

Work with It

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As Ajaan Lee points out, when you're meditating and you're setting your mind on staying with one thing, it's hard not to have other things come in and get in the way. In fact, it's to be expected. Those things come in two forms. With some of them, all you have to do is look at them and they go away. Or you tell yourself, "This is not why I'm here," you turn your attention away, and they go away. Others, though, hang on and keep coming back.

Sometimes in meditation instructions you hear the teacher say that if it's a distraction of the second kind, you've got to work with it. But how do you work with it? The Buddha, as usual, is really helpful in telling how. He actually gives three different frameworks for looking at the distractions in the mind and dealing with them.

The first one is his distinction between those that go away when all you do is look at them, as opposed to those where you have to exert a fabrication, as he says. Here, of course, he's referring to the three kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, and mental. That's one framework.

Another is when he talks about the five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. This helps to fill in what it means to just look at something or to exert a fabrication. Of those five ways, three of them deal with just looking. One, you realize that you've slipped and your mind is running off. Tell yourself, "I've got something better to think about," and you go right back to the breath. In the second one, you remind yourself, "I don't have to look at this. I can turn my attention away." The third one is realizing, "If I pay attention to this, I'm exerting a lot of effort. Why don't I just relax?" And it goes away.

The thoughts that don't go away easily come under the other two of those five approaches. There's the one where you have to think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking: "If I were to think about this thought for 24 hours, where would it take me?" It usually takes you nowhere. Or if it did take you someplace, it'd take you someplace you don't want to go.

The remaining approach is to make up your mind that you're not going to think that thought. Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and just tell yourself, "I'm going to squeeze that thought out of my mind." This is where having a meditation word is useful. You can repeat it really rapid-fire, "*buddho, buddho, buddho,*" really fast. Jam the airwaves so there's no space in your mind to think about that thought.

So that framework shows you two ways of exerting a fabrication. One is to think through the drawbacks of the thought and the other is to just force it out.

The third framework that the Buddha gives is his five-step program for dealing with things, moving from seeing them as being inconstant, seeing their allure, seeing their drawbacks to develop dispassion for them, and then escaping from them. Here again, you can combine this framework with the teachings on the three fabrications. For instance, when you look for inconstancy, the first thing you have to see is its origination: Why does this thing arise in the mind? It's going to be through one or more of those three kinds of fabrication. It may be through the way you're breathing, or the way you're talking to yourself, or a combination of the perceptions and feelings you have.

You may notice that when the mind tends to go for lust, there's a certain feeling in the body. Even before there are any blatant signs of lust affecting the body, there's an itchiness in your hands or your feet that's related to the way you breathe—or it may be related to something else. But immediately you slap a perception on it: “Okay, this is the kind of sensation where it's good to just drop all thoughts about the fact that you're practicing meditation and go for some sensual pleasure.” So there you are. You've got those three kinds of fabrication that can act as the origination. When the desire goes away, what happened? Why did you lose interest? What happened? Again, it can be any of those three fabrications.

When you look for the allure, again it's going to be one of those three fabrications. It might be that the way you breathe around something creates an aura around it in your mind. Or say, if there's anger, it could be the way you talk to yourself in the part of the mind that likes to be angry, that likes to stir things up in that way. How do you talk to yourself about that? What are the words that go into the sense that anger is something really attractive? If they're full-blown sentences, that would count as verbal fabrication. With just individual words, that would be mental fabrication.

And of course, what feeling do you have in the body? Sometimes with anger, there's a weight in the stomach or the chest, while at the same time there's a sense of a weight being lifted off the mind. A constriction is being taken away. In other words, your sense of shame and compunction is lifted up a little bit, and you feel entitled to say and do what you want. There's a sense of freedom that goes with that, there's a feeling and a way of breathing around that, all of which go together to create the allure, that anger is something that's attractive and enjoyable.

So you have to change the perceptions. This is why the Buddha provides us with those three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. In some passages

he parses them out to nine altogether, seeing whatever the issue is as a cancer, an arrow, alien, empty—anything to convince yourself that it's not worth going with. That's changing the perception. You can also change the way you breathe in order to change the feeling in the body and change the feelings in the mind. In this way, you actually start siding with the perceptions that say, "This is not any place I want to go."

We've talked in the past about how certain defilements tend to hijack the breath and get it to create certain feelings in the body so that you like the defilement. Well, you can learn how to take the breath back. Make the breath yours, so that your reasons for why you don't want to go with that particular defilement develop an allure of their own, and you really realize that they are on your side. That's what leads to dispassion. You see that dispassion is on your side as well—that it is freedom. Remember how the Buddha talked about the standards for what constitutes true Dhamma is that it leads to freedom—to being unfettered—and to dispassion.

Now, that dispassion is something unfabricated. But to get there, you have to have an anticipation that it's something really positive. This is part of the work of fabrication: the work of the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings that develop around your perceptions, and the way you breathe. These are the things that make the mind more inclined. As the passage says, you "incline the mind to the deathless" because you see it as attractive. You're tired of all the slavery that goes into running around, thinking the defilements are your friends, and then they get you to do things that you really regret afterwards. You've had enough. Freedom looks good. That, too, is a fabrication, but it's a fabrication on your side.

So when we work with defilements, we've got these three frameworks that we can keep in mind: the basic distinction between those that go away when you look at them and those that require that you exert a fabrication, which involves all three fabrications. Then there are the five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. Then there are the five steps to move from seeing the origination of the defilement to arriving at the escape. The three fabrications are involved in those last two frameworks, too.

The Buddha wouldn't say, "Just work with your defilement. Work with your problem," and leave it at that. He's more helpful. He gives you ways of looking at the defilement, ways of analyzing it to take it apart and put together something better in its place, i.e., a path that can get you really past it.

So always keep these frameworks in mind. Figure out which one is going to be the most appropriate one apply in any individual case. And see how they help one

another along so that you can use the processes of fabrication in a way that's just right for each particular defilement as it comes.

When you have a wide range of tools like this, you're like a craftsman whose tools are sharp, kept in good condition, and right at hand. You're ready for anything.