

Look in the Mirror

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Ajaan Lee talks about using the breath as a mirror for the mind. As you focus on the breath, you'll notice that if you're putting too much pressure on the breath, the breath feels uncomfortable. You want to give the breath as much freedom as possible to flow throughout the body—and that requires a light touch.

Even though he talks about working with the breath energies in the body, spreading them here, spreading them there, you notice that if you push them too hard or put pressure on them, it's a sign that there's too much desire there. So, the breath can tell you if things are going right or not going right in the mind.

Or if, when you're going through the day, a little bit of anger comes up, there'll be a catch in the breath, a tightness in the breath in some part of the body. The more sensitive you are to the breath as you go through the day, the more quickly you notice these warnings.

So, you're watching the breath as you go through the day, you're watching your breath here as you're meditating—to see what it shows you about the mind.

This image of a mirror has a long history in the Dhamma. When the Buddha was introducing his son to the practice, one of the first images he used was of a mirror. He said that just as you would look into a mirror for reflection, you look into your actions—bodily actions, verbal actions, mental actions—and reflect on them before you act, while you're acting, when the action is done.

- Before you act, of course, you're looking at the intention. You want to make sure that the intention is right: no harming yourself, no harming any other people.
- Then as you act *only* on the intentions where you anticipate no harm, you look at the actions while you're doing them: What kind of results are you actually getting? If you see any harm, you stop. If you don't see any harm, continue.
- When you're done, look at the long-term results and reflect again. If you see that you made a mistake, you resolve not to repeat that mistake. Have a sense of shame around it, realizing that it was beneath you, and you want to do better next time. That's healthy shame. If there was no mistake, no harm, then take joy in the practice—joy in the fact that you've acted in a harmless way, you're learning, you're progressing in the path—and continue trying to progress.

Now, obviously this applies to outside actions, but it also applies to your meditation. As you settle down with the breath, this is what directed thought and evaluation are all about. You direct your thoughts to the breath, you focus on it, you're alert to the breath, and then you evaluate how things are going.

Here again, you'll notice if you're putting too much pressure on the breath. If it feels squeezed or constrained, lighten up a bit, back off a bit. But if you back up too much, you start wandering around and you lose touch with the breath. So reflect again: What's *just-right* right now? Try to maintain that sense of just-rightness, a sense of balance, a sense of equipoise where the different parts of the body are not too heavy, not too light. You're not straining too much, but you're also not letting things just wander aimlessly around. You're trying to stay with the breath as continually as you can. It's simply a matter of learning what is just the right touch.

This, too, is learned through reflection. You notice that this principle the Buddha taught Rahula applies very much in the meditation: You get the mind to settle down for a while—allow it to enjoy its sense of peace—and then you ask yourself, “Is there still some disturbance here?”

In the beginning, the disturbance is in the directed thought and evaluation themselves. See if you can let them go. Just be with the sensation of the breath. Become one with the sensation of the breath and see if you can maintain a balance that way. Then, as things settle down further step by step by step, you keep asking yourself, “Is there still something here that's bothering the mind, something that's a disturbance?”

Don't look for the disturbance outside. Look for the disturbance *inside*. What is the mind doing, even in its concentration? When you notice what the disturbance is, then you let it go.

Now, if you let it go and you lose concentration, that's a sign that you're not ready to let it go yet. So you come back and pick it up again. You're learning to read yourself. You're using your concentration as a mirror for the mind and you're finding states of mind that are more and more peaceful, more and more solid.

This is where you run into a principle that Ajaan Lee talks quite a lot about. Other teachers in the forest tradition also talk about it: that you begin to get a sense that you've found something permanent inside—something solid, unchanging.

Well, watch it: It can either be a state of concentration or it can simply be a state of mind, an attitude—like the attitude of *the knower* that's able to watch anything, any change, and not get upset. It seems so permanent, so solid, so wise. After all, it accepts the truths of the three characteristics—or the three perceptions. It sees things as inconstant, stressful, not-self. But as the Buddha taught, seeing those things can simply take you to a very refined state of concentration. It's attained by discernment, but it's still a state of concentration—and it too is fabricated.

Ajaan Lee has a good way of dealing with that kind of issue. He says, “You see that there are these things that are inconstant, but there's something else that seems to be constant”: either the state of concentration or the insight that allows you to be with change and not feel

affected by change. He says, “Okay, let it be constant. But realize that even with constant things, you’ve got to let go.”

That’s how you stay safe. You reflect that there is some clinging there as well. And you’re going to see it clearly only if you’ve made a *habit* of reflection.

As the mind settles down, keep noticing that you’re *doing* something to keep it there. You want to be sensitive to that. Oftentimes it’s hard to be sensitive because everything is just so peaceful and so still. But if you’re alert to the fact, “Okay, there’s still something fabricated here, even though it seems very, very solid and very secure,” then you can take apart your attachment to that, too.

After all, as the Buddha said, concentration has its allure and its drawbacks. Discernment has its allure and its drawbacks as well.

It’s interesting how he talks about that fivefold way of examining things that the mind might be stuck on even on this level. In the beginning, you use it to examine things that are obviously unskillful. You want to see how they originate, how they pass away, what their allure is, what their drawbacks are; and then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks until you lose your passion for getting involved.

For example, with sensuality: It has its allure, but it has its strong drawbacks. Think of all those images the Buddha gives of the drawbacks of sensuality, to make you come to your senses, to reflect on the fact that when you feel strong sensual desire, part of the mind actually thinks that it becomes attractive as it gets attracted to other things. But you have to see sensual desire not as a position of strength or as a position of cleverness. It’s actually putting yourself in a position of weakness and danger. When you see those drawbacks, you realize you’re better getting out of that: That’s the escape.

Now, what’s interesting is the Buddha applies this analysis not only to unskillful mental states, but, ultimately, also to the path—as when he has you analyze the five faculties: Conviction has its allure, but it has its drawbacks. Persistence has its allure, but it has its drawbacks. The same with mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

Even these are things you have to gain escape from. And how do you do that? Through reflection. So look at the practice as a mirror. The breath is a mirror; your actions are a mirror. And the word *action* here applies not only to obvious actions outside, but also to the actions of the mind as you’re trying to get it concentrated, as you’re trying to come to discernment.

There’s a passage where Ven. Ananda compares the path to crossing a stream going from one attachment to the next. You could think of rocks in the middle of the stream, and you hop from one rock to the next, to the next—with the rocks standing for various levels of concentration and discernment. There’s nothing wrong with depending on these things, simply that you want to make sure that you don’t latch on to any of them as being your goal. Otherwise, you’ll be stuck in the middle of the stream.

You want to get to the other side. And it's through reflection that you see that even very stable-seeming states of mind, stable-seeming insights are fabricated. They have their drawbacks. Only then can you gain true escape.

So work on this habit of reflection, being very sensitive to your own actions, because that's how your discernment becomes all-around. And only when it's all-around is it really safe.