

Don't Believe Everything You Think

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You've probably had the experience where you're dreaming—and it can be an awful dream or a dream that's very perplexing or presents you with some challenges—and then suddenly you recognize: You're dreaming. You can wake up. You drop all the challenge and the perplexity, and you're out. It was because you were *in* the dream that the problem loomed so large, but once you're out, you realize it was nothing.

That's one of the things that mindfulness can do for you: mindfulness, of course, being the ability to remember. When you catch yourself in a strange perception, you can remind yourself, *"I don't have to be there! I don't have to believe this. I can step out of it."* Now, you'll have to have a place to step out *to*, which is why we have the breath as our focus. The breath is basically a physical phenomenon, but it's very close to the mind and it's your mind's anchor in the present moment. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present. When you're with the breath, you can watch the thoughts coming into the mind and not get sucked into them—unless, of course, you leave the breath, in which case you're going to need mindfulness to remind you to get out if it's a bad place to be.

So try to keep the breath as your anchor. Remember that this is your normal place to be: the sensation of the breath coming in, coming out. And allow the breath to be normal, too. It may take a while sometimes to get a sense of what normal breathing is, but once you know it, you can call it to mind. Then even though hormones of anger or whatever it may be shouting in your ears,

you don't have to believe them. You can still breathe in a normal way. And bit, by bit, by bit, that'll gradually bring everything else back to normalcy.

As the Buddha said, there are two things that really fashion your state of mind: One is feelings and the other is perceptions. Perceptions, here, are the images you hold in mind, be it a word or a mental picture—the words here being just basic concepts before they even turn into sentences. These are the things that shape our state of mind. Sometimes you find yourself in a good mood and you can trace it back to a particular feeling in the body or particular set of perceptions in the mind. The same applies to bad moods.

So you want to be able to look at your perceptions to see if anything unusual is coming in, especially anything abnormal, anything that's going to create problems, so you can know how to step out. This means, as I already said, having a place to step out to, and also having some alternative perceptions you can bring in mind. Many of your strange perceptions, when they come, are very believable—because you're used to believing them. But if you look at them from a different angle, they become something totally other. They don't carry that same weight, the same quality of being convincing.

Years back when I was staying at the monastery in Thailand, someone left a book of science fiction stories. There was one that I really liked. It was about a group of people who were going to do battle with what was basically a huge electric force-field fence that had been set up around one part of the universe by a race of people in another galaxy who were extremely advanced and then had found themselves trapped by their own fence. So they'd been

sending messages to Earth, first to show how really advanced they were and then asking for help. “Can you help get us out of this place? Now that we’ve improved your technology, improved your science with all the information we’ve been sending in our messages, can you use it to get us out of this place?”

So the people of Earth sent a rocket of very advanced scientists, all the best ones they could find, and they found an old woman to be the janitor. As they approached the electronic fence, the captain in charge of the mission met with the scientists to listen to their various proposals for getting through the fence—all the best proposals all the best scientists had given—and then he shredded them apart, showed how poorly reasoned they were and how impossible it would be to carry them out.

Then the next thing they knew, all the electricity in the rocket went out. What had happened was that the crucial person on the mission was not any of the scientists, it was that old woman who was a janitor. Apparently they had just found her as she was about to commit suicide because she had decided she didn’t believe in anything at all. The one thing she did believe in was science, so they brought her along. When she got to witness all the scientists’ theories being torn apart, she decided she didn’t believe anything at all. So the captain put her in a pod and she went through the electronic force-field fence. And in going through it, she destroyed the whole thing. It was because she didn’t believe in it that she was able to get through it.

So you have to use that determination: *You don’t have to believe everything you think*. Your power of not believing it, your power of skepticism, is what will get you through. Something comes up in the mind and it may seem really convincing, but if you realize that

it's having a bad impact on the mind, there *must* be something wrong with it. You need to be able to doubt that it's true.

Have your conviction instead in the breath; have your conviction in the Dhamma. Make that kind of conviction as strong as you can, because that helps you get past all the perceptions in the mind that might pull you away from the practice or lead to unfortunate mental states that could get you worse and worse and worse.

So use your breath to return to your place of normalcy, a place to return to your senses, whenever your perceptions are getting strange.