

## *Sucked into the Tube*

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One of the most important skills you can develop as a meditator is catching the mind in the act. To begin with, this means catching it in the act of wandering off. You make up your mind you're going to stay with the breath. You stay for a couple breaths and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. So you come back. And there's a sense of frustration: You missed what was going on. You got hoodwinked. Often our attitude toward these distractions is like our attitude toward flies, mosquitoes, and gnats that are buzzing around. We'd like to swat them and get them out of the way so that we can really do our meditation. But catching the mind as it's about to go off is a very important part of really doing meditation, do don't regard this simply as a nuisance. It's a way of developing mindfulness and alertness, the two most basic qualities that Buddha said are the most helpful for any task.

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Alertness means watching what you're actually doing. You want to keep the two of them together. Keeping things in mind, to begin with, means simply keeping the breath in mind. Then try to be alert to the breath. The more alert you are to the breath, the easier it is to keep it in mind. The more you start paying attention, the more you start getting interested in this energy flow in the body. You find, as you get more and more engrossed in it, that you're less likely to wander off. But it'll still happen every now and then. Ideally, you want to catch yourself in the act before the mind really goes someplace. Some meditation methods have you note: "distraction" or "wandering" or whatever and then come right back. It's a useful tool, but sometimes you don't need it. Just catch your attention and bring it back.

The important thing is that you try to see the thought as an event in the mind rather than getting sucked in to the little thought-world that the mind creates. It's like walking through a room, seeing a TV show on, and it's so easy to sit down and get sucked into the tube. In this case, you want to walk past it and say, "That's a TV show," and leave it at that. You know what happens to people who sit around watching TV all the time. Their brains get sucked out into the tube. And you don't want to do that. So you walk through the room and don't get involved.

You want to have the same attitude toward distracting thoughts. Try to see them as events. See how they're formed. To begin with, there's usually just a little stirring in the mind and the body. Then at some point, you apply a perception. You apply a label to it, saying, "This is this, and that's that." It's as if you have a

little code for yourself. You recognize the code's signals and often you create the code's signals. There's just a stirring, nothing much at all, but you turn it into a thought about this, that, and the other thing. Then you run with it and get sucked into that world. You want to catch yourself before you get sucked in. You want to catch yourself in the act of labeling that says, "This is a thought about the past, this is a thought about the future," whatever. Leave it simply as a process and get back to where you belong, which is with the breath.

In this way, you're beginning to develop the basic attitude behind the four noble truths. The four noble truths see things as processes of cause and effect: One thing leads to the next. Some things lead to stress; other things lead to the end of stress. If you see the distracting thought as something leading to stress, okay, as long as you stay in that mode of watching it as a chain of cause and effect, you're looking at it in terms of four noble truths. That cuts through ignorance. This is what keeps that little stirring in the mind, that little *sankhara* or fabrication, from turning into something that's going to suck you in. This is how we overcome ignorance: learning how to see things as cause and effect.

So the simple process of learning how to catch yourself before you get distracted is very important. Ajaan Lee makes the point that mindfulness and alertness, as they get more and more developed and stronger, turn into what's called *ñāna-dassana*, which means knowledge and vision. In other words, you see things as they actually happen in the mind and you understand what's going on. This is how discernment develops, and this is how discernment becomes the kind of discernment that can liberate you.

If you want to see fear or anger happening, you want to see it while it's actually happening. You don't want to go through instant replays, because your video machine has its defects. It's not nearly as effective when you see it again the third or fourth time and try to re-create what happened as it is if you actually see it happening right here and now. You see the mind making a choice. It goes with a particular thought. When you can see the stress that results and realize that the cause wasn't necessary, then you let go. But you've got to catch in the act. When the thought is caught in the act, then you can see through it. As you catch it in the act of causing stress, you can let it go.

You begin to see the how foolish you are to follow a lot of these thoughts. First there's an outflow. This is one of the meanings of that word *asava*—it flows out of the mind. It's as if it's a physical sensation sometimes. There's something flowing out from your awareness of the body, heading outside. But instead of following it out, instead of flowing after it, you stay right here and watch it move. You see it

goes out a ways, and it just disappears because you didn't give it that extra impetus.

That way, those thoughts have a lot less power over the mind because you see the way in which they're fabricated. And you see the element of choice. In some cases, you realize: Why would you ever choose to do that? Because you've kept it hidden from yourself.

So these two very basic qualities, mindfulness and alertness, carry you through all the way. And this skill that you develop in learning to deal with distraction becomes important as well, as you catch even more and more refined levels of stress. Even in very strong levels of concentration, there will still be a little level of stress, a little bit of activity. And it's very easy when you first hit strong levels of concentration not to see it. Everything seems soothing, silent, and totally still. But that's because your mindfulness and alertness are not yet ripe. Stay there for a while, and as things begin to settle down and you get more and more sensitive and subtle, you'll see these little subtle movements in the act. That's when you can drop them. That's when new things happen in the mind.

So try to keep your alertness as quick as possible, and keep your frame of reference as solidly as possible with the breath, with the thought at the back of your mind also that if anything else comes up, try to see it as a process, see it as a series of events, a chain of causes and effects, rather than believing that it's another world or thought world that really gives you a representation of reality. Or that it's going to be entertaining. Don't get sucked into it. Don't walk into the room and sit down and watch the TV. Just see it as ghost images on the screen and leave it at that.

At some point, you'll understand why you feel compelled to sit down and watch it. When you see through that, then you've seen through a lot, cut through a lot of the ignorance that causes the mind's habit of fabrication to lead to stress and suffering—because you catch these things in the act.