

Defilements with Their Bambi Eyes

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When the Buddha taught breath meditation to Rahula, he started out first with some contemplations: the foulness of the body, the inconstancy of everything in the senses, even the theme of not-self. And in his book, *Frames of Reference*, Ajaan Lee does the same thing. Before introducing breath meditation, he talks about the contemplation of the body, contemplation of not-self, inconstancy—the point being that if you’re going to get the mind to settle down and pull away from its thoughts, you have to contemplate the drawbacks of your thinking to at least some extent. Otherwise, when the mind gets still, your old thoughts begin to invade, and you don’t have anything to fight them off with.

You need some discernment in order to get the mind into concentration. As the Buddha said, there’s no insight without jhana and tranquility, and there’s no insight and tranquility—well, there can be insight and tranquility without jhana, but they won’t be strong. All these qualities work together. They’re various wings to awakening.

Some of the lists have discernment coming before concentration, such as the noble eightfold path and the seven factors for awakening. And even in the lists where discernment comes after concentration, conviction comes first: conviction that your actions do matter. And where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. This means that you’ve got to get the mind under some control. So before you focus on the breath, it’s always good to think about why you want to get out of your thinking, particularly sensual thoughts.

Concentration requires that you be secluded, as the Buddha said, from sensual thoughts. In other words, your mind is not totally devoid of them, but at the moment, you’re not going to be getting engaged with them. You’re apart from them, and to manage that, you have to see their drawbacks. That’s why it’s useful to think of a term that a lot of Western Buddhists don’t like to think about, which is defilements. The mind has its defilements: things that keep it from being bright, clear, clean, at ease. Some people find the term offensive. “What’s wrong with our minds? Our minds aren’t dirty,” they say. Well, compared to the mind of an awakened one, they’re pretty dim, they’re clouded, and sometimes it’s discouraging to see how many clouds we have filling our minds. On top of that, as the Buddha said, we’ve been taking them as our friends. We go around, as he says, with craving as our companion, and craving has hijacked our thoughts.

It's not the case at all thinking is bad, but we let our friends take over our thinking, and we've been traveling in a bad crowd. We feel affection for them. That's the problem. So we really do have to think about their drawbacks. But we take on them one at a time. The word for "defilements" is a plural. There are lots of them, which means that you don't have to battle defilement as an abstraction. But you have to learn how to see your old friends as not really your friends.

We've have that chant on friends: False friends are those who flatter and cajole. They're companions in ruinous fun. Those are your cravings. And you've lent them your things, you've lent them your thoughts, trusting them, feeling affection for them. But then what kind of friends are they? Are they the friends who get you to commit a crime and then, when the police come, they run away, leave you holding the bag? They don't suffer the results of karma. We do, the mind does. And then the defilements come back with new ideas, and we fall for them again, because of our affection for them. So you have to learn how to view them with some suspicion.

This is where we have to engage in some of those contemplations we don't like: the contemplation of the body. We don't like to think about all the slimy things inside the body. Some people get offended by that contemplation. But it's contemplation for the sake of the clarity and purity of the mind. We have to see that our old friends, no matter how much we may like them and how much we may find them familiar, have really been working against us. And when you can see that they've betrayed you, that's when you begin to gain a sense that maybe you don't want to continue with these friendships.

So for the time being, put all your thoughts that are not related to the breath in the category of "under suspicion," and get the mind still, focused on the breath. Any other thoughts not related to the breath, no matter how good they may seem, no matter how right they may seem, just say, "No, not right now." No matter how true they may seem, "No, not right now." We've got to give the mind a sense of what it's like not to have a lot of chatter going on and not to leave any opening for your "friends," our false friends, to come in and take over the mind. So just stay with the breath.

Try to be as fully conscious of the breath as you can. Fill your awareness with the breath. Think of the breath as being the only thing you notice in the body right now. Everything you notice in the body, think of it as breath. Let your body, the breath, the sense of ease, and your awareness all be filling the same space. The more your awareness is full right here, the less time you'll have to think. It's as if all your hands are engaged in this work and you don't have the free hands to hold

onto any other thoughts. That way you can get some rest and some time away from your old friends.

Give the mind some seclusion, because that's when you're in a position where you can begin to assess your friends. Who really is your friend? What friends do you have inside? Which friends are false friends? When you can find you can do without those false friends, then it's a lot easier to want to end the friendship. They come and they plead and they give you Bambi eyes, but you have to be firm.

So develop the firmness with your concentration and you'll find you can be nourished simply by being fully attentive to the breath. And you don't need those old friends anymore. I found in my own case, getting away from my family when I went to Thailand, was a good thing. I got a sense of who I was, who they were. I didn't feel so dependent on them, so that by the time came to come back and be with my family again, the relationship was much better. Well, it's the same thing with your thoughts. You need some time away from them. Take with you only the thoughts that are related to the breath, related to keeping the mind still right now. And ultimately, when you get back engaged with your other thinking, you're on a different footing. You learn to recognize better which friends are true, which ones are not. You can goodbye to your old false friends without any sense of nostalgia. That's one of the meanings of the word *analamo*. You have no nostalgia for them, no affection.

So learn to recognize that you've been traveling with a bad crowd, and you've got to do something about it. You've got to get out of that crowd. And the Buddha gives you new friends inside. You learn how to be friends with the breath, friends with mindfulness, friends with concentration, so you can learn how to recognize that these are what true friends are like. That way you outgrow your old false friendships and you're traveling with a much better crowd.