

Mindfulness, Discernment, & Peace of Mind

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We meditate to gain peace of mind, and part of that means finding something soothing for the mind to focus on. If all you can think about are problems and distractions, then there's not going to be much peace. The mind is going to feel frazzled, rough, raw.

This is one of the reasons why we start with the breath, because you can breathe in a way that feels really soothing. When you think of the breath, especially as the energy going through the different parts of the body, you can ask yourself, "Where in the body do I need a little soothing right now to calm the nerves?" Think of the breath energy going right there. As you breathe in, it immediately goes to that spot. Go around the body, making a survey of the different parts that seem uncomfortable, tight, or blocked, and think of the breath opening things up, relaxing things, so that as you sit here you feel bathed in good energy.

If you can create this state in the mind, try to maintain it.

This is where the other parts of the practice come in: that you have to use mindfulness and discernment to protect this. Otherwise, as soon as you leave here and start thinking about other things, the peace is gone. You start irritating the mind again. So you have to be able to fend off any things that might come in and distract the mind.

Often you don't have to wait until you leave here. Sometimes you're sitting here with the breath nice and calm, and all of a sudden you remember, "Oh, there's that issue. Oh, there's this. Got to take care of that. Got to think about this." Then the mind goes off and it doesn't get as much peace and calm out of the hour as it could.

So mindfulness is what reminds you that you want to stay here. Discernment is what gives you good reasons for staying here. It also helps you see when something's going to come up and be a problem, and it gives you some ways of dealing with it, fending it off.

Sometimes people think that you do concentration first and then, when your concentration is really good, you're going to get to discernment. But actually, you gain your discernment as you're getting the mind into concentration and keeping it there, because you've got to figure out how to sidestep the problems, all the distractions that have been running through the mind all day and are not deterred by the fact that you've made up your mind to sit and meditate. They're going to come in anyhow, unless you have ways of telling yourself, "No, I don't have to engage with these things."

This is one of the reasons why we have those contemplations at the beginning of the meditation, such as the five things to recollect every day: The first four sound pretty depressing but they're actually a part of your defense. Your thoughts go out looking after things having to do with your body, things having to do with people that you're engaged with. You have to remember: These things are going to end at some point. You can't really depend on them.

You've got to find something more solid than that.

And where are you going to look for that? Well, as the Buddha said in the fifth recollection, you have to look to your actions. That's what you can really depend on. Now, as you look at your actions as they've been up to now: Are they really dependable? If you find that the answer is No, then what can you do to make them more dependable? You have to start with your actions right now. That's why we train the mind: to develop the mindfulness and discernment that are useful not only for staying with the breath but also for helping you figure out what to do and what not to do, so that you can depend more and more on your actions—the things you do, the things you say, the things you think, how you relate to events around you, how you relate to events in the mind.

So where are you going to learn that discernment? Come right back here. You don't have to look anywhere else. We read a little bit in the texts to get some ideas, but the real learning comes as you try to put the teachings into practice. Be mindful to stay here. Have the discernment that when another thought comes up you say, "I've got something more important I've got to do. I've got to develop some skills in getting the mind to settle down and stay settled down."

As the Buddha said, mindfulness is useful everywhere. So you want your mindfulness to be really strong. That means keeping helpful things in mind.

We have a lot of unhelpful things that we carry around with us: little bits and snatches of songs, things we heard someone else say who-knows-how-long ago. They slosh around in the mind, pushing our thoughts, words, and deeds around as well.

So try to remember something that's more useful: that if you stay with the breath in the present moment, you're going to be able to watch your own mind, you're going to be able to step back from thoughts that come through the mind, and you can decide, "Do I really want to go with them or not?" That's a really useful skill.

All too often our tendency is that when a thought comes in, we jump right in and go with it. It's like a stranger driving up in a car, saying, "Hop in!" And you hop right in. You don't ask, "Who are you? Where are you going?" The car looks shiny. You say, "This must be fun." But not everybody in a shiny car can be trusted.

So you need a place to stand and have a sense of belonging here. One of the reasons why we jump into those cars is because we don't like where we are. We want to go someplace else. Here's an opportunity to go, so you go.

If, however, you can make the body in the present a good place to be—and this is why we work with the breath—then when a car comes driving up, you can say, "Wait a minute. Who are you? Where are we going? To what extent can I trust you?" You can save yourself a lot of grief that way.

So try to get familiar with how the breathing feels in the different parts of the body. Ajaan Lee talks about the breath channels going through the body and the breath going down the

different nerves and blood vessels. Can you feel that? Where do you feel that? You might feel it more clearly in some parts of the body than others. Well, focus first on those.

Then ask yourself, “Do you like how it feels? Does it feel tight? When you breathe in, does the energy go up? Does it go down? Does it feel good going up or would it feel better going down?” Ask these questions, pose them in the mind, and see what happens as a result.

The ability to ask questions, to step back like this, is an important part of discernment. Then when you learn something useful through your discernment, remember it. That’s right mindfulness.

We’re not simply being in the present moment and accepting whatever comes up and then leaving it at that. We’re learning that there are lessons we can learn that we’ll want to apply the next time around, and then the next, and then the next. You can start applying them not only while you’re sitting here meditating but also as you go through the day: What kind of thinking is helpful? What kind of thinking is not? Which states of mind can you trust? Which states of mind can you not trust? Those are important lessons to learn.

So use the breath as a place where you can step back and question other things that are coming up in the mind, so that you don’t get fooled by them, you don’t get taken off and kidnapped by thoughts that at first look shiny and fun but have some homicidal maniac driving the car.

When you think, you want to think in ways that actually are going to be useful. After all, this is your mind. You have the ability to think. Why are you thinking in ways that are destroying yourself? Who’s doing the thinking? Who’s in charge? You want mindfulness to be in charge, you want discernment to be in charge, because they really do have your best interests in mind.

Particularly the discernment. Mindfulness without discernment just remembers things. The discernment is what reminds you, “Okay, this is what we’ve got to think about.” Our thinking has consequences. The things you talk to yourself about, even just the bare perceptions, images that come flashing up in the mind: Sometimes they seem to be hard-wired but they don’t have to be. You can unwire them by questioning them.

The best place to question them is when you’re standing right here with a sense of the breath that feels good in the body: soothing as it comes in, soothing as it goes out, energizing when you want to be energized, relaxing when you want to be relaxed. You want to be more in control of this area right here so that it becomes a good foundation. You’re establishing a good place for your mindfulness so that your discernment can see things more clearly. If everything’s running around, discernment gets blurry. Or if you feel hungry and lacking inside, then your discernment starts developing all the wrong opinions about what you want and what you need to satisfy your hunger.

This is where you belong: right here. That way, your discernment and your mindfulness become your friends, things you can actually depend on.

So take some time to get to know the breath and see to what extent you can make it better, more soothing, more relaxing, more energizing—whatever you need right now.

This is your territory, so settle in. Don't let anybody else push you out. Of course, other people aren't the ones trying to push you out. Your own defilements push you to go running out after things. But the more you feel at home right here, then the less likely you're going to be pushed around, the less likely you're going to run away.