

## *Pulling Out of the Narratives*

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When you meditate, you have to be selective in what you focus on. There are all kinds of things you could focus on right now: the sound of the crickets, the distant sound of the traffic, the sound of the trees being watered, aches and pains in different parts of your body, different kinds of thoughts coming up. There's lots of stuff coming up through your various senses. So it's important that you learn how to focus on things that are helpful. As for things that are not helpful, just let them go. This is how we solve problems in general, through the quality of attention: what you attend to, what you don't.

We have to watch out for patterns of attending to things that are not really helpful, such as the narratives we bring, the world views we bring, to the meditation. Sometimes these things can really get in the way. This concerns not only things outside, but can also your personal history as a meditator, things that tend to happen in the meditation. You learn to anticipate them. Often you lose sight of the fact that you're the person creating those experiences, creating those patterns. The fact of the anticipation is just one more way of bringing that old pattern back.

So if you see it's an unhelpful pattern, you've got to learn how to question it. Learn to focus on things you ordinarily would not focus on, to see if they can help pull you out of that pattern, out of that narrative.

It's like the story they tell of the satellite that discovered the ozone hole over Antarctica. For years it was bringing in data that showed there was an ozone hole, but the computer program that received the data had been designed to throw out any weird data, any unexpected data like that. As a result, for years the ozone hole was missed. When people finally noticed the data, they went back and discovered that the data had been there all those years, just that the computer had been programmed to throw the data out.

In the same way, we program our minds to focus on some things and miss other things, and often we miss important things. So if you find that you expect a particular pattern in the meditation that's not all that helpful—say, that you tend to have good sittings at certain times of the day and not-so-good sittings at other times of the day—try to question that. Ask yourself exactly how much you're contributing to that pattern. For example, in the middle of the day when it's hot, most people say that this is sure to be the worst meditation in the course of the day. After a

while, you begin to expect that it's not going to be very good, and as a result, it's not very good.

So when you're sitting in the middle of the day, any thought that comes up that reminds you what time of day it is, just throw the thought out. It's useless information. You might say, how can you help but notice where the sun is? Well, don't notice it. As soon as the mind takes note of that fact, say, "This is useless information. Throw it out. Get back to the breath." You'll find that the breath at the middle of the day is not that much different from the breath at any other time of the day. You may feel sweaty, you may feel the heat, but you don't have to focus on those things. Get really focused on the breath.

It's like that music school I visited one time in Seoul, Korea, where all the musicians were sitting in one big room, everybody playing really loud, yet each person really focused on what he or she was doing. The trick of course was how to focus totally on what you're doing, totally on what's really important, and let everything else go. It's like learning to be a performer. It's one thing to practice on your own, but something else to step out on the stage in front of other people with all these other emotions suddenly coming up. You have to learn how not to pay attention to them. Just sit down and do what you've got to do.

There have been times in other parts of your life when you've been able to discount useless information because you knew that you had to discount it. So when you're meditating, learn to take that habit and put it to a useful purpose.

Or if you see the energy movement in your body developing in a familiar but unbeneficial way, focus on other things. Focus on sensations that would call that energy movement, that old pattern, into question, so that it doesn't have to follow the same old patterns over and over again. It's not that it happens on its own, you know. You're playing a role in shaping it. So you've got to watch out for any decision in your mind that follows along with that old narrative. Create a new narrative. It may seem artificial, but so was the older narrative. The reason it doesn't seem artificial anymore is that you've been through that old narrative many, many times.

It's like watching *Casablanca* over and over and over, month after month after month, on the movie channel. After a while, you forget that there were decisions made to make the movie this way. It could have come out in many different ways. It didn't have to be the way it was. But you watch it many times and it acquires an inevitability.

So remind yourself that these things are not inevitable. Take the pattern of the mind being still for a while and then suddenly refusing to be still. That can happen a couple of times, but it's not necessarily a pattern that has to repeat. In other

words, you don't have to believe the old patterns. Learn to question them. People who've been able to dig their way out of depression find that the two most useful questions, with regard to the things that you believe to be true but are making you depressed, are (1), does it really have to be true? Is it really true? Learn to put a question mark next to it. And (2), what if the opposite were true? Learn to apply those same questions to bad patterns in your meditation. Learn to deprogram yourself.

I found it interesting when I was reading about those two questions. Those are the questions Ajaan Lee has you ask as soon as an insight comes up. He says to learn to turn around and ask: What if the opposite were true? Then you find that in this vast field of sensations, there are potential sensations that could actually fall in line with the opposite narrative. So follow those for a while and see where they lead. This way, your insight develops two eyes, not just one. You gain a greater sense of freedom, a greater sense of control. You don't have to follow your old anticipated pattern. You don't have to go through the same narratives again and again and again. You can create new movies in the mind.

In the beginning, it may seem difficult, but it's worth the effort to get out of these unskillful ruts. This is one of the purposes of meditation: to remind you that there are more things possible than you might have imagined. Even in simple things like the way your breath goes, or the way your concentration goes, learn to open your mind to new opportunities, new possibilities. Always keep an eye out for the possibility that you're shaping your experience more than you might realize.

Fiction writers find this happening all the time. They set up a group of characters in their heads, and the characters are totally invented by their writers. But you follow through with them, and occasionally you find a character doing something totally unexpected, as if the character had a life of its own. That's simply because you lose sight of the fact you're creating the story on a deeper level, in addition to the conscious level.

The same happens in meditation. We have some subconscious expectation, subconscious anticipations, and they really do shape the way things go. So no matter how inevitable the narrative may seem, remind yourself: It's something constructed. It's put together by causes, and the causes could be put together in other ways. You have that freedom.

So try to develop the mindfulness, the alertness, and the discernment that allow you to take advantage of that potential freedom. The things you fear don't have to happen. The old comfortable narratives that are comfortable like old shoes: They don't look particularly good, they may not be particularly in good

shape anymore, but they are comfortable. So you go for them again and again and again, even if they twist your feet in unhealthy ways. Try to see if you can break things down into smaller pieces and put them together in a new way.

This is why the Buddha has you analyze things in terms of the aggregates, sense media, and properties. Break things down into small units and see what other things can be created out of those units. A lot of the discernment lies right there—in particular, the kind of discernment that leads to release. Release is going to be something unexpected. It's outside our normal patterns of thinking.

So a useful lesson in meditation is to remind yourself that there is more in this world than is dreamt of in your philosophy—that old line from Shakespeare. There are more possibilities in the mind than there are dreamt of in your narratives. So try to deconstruct the narratives, see what's left, and then see what other narratives, other ways of understanding the mind, you could create that would be more useful and productive.