

Try This at Home

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You've probably seen those TV shows or commercials where they have a disclaimer: Do not try this at home. Well meditation comes with the opposite message: Try this at home. Keep at it at home. Don't do it just while you're here at the monastery. Because you're training your mind, and the mind is making choices all the time. You want to get the mind so that it's making wise choices consistently. There of course will be lapses, but you want to let the lapses be fewer and fewer. It's not the case that your defilements arise only here at the monastery while you're meditating. They can arise anywhere at any time, and you want the skills and the tools that are capable of dealing with them anywhere and at any time. You want them always at hand. You want to be able to take this practice home.

The Buddha makes the point many times that the most important factor in sticking with the practice is having reliable friends, admirable friends, people you can trust, people who set a good example. This applies both to admirable friends outside and admirable friends inside. Just as there are true friends and false friends outside, the mind has its true friends and false friends inside: your thoughts, your intentions, your urges. Sometimes it seems like *you* speaking in there, but that "you" in there is a friend in ruinous fun, a friend who is only going to cheat you.

Ajaan Lee makes the point that a lot of our greed, aversion and delusion are like friends that talk us into doing something really unskillful, and then when the police come to catch us, they go running away. You're left as the responsible one. So you have to watch out for the thoughts that pull you away in the wrong directions. Try to cultivate the friends that really will help you.

The avoidance of false friends is what restraint of the senses is all about. You try to notice when you're looking at something: Why are you looking? What's your purpose in looking? If you're going to turn on the internet, why are you turning it on? What are you looking for? If you turn on the TV, pick up a magazine or newspaper, what are you looking for? If you listen to the radio, what are you listening for? You've got to look at your motivation.

When the Buddha talks about restraint of the senses, he's not telling you, "Don't look," or "Don't listen." He's simply saying that if you notice that you're listening with unskillful intentions, try to listen to something else. If you're looking with unskillful intentions, you try to look at something else. Or if you find that while you're looking or listening or engaging in any of the other senses, unskillful mind states are coming up, then you've got to look in a different way. If you're looking at something that normally excites lust, see if you can look at the other side, the side that's not attractive. If you're listening to something that excites anger, how can you listen to it in a different way? How do you get some perspective on the fact that this is the human world? There are going to be a lot of unskillful people, a lot of really stupid people saying all kinds of harmful things. That's the way the human race has been and it's not going to change,

even with the year 2012. This is the way people are. And so how are you going to live in an imperfect world without its imperfections creeping into your own mind? This is an important skill.

The Buddha recommends that you try to develop mindfulness of the body as you go through the day, all day long. That is your post for tying all the different animals in your mind. You've got your coyotes, you've got your lions and tigers, you've got your crocodiles and jackals. As the Buddha says, normally they're like different animals tied together on six different leashes. The leashes are tied to one another, but they're not tied to anything solid, so they go running off in different directions and whoever's strongest tends to drag the other ones along.

Whereas if you have mindfulness immersed in the body, as we're trying to practice here, right now, you've got a firm post, so that the tendency to go running after sights and sounds can only go so far. If you try to keep your mindfulness centered here and keep the breath filling the body and your awareness filling the body as you're going through the day, you may not be so conscious of the fact that the breath is now coming in, or the breath is now coming out. But you can be aware of the general feeling tone of the body, the energy tone.

Try to keep it balanced. Try to keep it healthy. As you keep this task in mind, you find that you're a lot less interested in going out and feeding on sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, and ideas. You've got something good to feed on right here. And when you do see one of those animals running off in a particular direction, you can see it more clearly because you've got this post to tie the leash to. So restraint of the senses is basically learning how to avoid the friends who are going to be cheating you and trying to lure you into ruinous fun, as the chant says.

As for good friends, you have to remember that one of the big problems in living in the world is the values of the world are very much opposed to the values of the Dhamma. What people in general think is important, the Buddha says is actually pretty trivial. And what the world may think is trivial the Buddha says is actually the important aspect of life. Learning to be generous, learning to be virtuous: The world outside at large doesn't put much stock in these things. To get ahead sometimes you have to be really grasping and really greedy. And the people who are really successful in the eyes of the world are often doing very immoral things. And yet the world exalts them. So you have to make sure that you don't pick up those values, because they're going to be detrimental to your mind, detrimental to your future.

This is why the Buddha, in addition to teaching mindfulness immersed in the body, teaches six other recollections, specifically for people living at home—as he says, surrounded by children, surrounded by your family, surrounded by the responsibilities of lay life. The first three are recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. For the first of those, think about what made the Buddha an amazing person, a really admirable person. There was his purity, there was his compassion, there was his discernment. Those are the things that have real value in life. So keep reflecting on that: that that's the sort of person you'd like to emulate. That's the person you admire. You'd like to have qualities like that, in your own life, in your own mind.

Similarly with the Dhamma and the Sangha. Think about the people who've devoted their lives to the practice of the Dhamma and were able to reap the fruit of

that practice. As you look at what you're doing in the course of the day, you may find that there are obstacles to fully devoting yourself to the practice. But at least what time you can manage, is time well-spent. Try to keep your mind, keep your thoughts coming back, back, back to these values, to these practices. Whenever you're free, go back to the breath. Try to develop mindfulness, alertness, ardency in your practice. Even if you can't do it full time, do it whenever you find room to squeeze in the practice.

And hopefully the practice will begin to squeeze some of those other obstacles out of the way. Think of it like the Bodhi tree. A Bodhi tree has tiny roots that spread out, and then as the roots spread they begin to grow and grow and grow. If they're in a brick wall, eventually the bricks start getting pushed apart as the roots grow. You want your practice to push apart the obstacles of daily life in just the same way so that they're no longer obstacles. And of course whatever you're doing, you always keep breathing, so try to maintain that sense of being right here with the breath, right here with the body, regardless of what you're doing otherwise. Make this your foundation, so it's not just one more added activity to your daily list, but it's the foundation on which you stand and from which you manage all your other responsibilities.

In addition to the recollection of the Triple Gem there are three other topics: recollection of virtue, recollection of generosity, recollection of the devas. These, too, the Buddha recommends as ideal topics for lay people living at home.

Recollection of virtue is when you reflect on how virtuous you've been in the course of the day. Where your precepts were sound and where they're, as the texts say, spotted or torn, like clothing in which you've worn a hole. Ajahn Lee makes the analogy about a shirt that you're wearing. When a precept gets broken once, it's like one rip in your clothing. If it gets broken twice, it's two rips in your clothing. After three or four times, you've got lots of rips, but as he said, it's better to have a ripped piece of clothing than no clothing at all. But ideally you'd like to have a shirt that doesn't have any rips, any holes, any tears, any spots.

As you reflect on the day, make that an object of your reflection. How was your virtue today? Try to measure the success of the day in those terms, rather than in terms of whether you were in a good mood or a bad mood, or if things went the way you wanted or didn't go the way you wanted. Those things are really trivial.

The important things are your virtue and your generosity. That's another topic he has you think about. When you reflect on your generosity, it's supposed to be a source of strength, a source of refreshment: that you've lived in this world and you didn't just take, take, take but you also gave—sometimes when asked, sometimes when not asked. You just saw that there was something you wanted to give, whether it was something material or your time, or your knowledge. Any form of help counts as a type of generosity. When you think about these things, make these your values. Then that encourages you to be more generous in the course of the next day. You know you're going to have to reflect at the end of the day about your generosity, so do a few things that you feel good about reflecting on.

Finally there's recollection of the devas. We all know that life is going to end at some spot and the question is, what comes next? So you want to develop the qualities of mind that will help ensure that, whatever comes next, it's something not to be afraid of, but something actually to look forward to. Not in the sense that you want to die, but

at least you feel secure about where you're going after death. Here again, mindfulness immersed in the body is a helpful foundation, but you can also reflect on the qualities that make a person a deva. That's what the Buddha's talking about with this recollection. He's asking you to think, not about all those devas out there, but of the qualities that make a person a deva. Then you reflect on your own life. Do you have these qualities too? There are five qualities in particular that he recommends.

First, there's conviction in the Buddha's awakening, which translates into conviction in the importance of your own actions. The Buddha gained awakening through his own actions and showed that human beings can find true happiness through the choices they make. So if you have conviction in this principle, then that's one of the qualities that makes a person a deva.

Then there are virtue and generosity, which we've already talked about.

There's learning, learning the Dhamma. It's good to listen to the Dhamma, it's good to read the Dhamma, because those activities shape your values. If the people around you tend not to be interested in the Dhamma, you don't want their values to snuff out the values of the Dhamma. So you have to keep reading, you have to keep listening, thinking about these things, reminding yourself of their importance.

Finally, there's discernment: the ability to see where you're causing unnecessary suffering, and to figure out how to stop. There are times when you're tempted to do things that you know are unskillful. You have to use your discernment to figure out to talk yourself out of doing those things. There are times when the things you know are skillful and you don't particularly feel like doing them, so how you can talk yourself into doing them. These are important aspects of discernment.

So when you reflect on these things, it's like having good friends. They keep you encouraged, keep you in line with the Dhamma. Even though the rest of the world is going off in its skewed ways, you want to make sure that your compass is pointed to true north. And don't let yourself get swayed by the fashions and fleeting concerns of the world.

So when you learn how to avoid false friends and live with true friends right here inside the mind, that enables you to keep at the practice while you're home. It keeps your mind on course. When a thought comes in recommending that you do this or think that or read that or look at this, ask: Is this a true friend? Or a false friend? Just because the thought is in your mind doesn't mean it's yours or that you're speaking to yourself.

Remember Ajaan Lee's image of all the germs going through the blood stream in your brain. Maybe *they're* talking to you. And you know how much you can trust germs. Think of your thoughts that way. They're potentially germs and potentially they're friends. Who knows? How do you know? You look at them and question them. Where would these lead you if you act on them? Where will they take you? Compare them to the values of your true friends. The values of the Triple Gem, the values of generosity, virtue, the qualities that make a person a deva: Those are your true friends.

And the more you hang around with your true friends, the easier it is to avoid the false ones. In both cases, it's important to keep your awareness, keep your mindfulness immersed in the body. That way you have something solid to hold on to when you're

really tempted to run away with your false friends. And you've got a gathering place where your true friends can surround you and keep you protected.