

Encourage Yourself

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We live so much in a world of change that we don't notice the changes in our own mind. Changes outside are so drastic sometimes, and so incessant, that the changes in our mind get shoved off into the background where we hardly notice them.

It's when we come out to a quiet place like this, where not much happens in the course of the day, that you really get to see the mind jumping around.

In the beginning, it's pretty discouraging. You read the texts about how the ideal meditator brings the mind to the present moment, settles down, and experiences rapture, pleasure, and singleness of preoccupation. It looks easy in the texts, but when you look at your own mind there doesn't seem to be any correlation.

When you get discouraged like that, one of the things the Buddha has you think about is *sanghanussati*, recollection of the Sangha. Think of all the people who've practiced meditation over the past couple of thousand years. Not everybody had it easy.

As the Buddha said, there are basically four types of practice: fast and easy, fast and painful, slow and easy, slow and painful. You can't choose which type you're going to be. But there have been all four types all along.

Even in the time of the Buddha, there were some people who found it really difficult, really painful. But they stuck it with it. There are a couple of cases of monks and nuns who got suicidal because their minds just wouldn't settle down. But even they were able to pull themselves together at some point. Here we are, we're not yet suicidal, I hope. So, if they could pull themselves together, we can pull ourselves together.

A lot of it has to do with patience. We Americans are an impatient lot. Everything is instant, instant, instant. I remember when computers first came out: They seemed so fast. Then they got faster and faster. Now you go back to use an old computer and it seems like you're just sitting there, waiting as the computer keeps chugging away, very lazy.

We tend to expect up-to-date computer speed in every aspect of our lives.

So we have to face up to the fact that maybe our practice is going to be slow. But at least it's a practice. At least it's going someplace. As the Buddha once said, the sorrow that comes from having a goal you haven't reached yet is nowhere near as bad as the sorrow that comes from not having a goal at all.

Psychologists tend to teach us that having ideals is hard on the mind. But what kind of life would it be like if we didn't have ideals, if we didn't have a sense of direction? We'd just be floundering around and there'd be that

question, “Where is this going? What is this all about?” There’s so much pain, so much suffering going on in this world, that if we don’t make up our minds that “At least we’re going to head in the right direction,” it all seems very pointless and hopeless.

The right attitude to have is: “However long it takes, this is the path to follow.” This is the only path that offers any real hope. And where can you start on it except from where you are?

So you start from where you are. You take heart from the fact that there have been people who’ve been worse off than you and they’ve become arahants—many, many, many people like this in the past.

So try not to set a time limit on how quickly you want results to happen. Just make sure that the needle of your compass is pointing in the right direction. And just follow it. If you fall down, pick yourself up; fall down again, pick yourself up again. Find ways of encouraging yourself.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells a wonderful story about how he was out in the forest one time, feeling miserable. Here he was, all alone. Apparently he’d come up against an impasse in his practice. He overheard some villagers who were on their way to a festival in another village, and they sounded like they were having so much fun.

For a moment he thought, “My gosh, here I am, just a rag thrown away in the forest. My life has no meaning at all. At least those people know enough how to have fun, how to have a good time.”

But then he was able to set his thoughts aright. He said, “Wait a minute. My being out here in the forest: I’m not sending myself to hell. At least I’m headed in the right direction. Their direction just goes around and around and around. It goes nowhere. This direction has hope; this direction has purpose.”

So this ability to talk yourself into sanity: That’s what matters. And talking yourself into sanity once may not work, but you keep doing it, just chipping away, chipping away, chipping away. This is an important part of the meditation.

We often think meditation means not thinking—just focusing on the breath and coming back, coming back, coming back. But there are times when that just doesn’t seem to work and you’ve got to sit down and encourage yourself.

A good part of meditation is skillful thinking: how to think when you’re angry to get past the anger. How to think when you’re feeling lust to get past the lust. How to think when you’re feeling discouraged so that you can get past the discouragement or depression or whatever.

Before we can give up thinking, we have to learn how to think well. We have this wonderful faculty: this ability to think. And yet, for so many of us, it’s destructive. It causes us all kinds of harm. It’s like giving a child an atomic

bomb. If the child were really intelligent, it would use the atomic bomb for some useful purpose. But most often it just wants to throw it around and enjoy the big bang.

That's the way it is with our thinking, yet the human mind can think a lot of wonderful things. And in particular, it can think its way into the path.

For example, when the Buddha talks about past lives, future lives, the principle of karma: It's to focus our attention on what's really important right now, which is the intentions we're thinking right now, the intentions we're following through with right now.

He has many stories about the cycles of the universe, past lives, future results of present actions. They seem to point far away from the present. But actually they're pointing right back to the present. He always ends his stories by saying, "Okay, all these developments come out of karma."

And what is karma? It's the intentions in your mind. Where is it? In the things you're thinking right now. It's this amazing power we have. Learn how to use it properly. All too often, our intentions seem to force us to act without our really thinking about it. So we want to stop and take note of them, to be really careful about them. Watch them, get to know them. And to do that, we have to realize their importance.

Sometimes it requires thinking our way into realizing why they are important.

The same goes with a lot of the other elements of the path as well. Sometimes the mind really gets off on the wrong track and you've got to keep thinking, thinking, thinking, to bring yourself back.

This is why we have teachers; this is why we have good friends on the path. But ultimately, you have to be your own best friend. Take yourself in hand and say, "Look, things may not be so well right now, but if you let yourself get off on the wrong path, it's going to get worse and worse and worse. At least head in the right direction and keep walking there as much as you can." You'll find that step by step by step, things begin to clear up. Even if outside things don't clear up immediately, at least the mind is in a much better state.

So when you find it hard to stay with the breath, there are lots of meditation topics for getting yourself back on track. Recollection of the Sangha, recollection of the Dhamma, recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the good you've done in the past: These are all useful techniques. They're all a legitimate part of the meditation.

We tend to forget that. Oftentimes we want just the technique. Some meditation teachers say, "Okay, all you need is a technique." They turn it into super science. They say, "This has nothing to do with any cultural background, nothing to do with any belief system at all." They give you a tool, but what are you going to use it for?

There's a whole system of values that lies around the meditation. If just pure noting or pure whatever were enough, then why would the path have eight folds to it? Why would it have eight parts?

Part of it is right resolve. There's right view and right resolve. These things have to get straightened out in order to keep the path in line.

As the Buddha once said, right view comes first. Immediately after that comes right resolve. So if you find your views getting off the path, go sit yourself down and reason things out. Learn how to use your thinking faculty wisely. When it's used really wisely, the Buddha says, you can get the mind to settle down in concentration. The thinking becomes less and less and less necessary.

But as with so many aspects of the path, you can't really let go of them until you've mastered them. So if your meditation requires just sitting here and thinking for a while, okay, it's a legitimate part of the practice. You find that you get better and better at working through some of the arguments the mind has for straying off the path, or attitudes that prevent you from getting on the path. They get weaker and weaker, and you can see through them more and more easily.

Then you find yourself more proficient at getting to the present moment and staying there—not simply through forcing the mind but because the mind understands that this is the best place to be.

Then you can really get down to work.