

## *Above & Beyond Suffering*

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We sometimes think that meditation means not thinking, just making the mind very, very still. But you can't really make it still unless you think about it, think about what you're doing, take stock of where the mind is right now.

There's an old Thai meditation guide that says, "Is your mind leaning forward? Or leaning back? Leaning to the left? Or leaning to the right?" Leaning forward means leaning into the future. Leaning back means leaning into the past. Leaning left and right means leaning toward things that you like or things that you dislike.

In other words, is there some imbalance in the mind? Are you carrying any baggage in from the day, either from your meditation out under the trees or your time on the road as you drive here? Does it cause your mind to tilt in any direction? If so, try to compensate for the tilt.

Sometimes before you can settle down with the breath you've got to use other techniques to put the mind in order. If you're leaning toward lust, we have the chant on the parts of the body. Imagine taking the body apart piece by piece by piece and putting everything neatly on the floor in front of you. Even if it neatly arranged, it'd be enough to drive you out of the room. Then you realize that that stuff is in your body all the time and it's in everybody else's body, too. When you think about that, you begin to realize that the objects of your lust are not all that desirable. Then you can turn to look at the lust itself. What kind of mind state is this? Where does it lead? Think of all the drawbacks of lust—when it's satisfied, when it's not satisfied—what happens? Very little good and a lot of trouble.

You can do the same for other mind states as well: anger, fear, laziness. Laziness is a big one. People often say, "What's a good, easy technique for overcoming laziness?" And that's the problem right there: The question itself is lazy. Overcoming laziness requires work. You have to stir yourself to make an effort, remind yourself that things are not going to get easier with time. We often feel, "Maybe I can put it off until tomorrow or the next day." Well, you just keep getting older and older, and this body that you've got sitting here gets more and more difficult to manage, keeps offering more and more pains, more and more problems to deal with. If you don't deal with the problems in your mind right now, it's not going to get easier with time. So you've got to learn how to stir yourself to greater efforts.

A traditional way to stir yourself is by reflecting on death, the fact that death could come at any time. After all, we're living in California. The big earthquake could come at any moment. As you look all around you, you see that there's danger on every side. And you look inside your body. Even if nothing happens from outside, the body can develop a little problem here, a little problem there, that can suddenly develop into something very major. People die of paper cuts.

Some weird germ gets into the paper cut and you're gone within a day or two. So when you realize that death is lying in wait on all sides, you don't have much time.

In other words, try to think in a way that gets you over that hump of laziness and actually getting down to work.

Once the mind feels ready—centered, stable—then you can focus it on the breath. It may seem strange. You might think, “After all, aren't we trying to use the breath to make the mind stable?” Well, yes—sometimes. Often you can go straight to the breath. Other times there are things standing in the way, and you've got to deal with those first. So you have to assess the situation. You can't just force the mind into a set technique and hope for the technique to take care of everything. You've got to use your powers of observation; you've got to use your own sensitivity.

After all, we're trying to develop discernment here. And discernment doesn't come from simply following instructions. It comes from taking instructions and applying them, seeing what the results are, making adjustments here, making adjustments there, learning how to question things. The Buddha once said that that one of the signs of a person of discernment is how that person approaches a question, how the person frames the question, how the person attempts to answer the question. And a technique that tells you not to think is not going to teach discernment. Learning how to think skillfully—when thinking is appropriate, what kind of thinking is appropriate, when it can be put aside—is what makes you discerning, and these are things that you can learn only through experimentation.

You have a basic technique—say, the breath—as a standard against which to measure things. But then you work around that standard, investigate the territory around the standard, so that you can prove these points for yourself. What state of mind is the most stable? What state of mind is the most conducive to seeing things clearly? How do you get there? And how do you get there from different points in your mental map? In other words, on days when you feel lazy or tired, how do you bring the mind to a point of balance? On days when you've got a lot of nervous energy, how do you bring the mind into balance? These require different techniques, different approaches, that can be learned only through trial and error.

So as we meditate here, it's a chance to experiment, a chance to explore the workings of our minds. It's not so much that we're learning somebody else's technique. We're taking that technique and using it to explore ourselves, to get a sense particularly of how the mind creates a lot of unnecessary suffering for itself. This is *the* big issue in life. As the Buddha discovered, once you take care of this issue, all the other big issues that people tend to get wound up about either get resolved or you realize that they weren't really that important after all. Certain issues eat away at the mind simply because the mind still has a habit of allowing itself to suffer, to create suffering for itself. What we're trying to do here is to learn how to be more and more skillful in how we approach what we do, what we say, what we think, so that we don't create that suffering.

Because the other part of the Buddha's discovery was that if we stop creating suffering for ourselves, the other things that come in from outside—the pains of the body, say, or disagreeable events outside—don't reach the mind. We're the ones who pull those things in and make them issues within the mind. Once the mind learns how not to create unnecessary suffering, the suffering that comes simply from having a body, or living with human beings, or living in this world, doesn't have any effect on the mind at all. This is a great discovery. You don't have to die in order to be beyond the sufferings of human life. It's simply a matter of learning how to approach the present moment more and more skillfully, with more and more sensitivity.

So we use the breath as a way of making the mind more sensitive. Notice how the breath energy flows. When the breath comes in, where does it feel like it's coming in? Forget what you've learned about its coming through the nose. If you were totally uninformed about in and out of the the breath, where would you say that the feeling of breath come in? Where does it go out? How does it come in? Is there one part of the body pulling a sensation in the other part of the body? Is there a way to breathe more comfortably? Start out with these issues.

Once the mind is ready to settle down and explore the present moment, focus simply on the various ways that your perception of the breathing creates problems, creates discomfort in your breathing. Change your perceptions; see what happens. As you do this, you get more and more sensitive to what's going on in the present moment in the breath. And from there you develop the sensitivity to the point where you can see even subtler movements in the mind, what kind of movements create suffering, what kind of movements let go of suffering.

One teacher in Thailand once said that the mind streaming out to its objects is the truth of suffering. Can you catch it in the act of streaming out? What is it like for the mind to know objects but not stream out after them? Look into that issue. If you're not ready for that issue, look into the issue of how you're breathing. Because that's the area of practice that'll lead you to subtler and subtler questions within the mind.

Throughout this, you've got to monitor what you're doing, monitor the effects. Don't monitor to the point that you're destroying states of stillness in the mind, but at the same time keep an eye on things so that you can get to a state of stillness when you need to, and learn how to maintain it once you've got there.

Once that state of stillness is solid, then learn how to put it to use as a basis for subtler insights, for more subtle understanding. And the insights here are not so much psychological insights. They're just noticing things that you didn't notice before, little movements right here in the present moment.

It's like a child learning to walk. When the child first walks, it uses a lot of unnecessary muscles in its body. It moves its arms in a certain way, jerks its body around in a certain way, because it hasn't really figured out which muscles are necessary and which ones are not. But

with time and observation, the child gets more and more graceful at walking. The act of walking requires less and less of its full attention so that it can focus on other things as well.

The same with the mind. We have some very awkward and inefficient ways of dealing with life, various very unskillful ways of dealing with life, because we're under the impression that we have to think in a certain way and we have to approach a topic in a certain way and that we're responsible for this and we have to do that. If we could take a video of the mind's movements, they'd be jerking all over the place. Meditation is a matter of learning to really look at what you're doing and realize that a lot of it is unnecessary—and it's creating unnecessary suffering and stress, adding unnecessary burdens to the mind. Once you see that, that's it's unnecessary, it's burdensome, then you don't have to tell yourself to drop it. You just drop it. And you find that the mind weighs itself down less and less and less.

And this simple exploration we're doing here to clean out the unnecessary suffering we cause for ourselves: As you work on it bit by bit by bit, you realize that it really does make a difference in your life. It changes your sense of priorities, changes your sense of what the important issues in life are, what the important issues in life are not—simply by exploring this one issue and taking it to its end.