

Keep the Mind from Wandering

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The mind's tendency is to wander—that's what the word *samsara* means. Samsara is not a place. It's an activity, something the mind does. We think of it mainly as what the mind does as it goes from one life to the next, but it's a basic principle in the Buddha's teachings that the larger patterns can be seen here in the smaller patterns: what the mind is doing from one moment to the next—and particularly how it goes from one, what they call in Pali, *bhava*, or state of being, to the next. These are little worlds in the mind.

Why does the mind wander? Because it doesn't like where it is. But its wandering is pretty aimless. If you made a map of where your mind went today, what would the lines like? They'd be scribbled all over the place. They'd look like a bird's nest. And what did you get out of your wanderings? A little pleasure, a little pain, but the fact that the mind has to keep creating these places where it's going means that there's stress built into the whole process. What the Buddha proposes you do is that you learn how to settle down in the present moment. Even though this is a *bhava* as well—it's a state of being—it's one that's already here.

And when you stay right here, you get to see the processes in action. In other words, to keep you from floating off into other little worlds, the Buddha has you fully inhabit the world of your body right here. The steps of breath meditation start out by being aware of short breathing and long breathing. Then, once you get sensitive to the breathing, the next step is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out, and then to calm the breathing process. In other words, try to make it comfortable. Make this enlarged sense of the mind your home, filling the sense of the body, with the breath easy coming in, easy going out, whatever breath is most suited for the needs of the body right now.

Experiment to see what that is. If you're feeling sleepy, you may want to use heavier breathing to keep you awake. If you're feeling tense, you want to try more relaxed breathing, gentler breathing. In other words, explore the potentials of what you've got right here, right now, and adjust them to suit your current needs.

One of the basic concepts in the Buddha's teachings is *dhatu*, sometimes translated as element, sometimes translated as potential or property. "Potential" is probably the closest meaning. In your sense of the body, there's a potential to feel movement or energy. That's the breath or the wind element. There's the potential for cool sensations, the potential for warm sensations, the potential for heavy sensations. The potentials you focus on are the ones that tend to get emphasized,

that tend to be stirred up—the Pali word is “provoked.” The potential was lying there very still or in a subtle form, and as you focus on it, you amplify it. We tend to do this in a very unskillful way because we’ve never thought about it systematically. We’ve never really explored it to see what can be done in order to master these different potentials.

That’s one of the things you do as you meditate. You start out with the breath element—the potential for breath in the whole body, a sense of movement, a sense of energy that fills the nerves, that fills the blood vessels all the way out to the pores. And what kind of awareness emphasizes that? Try to think of the body, just your awareness of the body, as all breath; every sensation as a variety of breathing or breath energy. It might be still breath, moving breath, either related to in-and out breath or just something that’s constantly there, of its own. Ajaan Lee makes a distinction between the *visiting breath*, which is the in-and out breath, and the *inhabiting breath*, the energy potentials that are there all the time.

What you do as you focus is that you tend to emphasize one potential over another. So try to learn how to fine-tune your focus, so that you’re emphasizing breath sensations that have the potential for ease and comfort. In other words, learn how to make the present moment a good place to stay. This is going to be your home for a while, so clear it up, decorate it nicely. Get a sense of how to inhabit the body in a comfortable way.

You can feel more and more at ease here, more and more familiar with the terrain, knowing where your spot is in the body—in other words, which parts of the body are like nodes in the energy system. You focus on the nodes and you’re in touch with a whole system. Then the mind can calm down more easily, feel more refreshed, more energized. Once you know those spots, then you can go there anytime, so that you can tap into that sense of ease, the sense of fullness that comes when the breath energy potentials are all activated throughout the body, in a way that feels refreshing, in a way that feels really absorbing.

Once you’ve got this sense of being at home, then you can change your relationship to all those other worlds that you’ve tended to wander through. You see them as isolated events, like little balloons going through your head. And do you want to follow those balloons? Sometimes they land in all kinds of strange places.

I was reading a while back about the people who go ballooning in Temecula. They head up into the air and they don’t really know where they’re going to land. And they actually have more control over their balloons than we have over the balloons over our minds. So when you start looking at the different worlds that you could inhabit, when you know how to look at them from the outside—i.e.,

look at them from this position of being fully at home in the body—you're in a much better position to decide which balloons are worth getting involved with, and which ones are not, which ones are worth encouraging and which ones are not. Each of these balloons is also a type of potential, so which potentials do you want to focus on and develop, and which ones are not going to be really helpful, useful in any way at all?

Once you've developed a sense of rapture here, as the Buddha said, that's your food. Not only do you have a home here but you've also got a source of food in your home. Then you look at all the other places that the mind likes to go feeding, and you realize you don't really get much out of them. If you're a homeless person, you end up feeding off garbage, feeding off scraps that other people have thrown away. It's not very good for you. But you're now in a position where you have a better home, better food, and can just lose interest in other people's scraps. Simply training the mind to have a good solid base of concentration like this is one step in learning how to lose interest in the other things that you used to feed on.

That's what's meant by *nibbida*: disenchantment, disgust, however you translate it. "Disgust" in the sense that it used to be food you liked, but now you've got something better, and you just don't want to go back there. Like the cat I mentioned this afternoon: I had a cat in college and I fed it oatmeal. One summer I went home and I left it with some friends. And the friends fed it good cat food. When I came back that fall, I took the cat back and tried to feed it oatmeal, and it refused to eat it. It knew there was better food in this world. In the same way, your mind, when it's better fed through meditation, loses its interest in a lot of those other worlds. This is the discernment that comes through the practice of concentration.

Ultimately, you get to the point where you have to learn how to outgrow the food even in the concentration, but until you reach that point—and it's going to quite a while before you reach that point—learn to appreciate the food you've got here, the potential home you've got here, the potential comfort, the potential for all these different elements in the mind that you can focus on and learn how to maximize when you need them.

Once you're more purposeful in taking advantage of this potential home here in the body, you can also be more purposeful in your wanderings in the times when you do need to think about other things, plan for the future, recollect the past. As for the thought balloons that just float aimlessly around, you just let them go. When you don't focus on those potentials, they just pass.

This way there is a lot more usefulness, a lot to gain from your comings and goings and your stayings right here. So as long as the mind must inhabit

something, learn how to inhabit what you've got here. As Ajaan Lee used say, you've got this field here. It can grow all kinds of crops, so don't go around trying to grow crops in other people's fields. Don't go trying to grow crops in the sky. You've got a good field here with good soil. Make the most of it.

When you've got a good home with good food, you find yourself much less inclined to wander aimlessly around. That cuts through a lot of unnecessary suffering right there. It also means that when the time comes that you're actually facing death, you'll have practiced. You won't just go wandering off into whatever pops into your mind. It's an important skill. It's an important thing to remember. This process of wandering around in your thoughts is precisely what has caused you to wander around from one life to the next. So if you master the process now and learn to bring it at least under some control, that skill will serve you in good stead, even in the most difficult situations in life.