

The Tricks of Denial

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Try to get everyone in your mind on board with the idea that you're going to be meditating right now. If you look around inside, you'll find that there are the voices that want to meditate and voices that want to do something else. In some cases, you can reason with the other members of the committee and they'll be willing to join in. But then there are some others that don't seem to want to listen to reason at all. They have their own reasons that they'll sometimes present to you as to why there are other things you could be doing with this hour. Other times they won't make any presentation at all. They'll just be very quiet and wait for your mindfulness to slip—and then you're off. They've kidnapped you.

So make the best survey you can right now. See how many voices there are and how many you can get together with the meditation. Then try to get with the breath. Watch the breath coming in; the breath going out. But also be on guard for the fact that there may be some other agendas going on. So you have to watch your mind. You need a double focus.

Ajaan Lee talks about this in his book on frames of reference. He says that your alertness is like a pulley that pulls in one direction, then pulls in another direction—back and forth, back and forth. You watch the breath and you watch the mind and then you go back and watch the breath again. Keep your eye on both the breath and the mind. If you find that you slip, try to get back as quickly as you can. That's what ardency is all about. You don't want to leave big gaps for other agendas to come in.

As I said, some of the other agendas seem to have their reasons. But then there are cases where the mind just has a lot of chatter. You may be focused on one topic, or else just lots of different things coming up all at once, and none of them seem to have any rhyme or reason. In cases like that, try to remember the example of what birds do when you get too close to their nest. Years back, I was up in Canada and we saw a loon family—there was a father loon and a mother loon and a little baby loon. I'd never seen a baby loon before, so we paddled over. Then all of a sudden, the father loon went running out to the middle of the lake and made huge displays, flapping its wings and calling, calling, calling, trying to pull our attention in its direction, away from the baby loon.

Well, the mind does that too. Sometimes there's a lot of chatter going on in the mind and it's an attempt to cover up something else. So if you look at it and see that the mind may be a little bit drawn to it, but not all that much drawn to it, or not especially drawn to it at all, but there's still a lot of stuff going on in the mind, that's when you have to hold in mind the realization: This is the father loon—just a lot of chatter. You want to be able to see through that. Ask yourself what else is going on? What other agendas are going on?

Try to make the mind as quiet as possible and see if anything comes up in the midst of the chatter. In other words, you're trying to separate the signal from the noise. And in every case, you would ask yourself, when something comes up, why would you be drawn to that? See things coming and going, and be alert to the fact that there are things right behind the surface—or sometimes, actually closer to your direct awareness, but your attention's being pulled away to the other things.

So look around. See if you can spot anything else that's arising and passing away—that does attract you, that does pull you in. And that's when you use the Buddha's analysis for how to deal with the perceptions, or the feelings or the other types of fabrication that do have a pull over the mind. You look for them arising. You look for them passing away.

Sometimes we read about how discernment is simply knowledge of the arising and passing away of phenomena. That's part of it, but it doesn't stop there. That's looking at wisdom and forgetting the four noble truths. Because when issues arise, you want to see what's the cause, what's behind them. That's seeing the connection between cause and effect—and that's real wisdom. That's real discernment. So in this case, you want to see, when something's arising that pulls the mind in, what's the allure? What do you think you're gaining from thinking in those ways? And then try to balance that with looking at the drawbacks.

Sometimes it seems to be working in a very perverse way, when things that you really don't like about yourself are coming up, and you're doing your best to pull away and to deny that they're there. You can't deny that they're there. In that case, you have to turn around and look at the part of the mind that wants to deny these things and ask how realistic it is. Denial doesn't help anything at all. You can learn how to see things as different members of the committee. And you can learn not to identify with them. But first, you have to figure out what they are so that you can make a choice of whether to identify or not. If you keep pushing them away, pushing them away, they just cling to you more and more, and you cling to them.

So the first thing you've got to do is admit: Okay, there are lots of different members there in the committee, and that old childish trick of just pretending that they're not there doesn't really make them go away. They just go deeper down inside. You've got to have the attitude that's willing to admit whatever comes up in the mind. Only then you can deal with it. So if the flurry in the mind is actually part of a denial, you can learn how to see through that. Something else is going on. The surface activity is not what the real issue is. That's just a distraction.

So try to be as patient as you can. Try to get yourself as still as possible with the breath. Bring the mind to a state of normalcy where it's able to be with anything at all and not react—not that that's the goal of the practice, but that's a technique you learn to use so that you can see more clearly what's coming and going. If the mind isn't still, you can't see comings and goings, because you're coming and going, too, and as you walk into the room, other things will walk into the room with you. As you walk out, they'll walk out with you—right behind you. It's

only if you stand right there at the door and watch who's coming in and who's going out—that's when you can see who's moving.

So the breath is the door where you stay. You try to be as still as possible. And as for the chatter that's eating away at the mind, learn how to distinguish between which chatter is a definite issue and which chatter is part of the mind's own subterfuges. Upasika Kee, when she talks about the different levels of the mind, says that they're all right here. It's not like you go down three inches or four inches and you find something new. They're all right here. It's just that they're displaying themselves with different frequencies or at different volumes. But it's all happening right here.

So remember that when things come up in the mind, often they're not the issue. They're part of the mind's own efforts to disguise the issue. When the Buddha talks about ignorance, he's not talking about just plain old not-knowing, or innocent not-knowing. Sometimes there's intentional not-knowing; intentional delusion; intentional illusions that the mind creates for itself.

The mind has its tricks, so as a meditator you have to learn some tricks of your own. You're dealing with a tricky this mind. have to learn tricks yourself.