

Dealing with Disturbing Thoughts

When Thoughts Take Over

The untrained mind is subject to thoughts and emotions on a regular basis and exists in a state of perpetual distraction. Śamatha or calming meditation aims to quiet the thoughts gradually and to reduce the volume of thinking activity in the mind. As the mind settles it is better able to maintain attention on an object without distraction.

Before this calming happens, however, distracting thoughts can arise that forcibly overwhelm our meditation practice. Such thoughts will frequently have strong emotional content.

This might happen as a result of external circumstances — grief, danger, shock, a disorienting change in our life situation etc. Or, it might happen as the result of unconscious internal forces emerging into consciousness — submerged memories, repressed feelings etc.

Essentially, the source of all such occurrences is our own karma. What we have done in previous existences has laid the table for us in this life. How we have reacted to events in the past has shaped our reactivity to new events.

In particular, we have allowed the strong emotions — fear, anger, lust etc. — to shape our unconscious biases and habits of mind. These habits of mind, in turn, determine our thoughts and behaviour in the present.

Don't Try to Suppress Strong Thoughts

Acknowledge that the thoughts are your own, they are an expression of your karma. Admit that they are real and that they are happening to you. They are part of the truth about who you are.

Do not try to suppress them. Rather, allow each of them to emerge of its own accord.

Don't try to cover over the thoughts with "good" or "nice" thoughts. Be aware that your karma — consisting of all your experience and all your genetic and evolutionary inheritance — knows you better than you know yourself. It is not easily fooled by shallow attempts to hide the truth.

Don't try to do battle with your thoughts. In the short term you are not meditating, so you have lost already. In the long term you will lose because the thoughts have power over you as long as you are engaged with them. You are effectively allowing the thoughts to reinforce themselves. You are providing new fuel for them to grow and spin off new versions of themselves.

What to Do

Try your best to keep meditating. However, if the thoughts are overwhelming and you are unable to free yourself of them, you may have to suspend the meditation session. It is better not to stew in the thoughts — this will strengthen their hold on you. Instead, take a break. Get up and do some qigong, rub your face, go for a walk, make a cup of tea. Do something to take your mind off the problem. Come back to meditation when your mind is freer. If the thoughts persist and you are unable to reestablish meditation over several days, don't hesitate to avail yourself of the advice of a trusted spiritual advisor.

In general, when disturbing thoughts arise in meditation, you need to make a sincere effort to detach yourself from them. Sincerity means you are not pretending, lying to yourself, making a half-hearted attempt. Detachment is the means by which you can lessen the power that thoughts and emotions have over you.

- Don't become involved in the thoughts — listening to their story, allowing them to play out, trying to analyze and understand them. In short, don't react to them and don't continue to think them.
- Pay no attention to whatever arises whether it's concepts, images, emotions, sensations, spontaneous movements or what have you. They arise from karma and have lives of their own that do not involve you. You are separate from them. Keep your distance.
- Maintain your practice. Stay relaxed and settled. Focus, without using any concepts, on the object of your meditation — breath, seat, feet, mantra, open awareness etc. Stay there and allow the thoughts and phenomena to pass through you and exit.

Improvement

The process of detaching and letting go of thoughts and emotions is one of clearing karma out of the body-mind. The stored information of karma needs to emerge energetically. Often it will exit physically. It can only do this if it does not meet with obstruction in the form of the thinking mind paying attention to it.

If you make a sincere effort to detach and if you regularly return your awareness to your practice, you will weaken the thoughts. Your karmic load will be decreased and your mind will be freer. As your meditation becomes more stable, thoughts will have less hold on you and less ability to distract you.