

## *Tranquility & Insight*

*November 12, 2022*

Focus on your breath. Breathe as deeply as you can. And notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Let that be your anchor. If deep breathing feels good, keep it up; if not, you can change. You can try shallower breathing, faster, slower, shorter, longer. Ajaan Lee recommends sometimes trying in short, out long, or in long, out short: whatever way of breathing seems to bring you a sense of balance so that you can stay in the present moment continually—because if you want to understand your mind, you have to watch it continually right here.

There are things you can learn by reflecting on how you used to think about things, and the results that came from those thoughts—the intentions that you acted on and the results of those actions. But all too often our memories of the past are colored by other things. If you want direct knowledge, you have to watch your mind right here, right now. So, the breath is a good way of anchoring you in the present. There's no future breath you can watch, no past breath you can watch. When you're with the sensation of breathing, you're in the present moment.

Of course, the question is, *Why do you want to be in the present moment?* Well, it's to see your mind in action. We talk about having conviction. Conviction in the Buddha's awakening basically means conviction in our own power to act, and the power that our actions can have in shaping our lives. We want to make the most of that power. And it's all happening right here, right now.

We look at our minds and realize that we ordinarily act on all kinds of intentions: We have wise thoughts and unwise thoughts; perceptive, unperceptive; and we have to learn how to make a distinction between those.

As the Buddha himself said, he got on the path when he could divide his thoughts into two types: On the one hand, there were thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. On the other, there were thoughts imbued with renunciation, non-ill will, harmlessness. And he learned to step back from his thoughts. This is important. There's a mental process called meta-cognition, where the mind can watch the mind, and can judge where your thoughts are coming

from, what kind of mental attitude they're coming from, and then, where they lead you. Whether you like them or not is not the issue, it's where they lead.

If they lead to a good place, the Buddha said you can encourage those thoughts. If they lead to a bad place, you have to discourage them. He made a comparison with a cowherd. During the rainy season, the cowherd has to keep careful watch over the cows because otherwise they get into the rice fields, eat up the rice, and then there'll be issues with the owners of the fields. So, if any thoughts are unskillful, he said, you beat them back in the same way the cowherd would beat back his cows.

Now, we ordinarily don't hear that, here in the West. Usually, it's, "You should just learn how to accept what comes up in the mind. Be okay. Be non-reactive."

Well, there's skillful reaction and unskillful reaction. Unskillful reaction is when you get all upset, "How can I be such a horrible person to think horrible thoughts like this?" Remember that the fact that a thought appears in your mind is not a reflection of you as a person. It's just old karma. We all have good old karma and bad old karma, a big mix of it.

Or you could think of it in Ajaan Lee's image: All sorts of germs are going through your bloodstream, some of them going through your brain, and they may leave a thought here or there. The fact that there's a thought appearing doesn't reflect on you—what's important is what you do with it. In this case, if you see that it's going to lead you to do something unskillful, you put it aside. You do what you can to undercut it. And to undercut it, you have to do it in a skillful way.

Again, you shouldn't deny that it's happening, where you say, "I couldn't possibly think a thought like that." That's not going to help. The thought's there, but you simply have to learn how to say No to it in a skillful way.

The Buddha lists five ways of dealing with thoughts like this. One is simply noticing that the mind has gone to a place where it shouldn't go, and you bring it right back. It's as if you have a child, and the child has begun to wander off dangerously close to a road, so you bring it back. Other times, the child keeps wanting to go back to the road, back to the road. That's when you have to explain to the child why it's a dangerous place to go.

In other words, the second method is that you look at the drawbacks of that

thinking. You can ask yourself, “If I thought thoughts like that for 24 hours, where would it take me? What would I do as a result? What would it do to my mind?” Usually, when you look at the drawbacks, the Buddha also has you look at the allure: Why do you like thoughts like that? When you can see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, and you can be honest with yourself about what the allure actually is, then you’ll be more inclined to let them go.

If that doesn’t work, then let the thoughts keep on thinking, but you’re not going to go there with them. You’re not going to get involved in that conversation.

This is where it’s useful to think of the mind as being like a committee. There are lots of people in the committee. When we talk about dealing with self and not-self, you have lots of selves in the mind—lots of opinions, lots of advice. There may be a lot of unskillful members of the committee, but you don’t have to identify with them, so you just make up your mind not to get involved in their conversations.

We can make another comparison: These thoughts are like a dog that keeps coming around to your house, begging for food. As long as you feed it, it’s going to keep coming around. The food for our thoughts is the fact that we *attend* to them. If you don’t pay any attention to them, they go away.

Our problem is that we find our thoughts fascinating. Everything that comes out of the mind has to be worth looking into. But when you realize that the mind is just a random thought-generator, let it go generating its random thoughts, but you don’t get involved in that process. After a while, it begins to stop, just like the dog. If you don’t feed it, it’ll continue coming around for a while, and it’ll whine, and it’ll complain. But if it sees that you’re not going to feed it at all, then it goes away.

Or if you get more sensitive to the breath energy in your body, you begin to notice that when a thought comes through the mind, there’ll be a pattern of tension: often in the head, but sometimes in other parts of the body as well. That tension acts like a marker, and the marker’s what allows you to keep that thought in mind. If you release the tension, the thought goes. So, if you can see that there’s a pattern of tension corresponding to the thought, just let it go.

The Buddha calls this relaxing the fabrication of thoughts. But if that doesn’t

work, then you press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, you clench your teeth, and you tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” In the Forest Tradition, they recommend taking a meditation word and repeating it really fast. *Buddho* is a common meditation word; it means to be awake. And just *BuddhoBuddhoBuddho* rapid-fire like a machine gun. Jam the circuits. After a while, you’ll be away from the thought.

This last method is the method of last resort, because it requires a lot of willpower and not much discernment. You can keep it up only for so long, but it can sometimes clear the air. You could make a comparison with a toolbox. It’s like having a sledgehammer in your toolbox for the times when the more refined tools don’t work. But know that you’ve got a lot of different ways of keeping those cows in check, to keep them out of the rice, not just one technique. If you had just one technique, then your defilements could run around that technique and do what they wanted.

They tell the story of the British defending Singapore during WWII. They thought the Japanese would be invading by sea, so they aimed their cannons out at sea, set in concrete. It turned out the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula from behind. The cannons were useless. So it’s good to surround yourself with different ways of dealing skillfully with your thoughts.

As a variation on that second technique—the technique of seeing the drawbacks of the thoughts—I’ve found it useful to ask yourself, “If this thought that I’m involved with were a movie, would I pay to see it?” Usually, no. The acting is horrible; the script is pretty amateurish. Then why bother thinking it?

As for dealing with thoughts that are skillful—thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, thoughts of harmlessness—the Buddha said it was like looking after cows during the dry season: The rice has been harvested and put away. There’s no more danger of the cows going into the rice fields, because the rice fields are empty of rice. So, they can wander where they like. The cowherd sits under the tree, and all he has to be conscious of is, “Those cows are someplace,” until he gathers them in at sunset. In the same way, you can keep track of your thoughts, but not have to worry about them.

However, thinking a lot gets the mind tired, which is why the Buddha said the

best thing to do was to get the mind into concentration. That's when you gather the cows in. After all, if the mind is tired from thinking, sometimes it'll start thinking unskillful thoughts, and it'll be difficult to keep them under control.

So you let the mind rest. Find an object where you can just stay quietly here in the present moment. It can be thoughts of goodwill, or focusing on the breath, or whatever topic you find congenial as a place where the mind can get some rest.

As you do this, you're getting the mind into concentration. It'll involve some thinking to begin with. You think about the breath—in case you're taking the breath as your object. You think about the breath and then you evaluate: "How good is the breath? How does it feel?" If you're focusing on the breath sensations in your head, make a thorough survey of your head: every little muscle that you can think of in your face, in your neck, in the back of your neck. Think of the whole head being nourished by the way you breathe. Think of the breath energy coming in from all directions. Every little cell in the head is breathing in, breathing out. Then extend that perception as far as you can through the body.

This involves thinking and evaluating. Or to put it in other terms, it involves talking to yourself, but you're talking to yourself in a constructive way. People have come to me and asked, "This directed thought and evaluation in the first *jhāna*: How do I start doing that?" The answer is, "You're already doing it all the time. It's simply a question of bringing it to the topic of the meditation in a skillful way, so that you get the mind to be snug with the breath, snug with whatever the object is." You want them to feel good together. Once they feel good together, then you can stop the talking and just *be* together. In the process of doing this, you realize, you're both learning tranquility and you're beginning to develop some insight.

We often hear that tranquility and insight are two separate types of meditation, but the Buddha never taught it that way. He said that as you get the mind into concentration, it requires that you develop tranquility and some insight. Once the mind gets into concentration, your tranquility gets stronger; your insight gets stronger. So as we're doing the concentration, we're bringing these qualities of mind to help develop the concentration, and they then get developed in the process.

The questions of tranquility basically are: "How do I get the mind to settle in?"

How do I get it to be unified? How do I get it to be steadied and concentrated?” So you try to find a way of breathing that it’s easy to settle in with, where you can stay steadily, and the different parts of the mind can get unified around it. As you figure that out, that’s how you get the mind to be tranquil.

Insight has to do with the processes of fabrication, and those are involved here as well. Here the questions are: “How do you regard fabrications? How do you investigate them? And how do you see them with insight?” You can regard fabrications as the five aggregates: There’s form, feeling, perception, fabrication itself, and consciousness. Or there’s another list called the three fabrications: bodily fabrication—which is the breath; verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrication—perceptions and feelings. These things are all involved in doing the concentration.

In terms of the five aggregates: You’ve got the body here that you’re focused on: That’s form. The breath coming in, breath going out: That’s form. There’s a feeling of ease that you’re trying to develop. There’s a perception of how the breath goes through the body. When it comes in, where does it come in? When it goes out, where does it go out? How does it go through the body as it’s coming in, going out? What kind of perception helps you to settle down with the breath so that it feels easy all the way in, all the way out?

I’ve found a useful perception to be that it’s not the case that the solid parts of the body are there before the breath. The breath is there before them. That way, the breath can go everywhere because it’s prior. Or, as I said earlier, another useful perception is that every cell in the body is breathing in, breathing out together.

Then there’s the fabrication of your directed thought and evaluation, your intentions around getting the mind to settle down. And then there’s consciousness, which is aware of all these things. So, you’ve got all five aggregates right here as you practice concentration.

The same with the three types of fabrication: You’ve got the breath—that’s bodily fabrication. Directed thought and evaluation, talking to yourself about the breath—verbal fabrication. Perceptions and feelings again—mental fabrication. They’re all here, too.

So how do you investigate them? In the beginning, you investigate them as

they may start wandering away from the concentration. In other words, a thought appears in the mind, and you try to see: Okay, what's the origination of this thought? What sparks this thought? Is it greed? Aversion? Delusion? Is there a perception that sparks it? What's the origination? How does this come about? The Pali word for origination, *samudaya*, literally means arising together. What arises together with the thought?

Then you look at it go away. When the cause goes away, then the thought goes away.

But then the mind may go back to it, and you want to know why. This is why you want to look for the allure. What's the appeal of these thoughts? Some thoughts are pretty random. They don't have much appeal. They just have to be, as I said, randomly generated thoughts. Other thoughts have an appeal. They're covered with Velcro. And sometimes you don't want to admit the appeal to yourself. But when you're honest with yourself, you can say, "Oh, this thought comes to my mind, and I go back to it because I like it for this reason or that reason." Then you can do something about it.

That's when you look at the drawbacks. You keep comparing the allure with the drawbacks until it really does hit home that it's not worth it. What you thought you were getting out of the thought is not worth all the trouble it's causing. When this realization really hits home, that's the escape: dispassion.

Yesterday we were talking about cutting dependent co-arising. The Buddha never talks about *cutting* dependent co-arising, he talks about *escaping* from it. And this is how you escape.

So, that's how fabrications are to be investigated so as to escape from them. But before you investigate them to escape them you develop them, in the concentration. That way, you get to know from hands-on experience: What is a feeling? What is a perception? What is fabrication? How do these things function in the mind?

It's like learning about the ingredients of a cake. You've got the eggs, you've got the flour, you've got all kinds of things. It's by working with them, making different kinds of cakes, that you learn a lot about eggs, flour, and the other ingredients.

Then finally, the question is: How are these fabrications to be seen with discernment? Here again, you start out with dealing with distractions from your concentration. Just now, we were talking about looking at the drawbacks. Seeing fabrications in terms of their drawbacks is what liberates you from them, so you look at them in terms of being inconstant, stressful, not-self.

In other words, you can't rely on them, and when they're not reliable, trying to hold on to them is stressful. As for not-self, it's a value judgment. You realize, okay, this is not worth holding on to. Any disturbance that comes in, you learn to see it in these terms. You free yourself from those disturbances, and that makes your concentration stronger.

Finally, the day will come when the only thing you're holding on to now is the concentration itself. Then you turn the same analysis on that. You see that it, too, even though it's a lot more constant than anything else you've ever experienced, it, too, has its moments of inconstancy. It, too, has its subtle stress. It, too, is not worthy of claiming as you or yours. That's how the mind gets totally freed.

But in the meantime, you want to develop the concentration so that that analysis really has an impact. You can hear the words right now, and they make sense, but they don't *do* the work. That's a sign you need to work more on your concentration, in which you'll be developing more tranquility, developing more insight.

You should find this fascinating: how your mind creates suffering for itself, even though it doesn't want to, but it does. Why on earth would that be? Well, because you're not paying attention, so you don't know what you're doing. You've paid much more attention to things outside, and not enough attention to your own mind. This is dangerous, because things outside can do only so much damage to you, but your own mind can do real damage. But at the same time, it can give you a lot of help.

So take an interest in this. If you do the concentration with a sense of interest, you'll develop both tranquility and insight together. That's how you learn to train the mind to stop creating suffering, so that it's no longer a burden to itself.

We have our burdens from outside. Those are plenty enough. Why do we add more burdens on top of ourselves? Because of ignorance. And this is how you



overcome your ignorance: by bringing the mind to tranquility and developing insight through the practice of concentration.

As Upāsikā Kee used to end her talks by asking, “Are you interested in this?” It’s hard to think of anything else in the world that could be more interesting than the mind’s own ability to hide things from itself, and its own ability to overcome that habit, to see through that habit. We take joy in other skills that we can develop. Try to take joy in this skill as well.