

Diagnosing the Mind

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There's a phrase you often encounter in the teachings of the forest ajaans, that when you sit down to meditate, make sure that your mind is standing upright, not leaning forward or leaning back, leaning to the left or leaning to the right. Leaning forward or back means you're focusing either on the future or on the past. You want to look right in the present moment. Leaning to the left or to the right means you're either indulging in sensual pleasures or you're tormenting yourself with the things you're thinking about. The point is, if you see yourself leaning in any direction, you don't leave yourself leaning there. You do something about it. If you're leaning to the past, remind yourself that the past is gone. There's nothing you can do to go back and change it or to bring what was past into the present. If there's anything good in the past, especially in your meditation, it's not going to be found by thinking about the past. It's going to be found by focusing on the present moment.

As for your concerns about the future, you have no idea what's going to happen, aside from a few general things: aging, illness, and death. But what you do know is that if the mind is prepared, it's going to be able to face those things without having to suffer. And the preparation will come from where? It'll come from developing mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment here in the present moment. As for moods that you like or don't like, as the Buddha said those are off the path. You want to get the mind right here watching, to pull out of those moods. We tend to think of our moods, especially our emotions, as a given—that that's who we really are. But they're just as fabricated and as arbitrary as anything else. So there's no need to stay stuck in them.

The same thing applies to other types of imbalance in the mind: too much energy, too little energy. You've got to think of the antidotes. When the mind is too energetic, one way of dealing with it is to give it lots to think about—lots to think about in terms of the breath. Focus on the details, move around, watch the breath energy in different parts of the body. Get really precise, down to the joints of your fingers, the joints of your toes, trying to see if there's any part in the body that you haven't covered. Keep this up until the mind is ready to settle down.

Strangely enough, the same tactic sometimes works when you're feeling sluggish. If you find yourself dozing off or getting very dull if you focus on the breath, move around. Two breaths in this spot, two breaths in that spot, keep chasing the breath around the body until you wake up.

What this comes down to is learning how to diagnose yourself. Remember, the Buddha talked of himself as being a doctor for the diseases of the mind. What he's training us to do is to be doctors for our own diseases, our own defilements, our own lack of balance. Your basic skills as a doctor are, one, learning how to diagnose the disease and two, having the appropriate medicine, the appropriate antidote. That means having a full range of medicines to draw on. If you went to a doctor and the doctor had only one medicine, you'd have to find a new doctor. The same as a meditator: You've got to learn how to read your mind, see what it needs, and be able to draw on a wide variety of treatments.

We take the breath as our basic tonic. But sometimes you have other diseases that can't be taken care of by that tonic, so you've got to look around. Look at the state of the mind and realize you have a wide range of antidotes to draw on. It's good not to be too doctrinaire, that you have to be very still or very active all the time, or that you have to simply sit there and watch whatever comes up. The Buddha never taught that. After all, there are four kinds of right effort. If unskillful things are happening in the mind, you try to abandon them and to keep them from coming back. As for skillful qualities, you try to give rise to them and then keep them there and get them to develop even further. So you're not just sitting here, noting just whatever comes up, because what that does is that it blinds you to the fact that there's a lot of fabrication going on under the surface.

So as long as there's fabrication, you might as well fabricate things in a skillful direction. That gives you insight into how the process of fabrication works. You can work with the breath. You can work with what you're thinking about. If you're having issues with somebody, try spreading a little goodwill first to yourself, to remind yourself that sitting here stewing about the issue is not helping you. You're the one who's suffering at the moment. Then have some goodwill for all the people involved in the issue.

That can often change the dynamic, to help pull you out—or, at the very least, help you get out of the issue for the time being. Sometimes it's worth thinking through but if you find that trying to think through the issue isn't helping things, isn't getting any clearer, then you can tell yourself you're not up for this yet. You put it aside. It's not that you're running away. You're just learning to choose your battles: when you're going to fight them and when you're going to take a strategic retreat.

Sometimes to see an issue more clearly, instead of thinking it through, just get very, very still. As we were saying today, to see things clearly, you have to be still. And the purpose of seeing things is to help the mind get even more still. All too often, our thinking goes off in different associations and wanders around and

travels to who knows where. You've got to be more in control of your thinking. The purpose of thinking in meditation, the purpose of discernment, is to help the mind get more and more still, to deeper levels of stillness, more secure levels of stillness, so that you can see deeper into the mind, so that areas the mind that tend to be hidden start coming up to the surface. Especially as your alertness gets more and more quick, you begin to see levels of decision going on in the mind that you hadn't seen before. This requires a lot of stillness but also a lot of alertness.

The image Ajaan Khamdee uses is of a hunter who, on the one hand, has to be very, very still so as not to scare off the rabbits and other animals, but at the same time very alert, to hear the slightest noise the animals are making, so that you gain a sense of when they're coming.

It's the same with observing the mind. You've got to get very still to observe it. But it's a balanced stillness, both still and alert. If you find you're having trouble getting into balance, ask yourself: Which part is missing? The stillness? The alertness? The ability to pose questions? And then try to compensate.

They've done studies showing that decisions often get made in the mind very early on in the perception process. Yet the conscious mind, coming in slightly later, thinks it's making the decision. Actually what it's doing is ratifying decisions that it's already made. This doesn't mean we don't have free will, that everything is on automatic pilot, although many of us do leave things on automatic pilot. But it means it doesn't have to be. If you're meditating and get very quick, you begin to see these things more and more quickly. You can bring what's hidden in the mind up to the surface.

That's the state of balance we're trying to achieve. So you look at your mind as it is right now, as you've been fabricating it, and ask yourself: Is this the state of mind that's going to help see things more clearly? Or is there something missing, something out of balance? Learn how to diagnose the mind and then use whatever medicine you can think of.

Sometimes it requires learning to take a different topic for your meditation for a while, like goodwill, equanimity, any of the brahmaviharas. Or you can use contemplation of death, or what they call the four guardian meditations. There's recollection of the Buddha, which is for encouragement, to inspire you to practice; development of goodwill, when you're dealing with anger; contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body if lust is a problem; and contemplation of death when you're feeling lazy. Again, you have to notice when the medicine is working, and what medicine is appropriate for you.

Usually it's best to do any of these four in moderation, as ways of bringing the mind back to the present moment with the right attitude, with the right level of

energy, and then drop them and get back to the breath. Then you can use the breath in various ways. There's the soothing breath; there's the energizing breath. If you find yourself focused on the breath and it's getting dull, well, try some deep breathing for a while. See what that does to wake things up.

I remember years back, one of Ajaan Fuang's students who had lost track of him: She had no idea where he had gone, but tracked him down, finally located him in Rayong, and came to see him. After that first evening's meditation, he said, "Look, you've been using the cool breath all the time. This isn't good for you." In other words, if you've been focusing on making the breath very refined, very still, it's not really good for the body to have that kind of breathing going on 24 hours a day. So even though it may feel less relaxing, you may have to do some deep breathing, to stir things up again. Energize things. Provide the body with what it needs. And bring the mind into balance.

There's the kind of breath that clears the unhealthy breath energy out of the body and there's the kind of breathing that nourishes the body. Just as there are different kinds of medicine, there are different kinds of breathing. So you have to learn how to read the breath energy in the body, learn how to read the mind. In other words, you've got to exercise your diagnostic powers so that you can learn to see what you need and then provide what the body and the mind need to bring everything into balance.

This way, you learn how to become your own doctor. There's nobody who can stand over your shoulder and say, "Now you breathe this way, now you breathe that way, now you focus on this, you'd better drop that." If there were somebody doing that and they were accurate, they would scare you—that somebody could read your mind that accurately. What you want is to learn how to read it yourself that accurately. It's going to take time, but it means having a very broad attitude towards the practice, not being doctrinaire, that things have got to be this way or that way, or that you have only one technique you're going to hold on to all the time.

This is why the Johnnie-one-note attitude toward meditation is not really helpful. As I said, it's like a doctor who knows only one medicine or one type of treatment. It may be good for one particular kind of disease, but the mind has many diseases, many ways of going out of balance. So even though we take the breath as our main topic here, remember you have other medicines as well. Even the main tonic has its variations.

Remember the story of Ajaan Chah. One of his students went to him one time and complained that Ajaan Chah was giving contradictory advice to different people. And as Ajaan Chah replied, sometimes you see people going down the

road and they're veering off to the right, so you have to say, "Go left, go left." Other people are veering off the left, so you say, "Go right, go right." So don't listen just to the words. Look at what's happening to see why those words are appropriate. That's one way of learning some diagnostic powers.

Another way, of course, is learning how to look at your mind. Try different approaches if things aren't working well. If things *are* working well, learn how to maintain them, keep them going.

Remember, there are four types of right effort: abandoning, preventing, developing, maintaining. So it's good to figure out what's appropriate at any one particular time. A useful sutta to read is Majjhima 2, where the Buddha talks about seven different types of right effort. One of the really useful pairs there is tolerating and avoiding. On the one hand, he says that if pains come up that you have to bear, you learn how to tolerate them, you learn to endure them. But at the same time, you learn how to avoid unnecessary pain, unnecessary difficulties. In other words, if you see a cesspool right in the middle of your path, you don't walk through it just because you've decided you're going to walk that path. You walk around it.

Learn how to apply this principle to the mind. There are times when a certain mental state or certain emotions come up, and you're not required to sit there and endure them. Give the mind something else to think about. Give it reasons for dropping that particular emotion. It's not that that you're avoiding the reality, because after all, as I said earlier, the reality is fabricated. And you can learn an awful lot about the process of fabrication by fabricating new ways of breathing, new ways of thinking about things, new things to focus on things, developing alternative feelings, i.e., feelings of pleasure through the breath, so that the mind is not sunk in a funk. You learn how to avoid unnecessary trouble. In doing so, you've learned an awful lot about how the mind works, how the principle of fabrication works.

So learn how to read the mind. Learn how to diagnose its illnesses, its imbalances. Remember that there are lots of medicines you can draw on, and your skill as a doctor lies in learning which disease and which imbalance requires which treatment. How do you learn that? By reading. By listening. And you especially learn this by applying different tactics to your mind, coming up with different strategies, and reading the results. You make mistakes, but then you learn from your mistakes. That's how discernment is developed.