

The Buddha's Rules of Order

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Life at the monastery has its rules and restrictions, and its physical limitations. Our accommodations are not as luxurious as they may be back home, but we have one luxury here that money can't buy, and that's time. In life in what they call the real world, time is hard to come by. When you come here, you've got whole days with very few responsibilities. Hour after hour after hour, you can simply be with your mind. It's a real luxury. So you want to make sure you don't waste it. You may have come here with the express purpose to practice meditation, but you sit down and find that your mind has a mind of its own. It's got other purposes and fills the time with all kinds of stories. It's as if you've got a committee in there, and all of a sudden some crazy person has taken the floor.

So it's good to know the Buddha's rules of order for how to manage a meeting like this. There are basically five approaches to keep the discussion on-topic.

The first rule is simply to note when it's gotten off topic. Remind yourself: You're here to be with the breath. You want to get to know the breath. And it's not just in and out. The breath has lots of ins and outs: in long, in short; in heavy, in light; in deep, in shallow, and the same with the outs. So it's something you want to explore. This helps you stay with the meditation. It's not simply a matter of tying the mind with the breath and giving it no reward. Remind yourself that the breath is the basic energy in your body, the energy of life. And the better that energy is, the better it's going to be both for your body and for the mind. It may be that the way you've been breathing normally is really not good for you. So you what to experiment. Try other ways of breathing. See what results you get. Learn how to read the results for yourself. That way, you can get absorbed in the breath without having to force it so much. That's the first rule of order.

When the conversation gets off topic, bring it back. If you want to talk about something, talk about the breath. Two factors of jhana, or right concentration, are directed thought and evaluation. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath: That's directed thought. Then watch it, be sensitive to it, and ask yourself: Could it be better? What kind of breathing would feel better right now? That's the beginning of evaluation.

Then you can evaluate further: Explore the sensations of breathing in all the different parts of the body. Try to be systematic about it. You can start at the back of the neck, you can start at the navel, any place where you find it easiest to stay focused for a while, then move on, on, on, till you've been through the whole

body, all the way down to the tips of fingers, all the way down to the tips of the toes. There's plenty to explore here.

Ajaan Lee compares it to having a doll to play with: lots of dolls. You've got the breath element, the fire element, the water element, the earth element—in other words, feelings of energy, warmth, coolness, solidity in the body. He says they're like four big dolls to play with. That should help keep the conversation on topic.

If it doesn't, and you find it veering off again and again and again to some particular obsession, remind yourself of the drawbacks of that obsession, what you gain from thinking about those things. Here you have all this time to meditate and you squander it on something that's actually bad for you. It can be like turning on the TV late at night with nothing better to do, and there's a pretty lousy movie on. You know it's a lousy movie but you watch it anyhow, because there's nothing else to do. Well, remind yourself. there's plenty else to do, better things to do.

When your thoughts involve anger, greed, or lust, remind yourself of the drawbacks of those attitudes, where they would lead you. If you kept with that train of thought for 24 hours, where would it take you? And most of these movies are movies you've seen many times before. You know the plot; you know how Humphrey Bogart is going to say. The problem is that your movies probably don't star Humphrey Bogart. They're the kind of movies that, if you had to pay money to see them, you wouldn't bother. And it sometimes they're actively bad for you.

So remind yourself, you've got better things to do. Sometimes it's helpful to look at exactly what gratification you do get out of that kind of thinking. Even if it seems obviously harmful, why do you like it? Why do you feed on it? What kind of nourishment do you hope to get from it? Watch it for a while, and you'll see that the nourishment is pretty miserable. It's really not worth the effort that goes into it. Then bring the conversation back on topic. That's the second rule of order.

The third rule of order is simply to ignore the thoughts. It's as if you've got a crazy person in the committee. You give him a place off in the corner of the room where he can expound his views, but you don't have to get involved with him. You can keep the rest of the meeting on topic, and you find that the crazy person thinking off in the corner, if you don't pay attention to it, you're not feeding it, begins to die out after a while, because there's no one listening. So even though there may be some background chatter in the mind, remind yourself that the breath is still here, still coming in, still going out. You can still feel it in the body. Try to be in the body as much you can, and in the mind as little as possible. Think of yourself melting down into the body so that you fill the chest, the stomach,

your legs, your arms, your fingers, your toes with awareness. Don't pull yourself up into the head where you're perched up on your shoulders like a strange bird looking down at the rest of the body. Be *in* the body. Allow the breath to bathe you. If there are going to be any patterns of thought, let them be off in the corner, but you don't have pay them any mind. That's the third rule of order.

The fourth rule of order is to realize that when you get involved in thinking like this, it uses a certain amount of energy in the body. You find patterns of tension that go flickering through your arms, your legs, different parts of your anatomy, and those patterns of tension are what help you keep that thought in mind. So when you find a particular pattern of thought coming back again and again and again, look for that area where the patterns of tension are, and then relax them. Let them loosen up, breathe into them, breathe around them, breathe through them, whatever you find helps to loosen them up. That's the fourth rule of order.

The fifth rule of order is to get the bailiff to come in and sit on the crazy person. In other words, you've tried all these other techniques and you've still got a crazy person in the committee who just will not yield the floor. As the Buddha says, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and remind yourself, "I will not think that thought." The analogy he gives is of a stronger man crushing down a weaker man. So get the bailiff to come in and pin the guy down.

Of all the different rules of order, this is the one that involves the least discernment and the most force of will. You'll find that it'll work only for a little while, but at least it gives you some space in the mind where you can get back to the breath. One you can think of the word *buddho*. You can even think of it very fast to jam the airwaves, in the same way they used to jam Radio Free Europe. Or you can think of it as being said by every cell in your body. Each time you breathe in, the whole body goes *bud-*; when you breathe out, the whole body goes *dho*. *Buddho*. Awake. It's the title of the Buddha—anything that'll jam the circuits for a while. Then after a while as you let up, see if the thought comes back. If it comes back again, well, just keep pumping in *buddho*.

If it doesn't come back, you've got some more space in the mind, so you can get back to the breath as you were before. Start exploring the breath again, and see where you lost it. Was it not comfortable enough, or was it so comfortable that you began to lose focus? Be careful about the comfort that comes up in the meditation when you finally get a sense of ease. Don't just wallow in it. Remember you've got work to do. So you're going to use the ease to give the mind a more solid foundation.

Those are the Buddha's rules of order to keep this committee in line, so that the crazy people in the mind, the vagrant intentions, don't take over the meeting, don't fill up your time, don't waste this luxury we have: all this time to watch the mind, to train the mind, to get the various committee members working together on a project that's really useful—developing the path, letting go of the cause of suffering so that you can realize what the cessation of suffering might be like.