

The Long-distance Meditator

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Everything you experience is rooted in desire, and because our desires are all over the place, it means our experiences are all over the place, too. If we want to accomplish something, we have to learn how to bring some order to our desires, to have a set of priorities—what’s most important, what’s less important—and learn how to stick to those priorities. That’s what determination is all about.

In the autobiographies of the ajaans, they talk a lot about determination. Usually it seems to have to do with times when they put forth a special effort, “special effort” meaning an especially energetic effort. But there’s another kind of special effort which also underlies the practice, and actually is more important. That’s the effort that you stick with it.

On the days when you feel like practicing, you practice; on the days when you don’t feel like practicing, you practice. When things are going well, you practice; when things are not going well, you practice. That stick-to-itiveness requires all of the qualities that the Buddha said go into a good determination, starting with discernment.

Most of us are like sprinters in our practice. We put forth extra effort for a while, and then we collapse, rest for a while, and then we put forth some more effort, and then rest. Instead, we have to think of ourselves as long-distance meditators, like long-distance runners. We’re in this for the long haul. We have to learn how to pace ourselves, to figure out what kind of effort we can maintain on a consistent basis, and then stick with it.

Ajaan Fuang made a comment one time—it’s a pun in Thai: The practice is *ryang nit tae tawng tham pen nit*. The practice is something small, but it’s something you have to do consistently. The word *nit* can have both meanings—small and consistent. The practice is something small in that all you’re really asked to do is be aware of your body. The hard part is keeping your awareness rooted right here.

As you go through the day, both as you’re doing formal meditation and as you’re *not* doing formal meditation, you want to be right here. Have a sense of the breath energy in the body, and be sensitive to when it feels good, as you breathe in, breathe out. That’s not asking very much, but for it to have some power you have to stick with it. Otherwise it just becomes one more thing you think about in the course of the day.

You want to make this your home base. Keep reminding yourself that you're never far away from it. Even when your thoughts go far, far away, they're thoughts that you're thinking in the present moment, right here right now. When you can make that switch from the content of the thought to the fact of the thought, or the activity of the thought—then right next to the activity of the thought is the breath.

So no matter how far your thoughts may roam through the universe, it doesn't take much to bring them back to the breath. Think of it that way: You're not having to haul the mind back for miles and miles. There's nothing heavy that you have to drag. You're just moving your attention, changing your frame of reference, and then learning how to keep your frame of reference right here.

This is why the Buddha talks again and again and again of establishing mindfulness. Once it's established, then you've got to *keep* it established.

This has a lot to do with learning how to talk to yourself, which is another aspect of discernment. If your mind obeys only when you come down really hard on it, it's going to look for times to slip away, because you can't come down hard on yourself all the time. The mind will rebel.

Or if it's a matter of learning how to read what your mind needs, think of the different kinds of horses that the horse trainer told the Buddha about. There are the horses that respond only to gentle treatment, there are the horses that respond only to harsh treatment, and there are those that respond to a combination of harsh and gentle treatment. As the Buddha said, meditators are the same. For most of us, it's a combination of harsh and gentle—learning how to be encouraging when you need to be encouraged, learning how to be strict when the mind is beginning to get lazy—but not so strict that you get discouraged.

Think of the verbs they used to describe how the Buddha taught: He instructed, urged, roused, and encouraged. His instruction was basically giving information, but also coming down hard when he needed to. But then there's urging, rousing, encouraging—lifting your spirits, telling you that you're going to benefit from this, and you can do this.

So look at how you talk to yourself and see what the mind responds to. Teach it to respond to gentle encouragement, because that's the kind of inner voice that can keep you at the practice in-out, in-out, up and down, keeping your mind on an even keel when everything else is going in and out and up and down.

Discernment here covers all the other qualities of good determination as well, because you

need to be discerning in how to be true to your determination, how to stick with it. You need to be discerning in what you're going to have to give up. As the mind wants to wander around, thinking about this, thinking about that, ask yourself: How many times have you been thinking about these things? How many lifetimes have you allowed your mind to wander? Isn't it time for something new?

Be discerning in seeing what the mind is like, when it stays comfortably in the present moment and can watch itself in the present moment. And, of course, discerning in how you calm the mind down when it begins to rebel.

So determination is a matter of combining discernment with effort.

Think about the Buddha's image of the lute player tuning the strings of his lute. You see what level of energy you have, and then you make sure to put in at least that much energy. There will be times when the body is sick, you're feeling weak, and you can't expect yourself to put in the same number of hours or the same amount of pressure on your practice as you can when you're feeling healthy. So you adjust the way you talk to yourself, but you don't give up.

There's a book we have floating around in the monastery about how to swim. The reason we have it is because it gives very good instructions on the right attitude to take toward a practice that you're going to stick with for a long period of time. One of its instructions is that even on days when you don't have a lot of time to put into swimming practice, for the few minutes that you *do* put in, make sure your form is correct.

So when you're feeling sick, make sure the form of your meditation is correct, that you're with the breath. It doesn't require that much to breathe comfortably, one breath, then two breaths, then the next breath, then the next breath. As Ajaan Fuang said, "It's a little thing, but you stick with it. Do it continually."

It's in the continuity that you begin to learn new things about yourself. Because the mind does have this tendency to jump around. It goes from one state of becoming to another, and there's a little blanking out between the states. A lot of things go on during that blanking out, and you want to be able to see them. So you need this quality of continuity in your focus, continuity in your attention, if you want to see the things that are going on inside. After all, everything you need to know is happening right here. It's simply that you're not watching carefully; you allow yourself to get distracted. The mind puts down a curtain, and you're content to be blinded to what's going on as it points your attention someplace else.

It's like an arrow that's pointing in one direction. Think about that koan about the finger

pointing to the moon. They usually say, “Well, you don’t look at the finger, you’re supposed to look at the moon.” But you should ask yourself, “Why is your mind pointing at the moon? Why is it putting up that finger pointing away from itself?” That’s what you have to look into.

You’ll see that only if you develop the talent to be as continuous as possible in the practice. Whatever waves may wash over you, they wash away. You don’t let yourself get drowned, because you realize there’s part of the mind that’s larger than any wave that can come at it. And that’s all it is: just a wave. It comes and it goes. Your awareness, remind yourself, is larger—larger than anything the world can throw at it.

So don’t make it small. Don’t allow it to be covered up with curtains or deceived by arrows. Right here is where everything is going to happen, so you want to be continually aware right here and not get distracted. And learn to develop this quality of a long-distance meditator. We’re in this for the long haul.

Look at the way you talk to yourself. When you find that you’ve wandered off, remind yourself: *It’s just a little thing to move back to the breath.*

Wherever your thoughts may go, the thought itself is right next to the breath. That way, it’s no big deal to come back, and it doesn’t require a lot of browbeating, just a little nudge. If you learn how to keep on nudging, nudging, nudging yourself in this way, you can stay on course.