

Resistance

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The chants we do in the evening, before the meditation, are meant to put you in the right frame of mind to do the meditation, pointing out skillful ways of thinking. Whether we're contemplating the body; issues of aging, illness, death, and karma; thoughts of goodwill; reflection on the nature of the world: All of these thoughts are designed to remind you of how important it is to meditate. They also remind you of your motivation for meditation. Whether you're here to find something solid in the midst of the world, or as an expression of goodwill, it's useful to remember — each time you sit down to meditate or do walking meditation — *why* you're doing it, the importance of what you're doing, so that you do it with an attitude of proper respect and attention. In other words, you don't just go through the motions. You don't treat it casually.

This is important work we're doing here — a point that's easy to forget. So we keep reminding ourselves, because thinking like this is an integral part of the meditation. People often believe that we're trying to learn how not to think, or trying to get the mind away from its conditioning simply by stopping any language from going through the mind. But the Buddha's instructions on meditation involve a lot of thinking, training the mind to think in skillful ways. But unlike psychotherapy — which tries to trace your thoughts back to their origins, where they're coming from in time — he focuses on where they're going, where they lead. Do they lead you where you want to go? And he gives some recommendations on ways of thinking that really help you go in the right direction.

As you carry through with his ways of thinking, part of your mind is going to rebel. For example, when you develop thoughts of goodwill there may be a little voice in the back of the mind saying, "Well, I don't really feel goodwill for these people." Or, "I don't give a damn about where my thoughts are leading, I want to think about *this*." Don't assume that the purpose of these exercises in directed thinking is to smother up those other thoughts, or to pretend they don't exist. Actually, the purpose of the exercises is to dig the problems up, bring them out into the open. If the question of how you think about the beings in the world isn't brought up, you can sail merrily along with all sorts of mixed motives, all sorts of mixed attitudes, not really being aware of what you're doing, or of how your attitudes are coming out in your actions.

Or if you have that apathetic feeling, "It doesn't really matter what I do, so I might as well just do what I like" — it's good to know that it's there. Then you can deal with it.

So if you find these argumentative thoughts coming up in your mind, take note of the fact. Ask yourself: Are you ready to dig into them? Are you strong

enough? If you aren't, you can continue with the meditation, leaving them for the time being, but at least you know they're there. This is important. As Ajaan Lee once said, to practice is to learn about your defilements, the things that hide under the surface and exert a lot of pressure and influence on your life, often without your knowing it. You're a lot better off knowing they're there, even if you can't quite deal with them yet. You're in a better position knowing they're there and that they'll have to be dealt with. Sometimes just bringing them to the surface is enough to make you realize that you don't want to identify with them.

If apathy comes up, you look at it. Do you really want to side with it? Look at the lives of other people who are apathetic. Where do they go? Or if a voice in your mind has ill will for this or that group of people: Is that a voice that you really want to identify with? Remember, you have the choice.

We're not here to hammer out our genuine opinions about things, to reach a final judgment on them. We're here to see where thinking goes and how to use our thinking in skillful ways. This is part of the training. It's like training for a marathon. Once you've made up your mind to run the marathon, you've got to deal with the thoughts in the mind that resist. Some of them you can simply push out of the way as being ludicrous or totally out of line with your real aspirations. Others you have to sit down with and work through. But the fact that you've made an aspiration is important. If you've decided that this is an aspiration you really want to hold to, you owe it to yourself to work through all of your resistance, because so many of us go through our lives aimlessly, without any kind of aspiration at all. Here, as we're meditating, we've got a big one: putting an end to suffering.

As the Buddha points out, in the course of training the mind you've got to learn to deal with skillful and unskillful thoughts – "skillful" meaning those that lead in the direction of putting an end to suffering; unskillful ones, those leading in the other direction. At least you've made it clear to yourself where you want to go. That, in and of itself, is an important accomplishment. Even if you haven't devoted yourself 100% in that direction, it's important at least that the issue is raised.

So many of us go through life without even thinking about where we're headed. We think about it a little bit here and there, but not in any concerted way, not in a way that makes us sit down and really look at our lives. For a lot of people, thinking about the general trajectory of their lives is pretty depressing, so they push the issue away. Big issues like aging, illness, and death get pushed off to the corner until they can no longer be pushed off. Then they come out at you with their eyes red and their fangs gleaming. You're not prepared to deal with them. Often they hit precisely when you're at your weakest point, flat on your back. If you haven't prepared for them, they come at you while you're down.

Here while you're meditating, at least, the issues are raised. You've got to ask yourself while you're healthy, while you're young enough, while you're still alive: What are you going to do to prepare for the time when aging, illness, and

death and separation move in? And you're actually given a course of practice, something to train in, to help you out when those things happen.

So, when you're given a practice – whether it's the precepts, or the contemplations that the Buddha recommends – it's not that you're going into denial, pretending that you don't want to break a precept, or pretending that you don't harbor feelings of ill will. These contemplations are meant more to raise the issue: Do you really believe that your actions are important? Do you really believe that it's important to act skillfully? Do you believe that your thoughts are important, that it's important to think skillfully? Take some time to probe into those questions, because they're central to your life. And don't let yourself get sucked in by the media out there. They'd rather that you not ask those questions, that you lead a very short-sighted life, so you'll be content just to buy their things.

So this is an act of resistance here. It's also an act of wisdom. When a particular reflection or contemplation brings up uncomfortable issues in the mind, realize that that's part of its purpose: to bring up those uncomfortable reactions, if they're there. If they're not there, you're fine. If they *are* there, you want to know. As I said, sometimes when they come up they just wither away in the light of your awareness. Other times you realize that they're like boulders that have been hidden under the water. The water has lowered a little bit, and now you see that there are boulders down there. You may not be in a position to dig them up, but at least you can avoid them for the time being, knowing that someday you're going to have to clear the channels.

In the meantime, you're alerted that you have to work on your tools – mindfulness, concentration, discernment – so that eventually you can dig out those boulders. Then they'll no longer be in the way.