

Directed Thoughts, Random Thoughts

September 14, 2021

Often when we come to meditation we'd like to stop thinking, but when you start out meditating you have to think. It's simply a matter of learning what to think about, what not to think about. As we chanted just now, one of the factors of the first level of right concentration is directed thought: You direct your thoughts to the breath. If they wander off away from the breath, you drag them back again. Then you combine them with evaluation: How is the breath? When it comes in, where do you feel it? Does it feel good? If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. Try longer breathing, shorter breathing, faster, slower, heavier, lighter.

You're trying to develop a sensation in the body that feels good to stay with, particularly in an area of the body that's sensitive. It might be around the heart, around the stomach, in the neck, or in the middle of the head. Keep directing your thoughts to the breath energy there.

Ajaan Lee's image is of holding on to a post. You can run around the post, and as long as you hold on, you don't get dizzy, you don't fall down. But if you let go of the post and start spinning around, you'd fall down very quickly. So as long as you're thinking about the breath, that's fine.

As you get more and more sensitive to how the breath feels, change the way you visualize the breath to yourself so that you can think of it as a whole-body process. At the same time, you want to be alert to it: What does it actually feel like? You begin to notice that certain perceptions of the breath have an impact on how you actually feel the breath. Try to choose a perception that opens your awareness to breath coming in from all directions—not just through the nose, but also through the eyes, the ears, in from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, in from the back, into the soles of the feet, into the palms of the hands.

Think of breath as being all around you. You're wearing the breath. You're not on one side peering into the breath. You're surrounded by it, bathed by it, immersed in it: whatever perception helps you get a sense of being centered right here in the midst of the breath. And be careful not to let go of the breath. A feeling of ease will arise and it's all too easy to drop the perception of the breath and just go for the ease. You begin to zone out. So to prevent that, keep your perception of breath always in mind.

You're setting up an intention: This is where you want to stay. And it's when you set up an intention like this that you begin to realize that other intentions are coming in, at odds with the original intention. Your rule of thumb is that anything not related to the breath right now, you let go.

That requires an extra level of mindfulness and alertness: not only looking after the breath, but also looking after the mind to make sure it doesn't wander off. This double layer of awareness is what's going to protect your meditation. This double layer is also going to be the basis of your insights, because one of the first things you want to learn is how to recognize in time a thought that would pull you away from the breath so that it doesn't pull you away, because it's all too easy to be hoodwinked.

You're sitting here with the breath, everything seems fine, and all of a sudden you're someplace else. You have no idea of what happened in the meantime. The mind plays these tricks on itself all the time. So you want to learn how not to be fooled. Each time you wander off, try to catch yourself as quickly as you can and come right back to the breath. Do it in a friendly but a firm way.

It's often wise to reward yourself with a particularly nice breath when you come back. If it feels really good coming back, the mind will be more and more inclined to *want* to come back. If you yell at it and get really upset, it's not going to want to come back. It'll wander off and want to stay away. So try to catch it each time, and try to catch it more and more quickly, and give yourself rewards.

As you get more sensitive to the breath, you'll begin to notice that there's a stirring in the breath before a thought forms. If you can catch that in time, you can just breathe right through the stirring—it's like combing out knots in your hair—and the thought won't have a chance to form.

Other times, you find yourself missing it, but over time you begin to catch yourself more and more quickly each time. You begin to see steps in how the mind goes out and creates a whole new thought world, and then you go into the thought world.

From that little stirring there's a perception that tells you, "This is a potential for a thought about x , do you want to go?" In the past, you'd just jump right in. But now you're learning how to say, "No, I'm going to stand back."

It's like being on the side of a road. You're out there in the hot sun, the road is hot, you've got bare feet, you have no shelter, no protection. Someone comes along in a car and you just

jump right in. Sometimes they don't even have to invite you; you jump in ahead of time. But if you've got an air-conditioned bus-stop, and you know the numbers of the different bus routes, and you know who's a stranger, who's a friend, then when cars come by, buses come by, you'll be a little more picky about who you go with.

Being with the comfortable breath provides you with that air-conditioned bus-stop. You're protected and you can step back from your thoughts. This is where that ability to watch your mind at the same time you're watching your breath is going to come in handy. You don't really leave the breath, but you do notice what's going on with the thoughts.

This is the difference between ordinary thinking and analyzing your thinking while you're meditating. With ordinary thinking, you just jump right in. You're in that thought world and you're off. But as you analyze thinking while you meditate, you still have a sense of being anchored in the body, and you see the thought world just as a little bubble that appears in the context of your breath, in the context of your present moment awareness. That's where you can watch the processes, get behind the scenes, see how the mind fools itself. You can step *outside* of your thoughts.

Now, sometimes simply reminding yourself that you're here meditating and that you don't want to get involved in that thought will be enough to get out. Other times, you find that the thoughts have a real allure. They keep pulling you back. And here again, the mind can lie to itself. It can tell itself, "I don't like this kind of thought"—especially if it's about anger, ill-will; emotions that you don't like to admit to yourself that you have, but they're there.

The first step is admitting they're there, then asking yourself, "Who in the mind likes them?" This is where it's useful to have the image of the committee of the mind in the back of your mind, so that you don't get quite so upset about seeing yourself going for those thoughts. It's just one little part of yourself. There are the parts that don't want to go.

This is why the mind gets sneaky—one part hiding from other parts what it wants to do. But if you see something unskillful like that, you can see the drawbacks and you can tell yourself how much you don't want to go for that kind of thinking. But as long as you don't really see the allure, you're not going to be very effective. You've got to attack the allure directly. And you have to do this specifically, again and again and again.

It doesn't do to generalize, and say, "It's because of my ego that I go" or "because of my general irritability." We're not here to find generalizations. We're not here to draw conclusions. We're here to deal with specific defilements as they come up. They'll have

different ways of dressing themselves up. Eventually, you find that there are certain patterns to their disguises, but the patterns may not be what you expected. So to begin with, you have to deal with individual cases.

“Why does this person get me irritated? Why does that person get me irritated? What do I find attractive about the irritation in the first case? What about the second case?” It may be similar; it may not. You may ask yourself, given that there are 108 different kinds of craving, how long it will take to deal with all these things. And the response is, “Don’t ask.” Just keep dealing with them one at a time.

There was a famous conversation when the King of Thailand went to see Luang Puu Dune. One of his first questions was, “Which defilement should be dealt with first?” And Luang Puu Dune said, “Whichever one arises first. Deal with that one first.”

And get to the specifics. The part of the mind that wants to avoid the specifics and go for the generalizations: That’s part of the subterfuge of the mind to hide these things from itself. You want to get down to the nitty-gritty because there are committee members of the mind that are like dogs: They find something dead and they like to roll in it. Other committee members are more fastidious in their tastes, but you’ve got to admit to yourself you’ve got dogs in here as well. And you get to know them because you’re firmly intent on this one topic, which is the breath.

Once you’ve got that kind of intention going, then anything else that runs up against it can be called into question. If you have no firm intention at all, the mind wanders around, drifts around like a boat without a rudder on the sea. It has no idea which currents are coming from which direction. When a new current comes in, you don’t really know because there’s nothing to compare it with.

But when the mind is focused on one thing, directing its thoughts to an object, then its other thoughts, its random thoughts, become clear. So try to stay anchored in this one object. Get to know it really well.

The breath has lots of ins and outs. If you have parts of the body that tend to have chronic pain, see if you can use the breath to defuse the pain.

In other words, find reasons for wanting to be with the breath. That’ll make your intention firmer. And the firmer your intention, the easier it’ll be to see that the other random thoughts, as long as you let them run around through the mind, tend to take control. But now you’re in control.

Ajaan Chah's image is of a house in which you have one chair. And you want to stay in that chair. Anybody else who comes in the house has to stand. If you get careless and leave the chair, someone else can get in the chair. Then they can force you to stand. They can order you around.

So direct your thoughts here to the breath. This is the chair in the house. From there you can see clearly who's coming, who's going, and you get some control over the comings and goings. That's when your thought processes really become your friend.