

Oppressed by Old Kamma

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There's a common expression that you shouldn't believe everything you hear. There should also be another expression that goes along with that: You shouldn't believe everything you think. In other words, just because a thought keeps coming into the mind doesn't mean it's true, doesn't mean you have to believe it. After all, all kinds of random things can come in. The effect of past kamma is very evident. You're sitting here determined to stay with the breath and something else comes into the mind—completely unintended. Well, that's coming from your past kamma. So when you consider the source, you realize it's not necessarily something you have to believe.

The problem is that certain thoughts keep coming in again and again and again. And as advertisers and propagandists have discovered, if you repeat something long enough and often enough, people will start assuming: "It must be true." Where did they learn that technique? They learned it from the way the mind treats itself.

But when you become a meditator, you have to realize that these are things you have to free yourself from. You do that by learning to look at thoughts as a process. That's one way of getting out of their power. And so you need the tricks to learn how to deal with them in the same way that people learn the tricks that advertisers and other media specialists know—so that you can gain some freedom from them. You can see, "Oh, now they're playing that trick. Now they're playing this trick." And when you see it as a trick, then you're no longer taken in so easily.

So you've got to learn the tricks of the mind or the tricks of thinking so you don't get taken in. So you step back and look at the process. When something comes into the mind—say a thought of irritation or a thought of boredom comes in—the first question is: "Why should I believe this?" Second question: "Well, what's actually is going on here? What's the process? How did this thought arise? And how does it assume authority?"

Often a particular thought assumes authority because it gets into the body. You have to realize that each thought that comes into the mind, especially thoughts that come and stay or thoughts that keep coming back repeatedly, have a place in the body where they latch hold. There's usually a pattern of tension that goes along with them someplace. Look for that. When a thought comes up, is it associated with a pattern of tension in your neck, in your back, in your arms, in your hands? What's the quality, the feeling tone that goes along with it? Can you

change that feeling tone, at will, using the breath? Sometimes you change the way you breathe, and the thought will go away. And just seeing it as a process like that helps to take away some of its authority and some of your willingness to believe in it, because you see the artificiality of the whole thing.

So when thoughts like this come into the mind, if you can't just brush them away immediately, you have to question them. Remind yourself of the disadvantages of following thoughts like that. They pull you away from your concentration. They get in the way of the work you're trying to do here. Here you have a real luxury—hours and hours and hours of time simply to focus on the mind—and what happens? You get bored or oppressed by the idea that you've got to fill up those hours with something. Well, why do you have to fill it up? There's only one little simple task that's being asked of you, which is to stay with the breath, each breath, as it happens.

This leads to another issue that comes up with many of these thoughts, which is that they start thinking about the past and future. They think about how long you've been sitting here. They think about how much longer you have to sit here. Can you stand it? Can you take it? Well, if you pile the past and the future onto the present moment, of course, you can't take it. The present moment just buckles under the weight of all that time. So when you see that kind of thinking coming in, you have the freedom to let it go. Think of that as a freedom. You have that choice. So many of the habits of the mind are there because we don't realize we have the choice just to say "No" to them.

And this is a case where you really can "Just say No." After all, who's there to enforce that kind of thinking? Nobody. Nothing. There's nobody behind it. It's simply the force of habit. And you can break the force of habit. Partly, it's a matter of allowing yourself to imagine that you can break that force. And then try it. Part of the mind will say, "Oh no, you can't. Even though you may break it once, I'm going to come back." Okay, you can just break it again and again and again. Don't listen to that voice, either.

Because often when these thoughts come into the mind, there's not just one of them. They're not just one voice. There are subsidiary voices behind them and you feel overwhelmed by the crowd: all these different voices and just one of you. There are all these many layers. Well, you take them apart, layer by layer by layer, and learn not to be taken in by any of the layers. So when a thought comes in the mind about how oppressive it is to have free time, stop and remind yourself, "What's oppressive about free time?"

You have the choice to stay with the breath. This breath and then the next breath and that's the only breath you have to worry about—the only piece of time

you have to worry about. You don't have to worry about the hours ahead of you or the hours behind you. They'll take care of themselves. All you're responsible for is the breath right now. All you're responsible for is the single thought that comes into the mind right now, the single distraction that comes into the mind right now. And that way, you find it a lot easier to deal with them one by one.

Sometimes, though, it's not the past or the future that's oppressive, it's the present moment. Well again, look and see exactly how much of this feeling of oppression or irritation is simply a present sensation and how much of it is the accumulation: This has been going on for so long, so long. You sit here and meditate as a group and sometimes somebody's breathing is noisy and you tell yourself, "How much longer can I take this?" Well, you're only asked to take it one moment at a time. As for the past, you let it go away. You don't have to carry it around. As for the future, you don't have to carry that around either. It'll take care of itself.

This principle applies not only to minor irritations but even to pain. Often when we have trouble dealing with pain in meditation it's because we're carrying the past pain and the future pain in addition to the present pain. So you remind yourself: You don't have to carry that. What's past is past. It's gone. It's no longer oppressing you. The fact that it's oppressing you is your choice. You have that choice. The same with the future: You have the choice to think about the future and how much longer it's going to be before the bell rings and you can stop meditating, or you have the choice not to think about it. The little voice in the mind will come up and say, "Well, that's irresponsible." What's irresponsible about that? Each moment can take care of itself. You can handle each moment, as it comes, as it comes, as it comes. You don't have to handle it beforehand.

And as you build up your skill for dealing precisely and specifically with the present moment, you'll find that each moment does become a lot easier to handle. What this means is that you're learning to see through these voices that come and try to pull you away. If you actually look at them, say: "Who's there? Who's saying that?" Well, there's nobody. Quiet. "So if there's nobody there, why do I have to listen to you?" You start seeing how irresponsible these voices are. When you try to pin them down, they run away. So why listen to irresponsible voices in your head?

These are just a few of the means of dealing with obstructive emotions and voices as they come in. Look at the physical side of whatever thought is coming in and pulling you away from the meditation. And then listen very carefully to the voices themselves. If you look at the physical side, you can just breathe right through it and that weakens the voices right there. Then you look at the voice, and

then you realize there's nobody there. It's just a habit pattern. And no matter how old the habits may be, you can change them simply by refusing to follow them.

You've got something a lot better to follow here: The Buddha's instructions on how to bring the mind under your control: which thoughts are the ones that are worth following; which are the ones worth putting aside. You can ask yourself, "If you follow those voices, where will they take you?" They're certainly not going to take you to the Dhamma. They're certainly not going to take you to the end of suffering. They just keep pulling you into the old patterns you've been following for who knows how long. Is that where you want to go?

And sometimes you say "yes" because it's familiar territory. But then familiar territory is full of what? It's full of suffering, full of disappointment, full of dissatisfaction. The new territory the Buddha is asking you to go to is unfamiliar, but everybody who's been there has said it's the end of suffering. So why don't you give it a try? Instead of giving in to the irritation or giving in to the boredom, just allow those thoughts to cease. Allow them to pass away into the silence. Come back to the breath. Or replace them with a better thought: Reminding yourself that you've got this opportunity to meditate. You don't know how much longer it's going to be. None of us knows how much longer we're going to be here. So you've got this moment right now. This is something you can be sure about. So focus all of your attention here. Make sure this moment is well handled.

And as for your ability to handle moments in the future, well, leave that for the future to take care of. If you develop good habits now, you'll make it that much easier to handle things in the future. Don't believe all the pictures your mind paints about what's going to happen in the future. What's future is uncertain, the Buddha said. What's past is gone. All you've got to worry about is the future right here, right here. See this moment clearly. And if you can maintain that attitude for this moment and then this moment and this moment, then the Buddha said that's what constitutes an auspicious day.

Some things in life you take care of moment by moment by moment: That's all you have to worry about, this moment right here, this moment right here. And then if random thoughts come in, remind yourself that they're the result of past kamma. What you're responsible is for your current decision right now. Are you going to follow the thoughts or are you not? Sometimes an old habit comes in and there's a sense of inevitability about it: that no matter how much you're going to fight it, you're going to have to give in eventually because that's been the pattern in the past. Well, at least for this moment, don't believe it. And as you build up more and more moments of making this choice, then you realize that those habits are not inevitable. You can change them.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa said, “It’s better to put up a fight and then lose, rather than not putting up any fight at all.” Because if you keep putting up a fight, after a while there comes a time when you get tired of losing. At the same time, you begin to see the weaknesses of these habits that you didn’t see before. If you simply just roll over with them every time they come in, then, of course; they’re going to seem inevitable. But if you give it a try, you may just find an opening that you hadn’t imagined.

And that’s what creates greater freedom in the mind. You’re no longer a slave to old thought patterns. You can learn to think in new ways, ways that are helpful. You can start playing with your perception of the moment, playing with your perceptions of your distractions. If the sound of somebody breathing is bothering you, well, you can think of it as the sound of an animal. If an animal were breathing that way, would it bother you? No. Well, then, what’s the difference? “Well, an animal can’t help itself, but people can help themselves.” Well, why does that make any difference to you? It’s simply the sound. Leave it just at the sound.

By playing with your perceptions, you begin to take apart a lot of the stories you built up around them—that make them oppressive, that make them irritating. Whatever. And you begin to expose those stories, so that you can see how illogical they are.

What this all comes down to is that you have to learn not to be oppressed by old habits in the present moment. Look at each present moment as an opportunity to act, as something that you can learn to deal skillfully with—using your breath as your basis. And your ability to ask questions—when the mind says something that you know is going to pull you away from the meditation, and you put a question mark next to it, “Does it have to be that way?”: That ability to question things is going to open the possibility for freedom.