

Alone with Your Mind

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One of the scary parts about growing old is that you get more and more stuck in your own mind as your eyesight fails you, your hearing fails you. They might stick you away in an old folks home where there's nobody you know, very few people you can really communicate with. What would you have for companionship? Just the contents of your own mind. And if the mind hasn't been trained, that's a very scary prospect because most people's minds are pretty random. This is one of the reasons why we meditate—so that when we're alone with our own minds we're actually with good companions.

As the Buddha said, most of us go through life with craving as our companion: all our thoughts of past or future and all the cravings that latch on to them. Even our thoughts about the present have a lot of cravings that latch on to them as well, and they can be really unskillful. This is one of the causes of suffering, but as the Buddha said, there's a skillful role for craving, too. That's what you want to take advantage of here while you meditate. You give the mind a specific task. What's giving it the task? Your craving, but it's informed craving, skillful craving—craving based on the desire to gain some clarity, some awakening.

So, when you sit down to meditate, you want to have a plan. You may not necessarily follow through with the plan but at least have a plan to start out with. It gives you a signpost or a marker so that you know when you've explored what that particular plan had to offer. If it was helpful, you stick with it. If you realize it's not all that helpful right now, you can abandon the plan, but at least you'll know that that's what you've done. That way, you can remember where your meditation took you; when you turned right, when you turned left, when you went north or south. You'll know because you had an initial plan.

For the time being, your plan is to be with the breath. Notice where in the body it's most congenial to focus and notice that the focus does really have an impact, in the kind of mental state it induces. Focusing up in the head tends to be more energizing; focusing down toward the stomach tends to be more relaxing. You have to ask yourself, "What do you need right now?" Learn how to get good at several different spots and then notice the quality of the breath at each one. When you breathe in, how are you pulling the breath in? To what extent does it have to be pulled that way, or are you adding unnecessary stress to the in breath? When you're breathing out, are you squeezing things out too much? Think of the breath as something that flows freely throughout the body. You don't have to push it here or force it there. It's more a matter of allowing it. You allow the breath to go down the back. You allow it to go down the arms. You allow it to go in your bones, around the skull.

Anywhere you know there's tension or tightness, think of *allowing, allowing*, because there are several levels of breath energy. There's one that flows automatically all over the body.

As soon as you start breathing in, it's already gone all over the body. It's that fast, that subtle. Often when we're trying to push the breath into different parts of the body, we're actually pushing the blood into those parts, which may or may not be helpful. But the breath doesn't require any pushing. Unlike the blood, it doesn't have pressure. It just has flow.

This is one way you can develop a good companion in the mind. You're curious about the breath energy and this can take you a long way. You can stick with this for a long period of time.

Ajaan Lee developed his breath meditation method, Method Two, when he was out in the forest. He'd walked three days into the place where he was planning to spend the rains retreat and soon after he arrived, he fell sick. Within a couple of days, he actually had a heart attack. So what was he going to do? If he recovered, he was going to have to get out of the forest somehow. He'd have to be strong enough to walk three days. So he worked with the breath.

Those instructions in Method Two described the way he worked with the breath after his heart attack, especially focusing on breath energy coming in from the back of the neck, going down the spine, down the shoulders, out the arms; the line of breath energy that starts right at the spot where the diaphragm attaches to the breastbone and then goes down through the intestines. All of these were directly related to how he was able to pull himself back together again after the heart attack.

But in the Dhamma talks from years after he came out and continued teaching, he had lots of other ways of discussing the breath, too: the breath coming up the spine, the breath coming up from the navel to the nose, different levels of breath—subtle breath, refined breath—many, many ways of conceiving the breath, working with the breath, that deal with different conditions in the body.

So there's lots to explore here, lots to experiment with. But you don't want the breath as your only friend.

You're going to need several other companions as well. One is simply the mind's ability to think. Often it becomes our enemy. It's wandering off, worrying about this, wondering about that, thinking about the past, regretting this, regretting that. It's another one of those companions you don't want when you find yourself alone with the mind. You want to be able to turn off unskillful thoughts and replace them with more skillful ones. In some cases, this means simply reminding yourself to think about something else.

One of the reasons we have those chants on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every night is because those are good things to reflect on: how fortunate it is that we've found a teaching that was discovered by someone who in the course of finding the truth was able to find true happiness—who needed nothing from anybody else and so, when he taught, he was engaged in a completely pure act of generosity. This is what he shared. This is what he discovered after having fought the mind past greed, aversion, and delusion. We're so fortunate that we have a teaching like that. You can think about his wisdom, you can think about his

purity, you can think about his compassion and remind yourself that this is what a human being is capable of. That's uplifting because you can look around the world and see what other things human beings are capable of, and it gets pretty depressing. But we have the Buddha's example.

Then there's the Dhamma he taught, not only in the words but also the practice he taught and the realization that it leads to. All of this comes under the topic of recollection of the Dhamma, the practice that leads to true happiness. Everything that he taught, he said, dealt with suffering and the end of suffering—and of course that includes the way to the end of suffering. His teachings were pointed at this particular end. Everything in the Dhamma points here. Again, this is a really special teaching. We're fortunate we've found it.

Then there are all the people who have followed this teaching, from all walks of life—men, women, children, rich, poor, educated, uneducated—all with one thing in common: that they were really sincere on wanting to put an end to suffering and were willing to do whatever it took. For some people it was easy; for some it was really hard. The way all the members of the noble Sangha were able to attain this true happiness was by following the Buddha's teachings.

When you think about this, you can give rise to what Ananda once called the skillful use of conceit. "If they can do it, so can I." This is a possibility for the human mind.

So when you find that the mind needs encouragement, you can teach it to think in these ways. Realize that these are the things that are really important in life. This helps to replace the values that we place on status, wealth, praise from other people, sensory pleasures, material pleasures. It helps to put things into perspective.

Another contemplation that's useful is contemplation of death. It could come at any time. Often, when you think about death, it gets depressing, but the Buddha said that's not the right way to think about it. You think about it as a way of encouraging yourself when you find you're getting lazy or complacent. You have to ask yourself: "Are you ready to go?" Things come up in the mind. If you tell yourself, "I'm not ready to leave this, I'm not ready to leave that," then you've got some attachments there. You may not be able to put them aside totally but practice putting them aside at least for the time being.

There was a woman who once came to the monastery in Thailand, planning to stay for a week to meditate. The second day she was there, she came to see Ajaan Fuang and said she was ready to go home. He asked her why and she said, "Well, I'm concerned about my husband, concerned about my children, I don't know what they're going to do without me." So Ajaan Fuang said, "Tell yourself that you've died and they're going to have to be able to look after themselves one way or another." So for the time being, you've died to the rest of the world while you're here.

This way, when you're alone with your own mind, you can make it a good place to be. You'll have good companions as you look in your own mind: the thoughts that not only replace unskillful thoughts but also call the unskillful thoughts into question. Ask yourself,

“Why should I be thinking that thought? What’s accomplished by it in the grand scheme of things? Is this something I really should be worried about? What’s the attachment here?” If you can actually locate the attachment, learn to look at it in ways that help you develop a sense of dispassion toward it. If nothing really clear comes, then you tell yourself, “Okay, I’ve got more work to do in terms of concentration,” and you go back to that.

One of the important skills in concentration is learning how to put a question aside. They may be important questions, but you tell yourself—after looking at your ways of trying to deal with the questions and seeing that you’re not gaining any clarity—“Okay, I’ll just put that aside for the time being and work on getting the mind still.” This is probably the most important skill in developing concentration: not waiting for every ‘i’ to be dotted or every ‘t’ to be crossed, everything to be neatly tied down or wrapped up before you can settle down and be still.

You’ve got to be able to find stillness of mind in the midst of all these other distractions, all the other duties and responsibilities you may have—learning how to let go, at least temporarily, so that the mind can find some space, some nourishment from the stillness it can develop inside. This may mean giving it long periods of quietude. That sense of urgency that animates the path doesn’t mean that you take just a few moments of concentration and then jump back to work with your thinking. Sometimes the mind needs a long period of being really still, focused, working on the tranquility side of the meditation. Then, when it feels really nourished, you can start developing more of the quality of insight.

The Buddha never divides insight and tranquility into separate techniques. Actually, they’re more qualities of mind you want to bring to the practice—and you can see this with the breath. Sometimes, when you’re working the breath, it’s a matter of playing with this, experimenting with that. You’re thinking about the breath and, in so doing, you learn a lot. You learn how to see more clearly how the mind relates to the breath, what concepts you use to direct yourself to the breath: learning how to evaluate what feels good in the short term, what feels good in the long term.

Then there are other times when you just want to stay with one really nice comfortable sensation, find your quiet spot and let everything settle in right there. Any questions that come up, you say, “Nope, not now.” You don’t even have to think that complete thought, just, “Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope.” As you get more plugged into the breath, you’re developing more of the tranquility side.

So you’ve got the same topic, the same object, and you can develop either insight or tranquility—or both together.

This way, you’re stocking the mind with lots of good qualities, so that you find that you really do like being alone with your own mind. And in the future, you’ll find that you have the skills needed when you’re forced to be alone with your mind. It’s not going to be a problem. You’ll be familiar with all your friends in there. You’ll be familiar with all the less skillful elements and you’ll know how to deal with them so that the unskillful thoughts, unskillful

qualities don't take over. Then all your good friends will be in charge.