

Thinking Your Way to Stillness

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There's a common perception that meditation doesn't involve any thinking. You just force the mind to stay alert in the present moment and refuse to get involved in any thoughts at all. Then it will settle down. That approach works for some people in some circumstances, but not for everyone. This is why the Buddha gave a wide range of instructions on how to deal with distracting thoughts. Just noting them and dropping them *is* one way of dealing with them, but there are other ways of dealing with them as well, many of which require that you think in order to get around them.

So it's important to know how to use your thinking processes as a part of the meditation. One method that Ajaan Lee recommends is to think about the breath, and think about how you think about the breath. He talks about the breath energy throughout the whole body, and how the breath can be good or bad for you. He also talks about how to explore the different manifestations of breath energy in the body, how to experiment with different ways of perceiving them. In other words, get yourself interested in the breath, interested in how you relate to the energy in the body. As you explore that, as you think about it and analyze it and watch it, the mind drops its other interests, objects, and preoccupations, and gets absorbed through the process of analysis. This is one of the bases of success, *vimansa*: concentration based on analysis.

But there are times when the mind will refuse to settle down with the breath. It's got other issues. So there are different ways of dealing with those issues. First, you've got to figure out what the issues are. If the mind seems restless, what is it restless about? What has it stirred up? Sometimes the agenda lies under the surface. One way to bring it up into the light of day is to refuse to think about whatever the issue is and see what part of the mind complains, saying, "This is important; you've got to think about this." And you can ask it: "Why?" Listen to what it has to say, both in terms of the content and in the terms of the tone of voice. Look into the assumptions on which that complaint is based. Then analyze the assumptions to disentangle yourself from them. You might ask yourself who in your past thought that way, spoke that way: someone whose ideas and attitudes you picked up, often without questioning. We've picked up lots of unhealthy attitudes from our parents, from our teachers, from our friends, from the media, and they keep sloshing around in the mind.

Ajaan Lee talks about the fact that you have germs in your bloodstream, and they're going through your brain. Maybe the thoughts going through your brain are *their* thoughts. Even if you don't resonate with the idea of germs in your brain having thoughts, the same basic principle applies to the people in your background: Their thoughts have somehow gotten planted in your brain. The fact that the thoughts are planted in your brain isn't your responsibility right now, but it *is* your responsibility if you take them up and chew on them. You have to dissociate yourself from that kind of thinking, to ask: "What are the assumptions behind those thoughts? Do you really believe them?" Learn how to look at them from the outside.

I had the advantage, when I was learning how to meditate in Thailand, that when I'd bring an issue up with Ajaan Fuang, he'd sometimes give me a quizzical look. He had never heard any thinking like that before. And just the fact that he regarded as strange the thoughts I regarded as natural helped me realize how much I was a product of my culture, of a particular set of circumstances at a particular time, in a particular place. And it's a really good exercise to learn to question your background, the ideas you were brought up with, the assumptions you carry around. If these things are not questioned, they'll simply lurk there and eat away at your mind and get in the way of the practice. It may turn out that, after investigating these ideas, you decide that they are useful at certain times in certain places, but not always. And especially not if they're interfering with your meditation. You have to see that they're not really appropriate for what you're doing right now. That's one way of dealing with thoughts like that.

Another is simply to look at what the thoughts are doing to the mind. If you allow the mind to think in these ways over and over again, you're creating mental ruts. Are those ruts that you want? Do you want your mind to keep lurching back into those ideas again and again and again? As the ruts get deeper and deeper, it gets harder and harder to get out. This is called looking at the drawbacks of that particular thought.

Another way of dealing with these thoughts is to actively replace them with the opposite thought. This is what the recollections taught by the Buddha are useful for. If you're feeling discouraged in your practice, you can think about all the members of the Noble Sangha who went through really miserable times in their practice for one reason or another—either outside hardships, or just their own inability to get the mind concentrated. There's the story of one monk who decided to commit suicide. He had been practicing for more than 20 years. As he said, he hadn't had even a fingersnap's worth of concentration. So he got the razor and everything all ready. And that's when he came to his senses; his mind suddenly gathered into one and settled down.

As for us, we haven't gotten suicidal in our practice yet, and I daresay that we've had more than a few fingersnaps' worth of concentration. So you can take comfort from the fact that if he could do it, you can do it. There's no need to get discouraged.

You can also think about the Noble Sangha when outside circumstances get tough. There are verses in the *Theragatha* about monks who fall sick out in the wilderness. They have no doctor, no medicine. So what do they do? They resolve to develop the factors for awakening, the five strengths, the five faculties, four bases of success, and to use those qualities as their medicine. There's also a set of verses about a monk who doesn't get any alms. He asks himself: "What are you going to do?" And his answer is, "I'm going to go back to my dwelling and I'm going to meditate." "It's cold outside, what are you going to do?" "I'm going to use the four immeasurable meditations—limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity—to warm the heart."

These reflections remind you that when things get difficult, you want to develop the mind's resources, so that you don't just keep obsessing about the difficulties and complaining about how they make it impossible to practice. There have been people in the past who've been in worse situations than you're in, but they were able to practice in spite of that fact. In other words, you learn

how to think in positive ways, helpful ways, instead of destroying yourself with your thoughts.

There are also reflections on your generosity, on your virtue, on the fact that you've developed the qualities that make people into devas. Those are to remind you that you do have worth, that you do have potential in the meditation.

These are some of the ways in which thinking is useful in the meditation. You analyze unskillful thinking and you try to replace it with skillful thinking. As the Buddha said, once the mind has settled down with the skillful thinking, you can then bring it back to the breath, bring it back to contemplation of the body, whatever your frame of reference, so that you can deepen the concentration.

In Ajaan Maha Boowa's analogy, this is like trying to cut down a tree in the middle of a forest. If the tree were out in an open meadow, there'd be no problem cutting it down. You'd simply decide which direction you wanted it to go and you'd cut it to fall in that direction. But in the forest you have to deal with all the branches that are entangled with the branches of the other trees. You have to cut them first before you can bring the tree down. In other words, if you find that your thoughts are entangling you with the world, you've got to learn how to think in ways that help disentangle you, that cut the intertwining branches, whether through seeing the negative side of the thoughts that are pulling you away, or actively replacing those negative thoughts with positive thoughts that incline the mind to see the value of the practice, to really feel the value of the practice, and to give you confidence in your ability to do the practice.

Today I asked several people about which stories about the Buddha's life they found most inspiring when they needed confidence and inspiration in the practice. And it was interesting to see how widely the stories varied. Some people were inspired by the Buddha's physical courage. Some were more inspired by his restraint as a teacher. Some were inspired by his psychic powers, his ability to deal with devas, brahmas, and Mara. Some were more inspired by his ability to deal with simple people. There's a great passage in the *Theragatha* where an outcaste person talks about his life. His job was to gather the old wilted flowers at shrines and throw them away, one of the lowliest occupations in India at that time. One day the Buddha comes up and simply stands in front of him. The guy tries to flatten himself against the wall behind him, to get out of the Buddha's way, but then he begins to realize that that's not why the Buddha's standing there. The Buddha wants to teach him. The Buddha takes on this outcaste as a student and teaches him to be an arahant.

There are lots of ways you can find inspiration in the life of the Buddha. You have to decide for yourself which story or incident you find most inspiring. The same with the Dhamma. The same with the Sangha. There are lots of possibilities there.

This is one way in which reading the Dhamma is useful. There's a tendency among some meditators to believe that reading gets in the way of your meditation. But reading about good examples reminds you that human beings can do this. There are human beings who've succeeded in the practice. There have been in the past and there can still be in the present moment. There's a tendency in modern literature to focus on antiheroes, people whose virtue lies in their being frank about their weaknesses—which is a kind of virtue, but not the whole story of virtue. For the sake of the practice, it's more useful to read about people who've succeeded in doing what's difficult. They're our friends from the

past. One of the definitions of true friends is that they give what is hard to give, do what is hard to do, sacrifice what is hard to sacrifice. They did that for us—not just for us personally, but for everybody in the future.

There's that great story about Ven. MahaKassapa. Toward the end of his life the Buddha calls in MahaKassapa and says, "Look, you've been living out in the wilderness, living off meager alms. You don't really need to do this anymore. You're an arahant now. Come and stay near me. Live a more comfortable life." MahaKassapa says, "No, I've been doing this all along, praising this sort of life. I want to keep this up as an example for the generations to come." In other words, he did that for us.

So think about that when things get difficult. There are people in the past who wanted to encourage us, wanted to see us get the same results from the practice that they got. Take heart from that. Only when you learn how to think skillfully in this way can you get the mind to a point where it's willing to stop thinking.

So remember: Not all thinking is bad. Not all fabrication is bad. You have to learn how to fabricate skillfully before you can let go of fabrication, and these are some of the ways you can do it.