts and bolts of the concentration practice, but also to make you stop and think about the values of your life. What really is important? To what extent do you have to give up certain things in order to gain a greater sense of happiness?

The Buddha said that this is one of the signs of an enlightened person: You

realize that there's a lesser pleasure that you have to give up to gain a greater pleasure and you're willing to give up the lesser pleasure for the sake of that greater pleasure.

Sounds obvious, but most of us don't think or act in that way. We want to gather up as many pleasures as we can. We don't like the idea that we have to give up one for another. It's like planting a garden with all the kinds of flowers and trees and bushes that you like, without stopping to think that some of the trees and bushes will poison the soil and kill off some of the other ones.

You've got to make your choices. Sometimes the things that you really like are the biggest troublemakers in your life. So be willing to learn that lesson. It's not an easy one to learn. But if you're willing to learn it, it opens up huge possibilities within the mind.