

Dissolving Your Thoughts

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Many of Ajaan Fuang's students were firmly convinced that he could read their minds. And so they'd get very embarrassed if they found themselves thinking critical thoughts about him, because they thought he would know what they were thinking. So they'd come to confess and to apologize. And he'd tell them, "The mind can think all kinds of thoughts. It can think good thoughts, so why can't it think bad thoughts?" If he could read people's minds, and I'm convinced he could, he'd probably seen all kinds of thoughts, and just learned that this is the nature of the human mind.

So it's nothing to get worked up about when you find yourself thinking totally useless, childish, embarrassing thoughts—but you don't want to get involved with them. You've got to learn to take a fairly matter-of-fact attitude toward them, that there's this aspect of the mind, it's unskillful, and you don't have to be embarrassed about the fact there are thoughts like this in the mind. But at the same time, learn how to deal with them as quickly and efficiently as possible. When you notice that they're unskillful, try to breathe through them. This, of the various techniques the Buddha gives for dealing with unskillful distracting thoughts, can often be one of the most effective.

When the mind has been quiet, you begin to realize that when a thought goes through, especially one that has a lot of emotional content, it's not just words. There's an energetic feeling around it and you can feel it in the body. So if you feel one of these waves coming through you, try to notice where you feel it in the body and see if you can breathe in a way that undoes what the wave did. The wave is like a wave of water washing against the shore. It comes up but then it can go away, dissipate, disappear.

So when a thought comes in that's really not useful for your meditation—either it's totally unrelated or you've gotten to the point where you realize you don't really need to do that much thinking and evaluating about your object anymore—try to be aware of the physical side of the thought, and then allow yourself to reset. In other words, go back to what the body was like before that wave of energy came through it. Breathe through the residual energy, dissolve it away, and then get back to business. Try not to get involved in the conversations about, "I had a thought that was worth getting involved with. Was it good? Was it bad? What kind of person am I?" Don't think those follow-up thoughts. The original thought was just a thought, and treat it just as a thought and not as a reflection of who you are, what kind of person you are or have been, because we've all been through all kinds of things.

There's that reflection that the Buddha has about seeing someone who's really poor and sick lying by the side of the road and reminding yourself that you've been there; seeing someone who's wealthy with all the sensual pleasures you can imagine, you've been there too.

He has you ponder those thoughts to develop an attitude of equality with other beings, so that you don't look down on the people who are suffering and you're not jealous of the people who are ahead of you. And you can use the same attitude with your thoughts.

Wonderful thoughts come through the mind, you've been there before. Horrible childish thoughts come through the mind, you've been there before. Do you want to go there again, with either kind of thought? Right now you're trying to learn how to not think about things, just to be in the present moment, to be aware of the breath in the present moment, to be aware of your awareness in the present moment, and to allow things to settle down with as much stillness as possible.

So whatever kind of thought comes up, you don't have to get enthralled or disgusted with the contents. Just note, "There's a thought." Look for the energy as it goes through the body. Work on that side, and once it's dissipated, let it go, because your topic here is the breath. You want to be a little bit alert to any warning signs that another thought is coming through, but otherwise try to be with the breath as much as possible. If a thought comes up, even if it's a comment on your state of concentration right now, think of it as an energy that you can dissipate and just let it go. You want to learn how to settle down with as much stillness and steadiness as you can.

Now, being still and steady is a balancing act. You've probably seen people walking across tightropes. It's not that they glide across perfectly smoothly. There's a little bit of leaning to the left, leaning to the right, and if they find themselves leaning too much in either direction then they can compensate. An important part of the skill in learning how to meditate is developing that sense of balancing and then compensating when something has knocked you off kilter.

Here again, this ability to sense the thought as a disturbance in the breath energy in the body is really helpful because, after all, you're with the breath already, and you don't have to change your focus that much to deal with disturbances in the breath. It's simply that you broaden your range, so that you're aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, everything in the body is breath. And you don't have to worry about whether you're in the first or second or third or fourth jhana.

I was talking to someone today who finds that he gets to the point where the breath almost seems to stop and he thinks "Ah, almost there, fourth jhāna," but then the mind pulls back. You don't have to think about the breath stopping, you don't want to make the breath stop, because then you end up suppressing the breath, and the body will react at some point when it's not getting enough breath.

The topic of jhana is not jhāna. The topic of jhana is the breath. In other words, you give all your attention to the breath energies in the body. Try to connect them as much as possible when they're positive, and as the breath energy feels more and more full, there will naturally be less of a need to breathe in and out. The breath gets softer and more gentle, and when everything is really well connected, then it will stop. You don't have to make it stop. What you

can do there is to connect everything so if there's a sense, say, that your left flank is lacking energy, someplace in the body connected to that is a little surplus of energy. So you don't need to go outside the body to draw in breath energy, you've got plenty of energy just right here. Just allow things to connect, and everything will flow wherever it's needed without much thought involved at all. The work is in the connecting and allowing.

And as for your commentary as to where you are or what you're doing, think of it as another form of energy. Look for the breath aspect of that thinking. That way, you maintain your focus still with the breath, and the thoughts become less and less and less of a disturbance. This ability comes about by learning how to view your thoughts with a really matter-of-fact attitude that there are times when thinking is useful, and there are times when you have crazy thoughts in your mind. But right now is the time to think as little as possible, to think about one thing, the breath, then maximizing the range of your awareness, the range of the breath through the body, so that you're aware of all the subtle connections that are already there. And you can gradually improve them until the body becomes a better and better place to stay.

Once it's more absorbing here, the felt need to think will get softer and softer. This doesn't mean that you're not going to have disturbing or embarrassing thoughts when you get out of the meditation, but it does mean that, as you gradually come out, you'll see these things more clearly.

It's like noticing the effect that movies have on people. Every once in a long, long while I get to sit on an airplane where the people are watching movies and I've noticed that the images from the movie, even if I just barely look at them, will stick with me for days. And you wonder what these people do, the people who are watching movies on TV and watching the Internet and playing on the Internet all the time. There's so much sloshing around in their minds and in their bodies that they don't notice the impact of individual movies. But it's when you step away and can be away from these things for a while, then you notice the impact.

It's the same with your thoughts. You'll learn how to see your thoughts a lot more clearly by allowing the mind to be still for a while. And part of it will complain, but just notice that complaint as a thought that you don't want to get involved with. You want to learn how to develop your skill here, so that the deeper your concentration, the more sensitive you'll be to the impact of thoughts when you leave concentration. And you see more and more clearly which kinds of thoughts you really don't want to chase after, the ones you just want to breathe through and be done with them.

This is one of the ways in which concentration leads to discernment—discernment of exactly what's happening when a thought occurs, and discerning your ability to step out when you don't want to get involved.