

Stop & Think

April 2, 2020

There are two kinds of meditation: the kind where you stop and think, and the kind where you stop and don't think. The Buddha calls these directed and undirected meditations.

Undirected is when nothing much is weighing down the mind. You simply let go of your concerns and find yourself with the breath. You settle in with the breath, you're mindful, alert, and ardent to stay with the breath. And whatever thinking you engage in has to do only with the breath itself and the mind's relationship to the breath: the directed thought and evaluation that eventually get you into right concentration. That's undirected meditation.

Directed, the type of meditation where you have to stop and think, is for times when the mind is entangled with concerns, worries, and responsibilities, and it can't let them go easily. That's when you have to think your way out of them before you can settle down with the breath.

So this is a good time to stop and think, because there are a lot of things to weigh down the mind. Aging, illness, and death, which are ever-present, are now more blatantly present. And because they're moving in and cutting off many of our hopes and desires—many of our hopes and desires that we feel are perfectly legitimate—it gives us a sense of frustration.

But you always have to ask yourself when you're frustrated: "Is the problem with a goal? Have you chosen the wrong goal? Or have you chosen the wrong means to a good goal?" You have to sort through your desires, figure out what exactly is feeling frustrated. If it's a problem with the goal, then you can ask yourself: "What do you really want out of life? What would it be a better thing to look for?"

As the Buddha said, once you have a body, the body is subject to all kinds of attacks, starting from when you were a child, with sticks and stones coming your way because you had a body. If you didn't have a body, these things wouldn't touch you. Aging, illness, and death come because you were born with a body. So one thing you might want to ask yourself is: "Wouldn't it be better to look for a happiness that doesn't require a body?" Remember that life is not something that was thrust on you. You went for it. As the Buddha said, craving is what makes us go from one body to the next in hopes that the next body will satisfy our cravings.

So you can't blame your predicament on other people. I think I've told you the story of a woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang's, a nurse who found herself the victim of a lot of gossip at the hospital where she worked. One day she was feeling really frustrated and overwhelmed with the gossip, so she went

to sit and meditate with Ajaan Fuang. In her meditation she happened to get an image of a hall of mirrors. She saw herself reflected back, back, back, back in two different directions, forward and past, and it made her think about rebirth, and how many times she'd been reborn and probably how many times she'd been the victim of gossip. So after she left her meditation, she went and mentioned the vision to Ajaan Fuang, thinking that he would sympathize with her and comfort her. His response, however, was like a splash of water in her face. He said, "Well, you were the one who wanted to be born to begin with. Who are you going to blame this on?"

It's our desire to find happiness in certain ways that makes us take birth. Sometimes when people would die, their relatives would go see Ajaan Chah and ask him: "Why did so-and-so have to die?" He'd say, "Because they were born." Did he mention bad kamma from the past? Well, there's kamma enough simply in being born. Once you've made the choice to be born, you're going to die. And there's no guarantee how long you're going to be able to live.

I was talking recently with a friend who said that when he was younger, he felt that it was not right that young people die—that death was something that should only happen to the old. But as soon as you're born, the possibility of death is always there. Some people are born and don't even make it out of the womb. Or they come out and they survive just a few days and then they're gone.

We've had the opportunity to be human beings long enough to have learned something about language. We've learned about the Dhamma and had other good opportunities so far. How much longer they're going to last, we don't know. But you have to remember: Death is not the end. You can find hope in that, but you can also find a sense of threat. If you're not skillful, if you come back in the wrong ways, it's going to be hard to find the Dhamma again. And you're going to be suffering again and again. So you ask yourself: "What kind of happiness would you want that would not involve having to have a body?"

There are the formless pleasures of the formless jhanas. Of course, the irony there is that to get into the formless jhanas, you first have to go through form, i.e., through the body. You've got the processes of bodily fabrication, i.e., the breath, and your mental fabrication, and your verbal fabrication. You have to get these all smoothed out so that you can see the mind clearly.

We have to deal with the body first because the interference of the breath, the interference of the pains in the body, makes it hard to see the mind in and of itself. So you have to work through the body first.

We think in these ways as a way of getting the mind to finally settle down.

Ajaan Maha Boowa's image is of two different kinds of trees. Undirected meditation, he says, is like a tree out in the middle of a meadow. If you want to

cut it down, it doesn't involve much calculation as to which direction you should cut it, just whichever one seems to be most natural. You cut and it's down. In directed meditation—where you have to think your way through issues of the day, issues in life, before the mind is willing to settle down—the mind is like a tree among other trees. Its branches are entangled with the branches of the other trees, and the other trees may not provide many openings for it to fall. So you have to think strategically: which branches you cut, which direction you're going to cut it down. or if you have to cut it down in stages. But then when you've thought it through and you follow through, you finally do get the tree down.

So if you find your mind entangled with issues from the Internet—and too many people are spending too much time on the Internet right now; our normal social functions are cut off, social interactions are cut off, so we interact through the net—that's a dangerous place to be. All sorts of theories, all sorts of ideas are out there. And they're not there to help you get your views or your values straight. You get your values straight by sitting very quietly and thinking through: "What do you really want out of life. And what kind of desire is a safe desire? What kind of desire do you want to be latching onto if you find that you can't stay in this body any longer?"

When you realize that you want to go beyond even the formless states—in other words, to total release—then the issues of the world will begin to fade, and your task becomes clear: You've got to get the mind to settle down so that you can see its processes clearly and you can see where the craving is coming from, the craving that keeps you going.

When you think in these ways, then you've thought well. And you know you've thought well because then you can go to the stopping-and-not-thinking kind of meditation and really get to work.