

Blowing Bubbles

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One of the first instructions you get in practicing concentration is that if you notice you've wandered away from the breath, try to come back as quickly as possible. And just because it's a basic instruction early on doesn't mean that it's something to forget later on in the practice. It really is important because you not only strengthen your concentration, but you also gain insight into your thoughts as you try to drop them.

Some people think that you have to stay with a thought for a long time, watch it, and analyze it, to really understand it, but that's not always the case. You learn about the process of thinking by dropping it, because in the course of dropping it you see what little strings are left. It's like cutting a lotus stem. You pull one part away from the other part, but there are very fine strands connecting the two parts for a while. In the same way, there are little strands in your thoughts that will try to hold you there. As you try to cut them, they complain. That's when you begin to understand, "This is what made that thought so interesting or attractive." You don't have to stay with the thought to understand the process of why the mind is getting involved with these things. You actually learn a lot by cutting things away as quickly as possible.

When the mind is churning out thoughts, it's like a child playing with soap bubbles. You blow the bubbles and they float away, and you want to get into the soap bubble and float away with it because the bubble contains all these interesting swirling patterns of color. You want to see how far you can go with it. Yet all of the bubbles burst. When some of them burst, it's not all that bad, because they burst low to the ground over a patch of grass. But some of them really can give you a lot of trouble. They burst high up in the air over a patch of thorns, and there you are: plunked down hard on the thorns.

So you want to understand this process of bubble-blowing without getting into the bubbles. You're looking at the process, and all the Buddha's ways of dealing with distracting thoughts give you insight into these processes.

The first one is simply that if you notice you've picked up an unskillful object, you drop it. Replace it with a more skillful one. This emphasizes the point that you really do have a choice. You're not stuck with whatever comes up in the mind.

Lots of different things could come up, and you learn to choose the things that are most skillful. That's an important lesson in kamma right there. There are lots of different potentials that could come up at any moment, and you have the ability to choose which ones you're going to emphasize. So that's an insight: Just because a thought has come into the mind doesn't mean that you have to live with it; you can pull out immediately.

The second technique is to think about the consequences of unskillful thinking. You find that something keeps coming back again and again and again even when you try to drop it. So you ask yourself, "Where is this going to lead me? If I stayed with it for a long period of time, what would I end up doing?" You think about the thought in whatever ways you can that make you realize you don't want to go with it; it's a waste of time. One of my favorite techniques is to ask yourself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to see it?" But it goes deeper than that. If you were to think about lust for days on end, where would it take you? If you think about anger for days on end, where is it going to take you? Nowhere good. So why get involved with it at all? You learn to step back and realize that your thoughts really do have consequences. You don't want to encourage them just because they're fun to be with for a while. The consequences can be really bad. That's another insight you get into kamma.

The technique where you simply ignore them: The thoughts can be chattering away, but you don't have to go chattering with them. You don't even have to try to shut them up. This gives you some insight into the committee of the mind, realizing there are lots of different selves and lots of different becomings—lots of different bubbles are being blown all the time. And again, just because something is there, you don't have to go with it. You don't have to get involved. Sometimes the thought will try to get you involved simply by being so

outrageous that you try to stop it—and it's got you. You're already sucked into the bubble. So instead, you stay on the outside.

The technique of relaxing a thought formation: When you get sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to realize that when a thought arises in the mind there's going to be a little marker in the body, a spot of tension that you use to remind yourself, "Okay, this is the thought I'm going to stay with." When you notice that a thought comes in, but there's a pattern of tension—say, in your arm, your shoulder, or some place in your stomach—if you see that they arise together, try to dissolve that pattern of tension with the breath. And the thought will go away because it has nothing to act as its foothold.

This gives you some insight into the way things happening in the body are connected with things happening in the mind. In fact, the more quickly you see this connection, the more quickly you get to the point where there's just a little stirring in your range of awareness—and it's hard to say whether it's mental or physical—but the mind makes a decision: "Okay, this is a thought about x." And then you go riding with the thought. That happens fairly early on in the process, and the more quickly you can drop the thought, the more clearly you'll see that stage in the process. So, as soon as there's any kind of stirring, you just breathe right through it, breathe right through it, and that prevents a lot of these thoughts from arising.

The Buddha's fifth technique is where, when nothing else works, you put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, clench your teeth, and just tell yourself, "I'll crush my mind with my mind." In other words, "I won't let that thought come up." Or you can repeat a meditation word very quickly—buddho, buddho, buddho—to jam the airways. This, of all the methods, uses the least discernment. But it teaches you an important lesson, which is that as your meditation progresses, it's not the case that you'll never need basic methods like this ever again. Just because one method seems gross or coarse, it's not the case that once you've gone to the sixth grade, you can forget what you learned in the first grade. Sometimes you have to bring your first grade lessons to use in the sixth grade.

It's the same with meditation. Sometimes the really gross techniques are the only ones that are going to work, and you can't say, "My mind is now getting more and more refined. I can't use those any more," or "It's a regression to use those techniques." Don't think in that way. Use whatever you've got to use. This is an important lesson in discernment as well.

So the ability to drop a thought very quickly is an important part of developing both concentration and discernment. A bubble gets blown and you watch it from the outside; you don't get inside it. You see the process of bubble-blowing. You begin to understand it. You stop it more and more quickly as you understand where it's coming from. Otherwise, you get engrossed in the colors of the bubbles and you want to get in—especially when the thoughts are about Dhamma. You can give yourself a whole Dhamma discourse while you're sitting here. In other words, you're not really looking at the breath. You're going off in some Dhamma bubble.

Regardless of what the content of the thought is, you want to become able to pull yourself out, because the real understanding is an understanding of the process—how these things happen. The content is pretty irrelevant. It's in seeing the process that you actually gain discernment. And again, the best way to see the process is to try to stop it as quickly as you can. Get back to the breath. You'd be surprised what you learn by simply doing that.