

Saying No to Distraction

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When you meditate, it's good to keep in mind the Buddha's teachings on kamma—that what you're experiencing right now is a mixture of several things: the results of intentions from the past, your present intentions, and the results of your present intentions. This helps you to sort out what's going on in the mind.

Your present kamma should be that you want to stay right here—with the breath going in, going out—and working with the breath in whatever way helps you settle down. As long as you can maintain that intention in the present moment, then anything else that comes up you can regard simply as the result of past kamma—nothing you need to get involved with right now.

But if you do find yourself continuing the weave of a particular thought—as they say in Thai—that *is* present kamma. You've switched your intention. So the first order of business is to get back to your original intention.

As for trying to understand the distraction, save that until your concentration is solid. The first skill you want to develop is how to say No quickly to a thought. Recognize that a thought is beginning to enter in, and think of shredding it.

Sometimes the thought seems to present itself as a little present. You look into the box, and then you fall into the box. In other words, the thought envelops you, and you're in the thought, in that state of becoming. You've left the breath entirely.

At other times, it presents itself as a puzzle: Here's the beginning of a thought. How does it end? It's like those old poetry contests they used to have in the palace in Thailand. They'd write the first two lines of a poem, and then the different members of the court would try to finish off the poem. A lot of times we can't resist, even though our thoughts are not poems. They can be pretty trashy, and yet we still want to complete them before we're done with them.

It's as if they're untied shoelaces. We have to tie them up before they go. Well, you tie them up and you find *you're* tied up. They pull you in. So you've got to be quick to remember: They can stay untied.

When we read the teachings of the Forest ajaans, we often notice how quick they are at recognizing the student's defilements and having the right response. That's because they had to learn that skill in dealing with their own minds: how to say No quickly to a thought—quickly and effectively—and then get back to business.

Our real business is how to develop a state of concentration and maintain it. The voice in the mind says, “Well, I want to understand this thought first”: Keep that for later. Right now, you want to understand concentration. If the mind is settled, what can you do to keep it here? If it’s not settled, what can you do to get it in place? Those are the things you want to understand.

So you work with the breath; you work with your perceptions of the breath, keeping track of body—in other words, the breath itself and its relationship to the body—the feelings that arise, and the mental state that’s watching over this. You want to bring those three things together. And get interested in this.

This is a big problem that a lot of people have in trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath. The breath gets boring, and very quickly they want to look for something else. But you have to remind yourself, it’s not just the breath here; it’s your whole mind—this mind that has so many tricks, that lies to you so often, that promises entertainment and then turns on you. Here’s your chance to understand it, and you do that by training it—training it to be still and then watching out for all of its tricks as they come up inside.

So, when something comes up, as I said, the first reaction should be, “This is not what I want right now. I have something else I’ve got to do.”

If the thought, though, is insistent—it keeps coming back—then, the Buddha says, you have to think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. If you were to think about it for a day and a night, where would it take you? In which direction would that thought bend your mind? As the Buddha said, the things we think about a lot bend the mind, in the same way that a tree gets bent by the wind.

So if you find yourself thinking thoughts of sensuality, you’re going to be bent in the direction of sensuality; thinking thoughts of ill will—and here “ill will” includes not only just out-and-out nastiness, wanting to see people suffer, but a lot of times your thoughts of justified anger come down to ill will too. Someone has done wrong in the past, and you really want to see that person meet up with justice—in other words, suffer. No matter how right the thought may be, it still counts as ill will.

Is your mind leaning toward sleepiness? Or is it leaning toward restlessness, anxiety? Or are you just not certain about what you’re doing? These hindrances can bend the mind. As it leans over, leans over, leans over, it finally falls.

So that’s the analysis you should give to those thoughts: What are their drawbacks? Then try to compare those drawbacks with the allure: Why do you like them? It’s when you can see the allure that you really understand why these thoughts come up.

If you're not sure about the allure, just keep saying, "No, no, no, we're not going there," pointing out reasons for not going. After a while you'll hear the mind come back with its own reasons. Either that, or it will make a deal—say, "Okay, I'll go away for a little while, but I'm going to come back." You have to keep your eye out for the part of the mind that says "okay."

Why can't you be done with that kind of thinking? The fact that it would appear in the mind again, as I said, is the result of old kamma, but if there's the tendency to want to pick it up again, the mind has played traitor with itself.

So you learn a lot about the mind by saying No to its thoughts, and then being very watchful.

The kind of unhealthy saying No—repression—is when you say No and then pretend it didn't even happen. That's not what the Buddha's recommending. He's recommending what the psychologists call suppression, which means basically you say No, you do your best to deprive the thought of its power, but you're perfectly aware that it's there, and the potential for going back there is always there.

Learn how to give the good old Thai-Ajaan karate chop. The thought comes up, it recommends something, and you say No. And you've got a good reason to say No—a quick retort. Then you get back to the breath, and that way you save yourself a *lot* of time.

So you just say No, but then you also watch to see how the mind is going to negotiate, and see what reasons it comes back with, saying, "Come on, just this once. It's not going to hurt." Or one of its favorite ones is, "You're going to give in anyhow, so why don't you give in now?" For that one you can say, "Well, I don't know about down the line. But *right now* I'm going to say No." When it comes up again—"Okay, *right now* I'm going to say No." At some point, the mind is going to reveal itself as to why it thinks this is going to be a good thing to go with. That's when you've learned something, but you've learned by saying No.

This is a lesson we should learn as we go through the day, exercising restraint of the senses. When the mind wants to look at something or think about something or listen to something that it knows is not right, you've got to keep it on a short leash. Sometimes, in the busyness of the day, you don't have time to analyze things, but then at least get good at saying No.

If the thought comes up again during your meditation, that's when you can look at it and say No, and then watch how the mind responds. But it's not just a matter of saying No. You get back to the breath, because that's the most effective way of saying No: giving the mind an alternative thing to be interested in.

Think about it: This breath is the energy in your body. Your health depends on this. The more fully the breath can flow through the body, the greater your

resistance is going to be to disease, the healthier the organs. So, at the very least, you can work on your physical health with each breath.

And having an all-around awareness in the body puts the mind in a position where it can see things from angles it didn't look from before. The defilements like it when the mind has a spotlight attention—when it's focused on one thing from one angle, and a lot of the mind is in the dark. Here we're trying to illuminate as many dark spots from as many angles as possible.

Think of the whole body, be *aware* of the whole body—all around, in front, behind. You're not on one side of the body looking in; you're here *in* the body surrounded by breath, so your awareness should surround you as well. The more you can take that surround-awareness and keep it going, the harder it will be for the mind to focus on a little thought and run away.

So learn to say No to your random thoughts by saying Yes to the breath, Yes to concentration, and you find that you learn a lot, both about the random thoughts and about the mind when it's still.

Because that's what we're here for: to learn about the mind—not for our entertainment, but to understand, "What is this about the mind, where it lies to itself, where it hides things from itself? Why does it do that? And why do we let it get away with doing that?" When you have that purpose clearly in mind, that's when your No and your Yes can be effective.