

“Living Meditation Living Insight” by Dr. Thynn Thynn

Staying with the Moment

Student: You say I can meditate in daily life by cultivating sati (paying attention) in my mind. But I find that very difficult; my mind is too distracted.

Thynn: That is not unusual. You see, to focus on your mind as you function in everyday life, you need to turn your mind inside out. Indeed, your mind must be strong and focused in order to be mindful of itself. So naturally it is difficult to focus on your mind if you are agitated or distracted.

Student: How can I start then?

Thynn: Try being mindful of whatever you are doing at the moment — walking, sitting, bathing, cleaning, looking at a flower. You can do this at any time and in any place. As you train your mind to focus, you will find you are less distracted. Later, as you go on, you can be mindful of your thoughts and emotions as they arise.

Suppose you are driving. You have to pay attention to the driving, don't you? Your mind has to be there at the time and place of driving, concentrating on the road, watching the other drivers. You cannot afford to be distracted too much by other thoughts. It is something like meditation on the task at hand. But often we do not carry out other tasks in this concentrated way.

Student: Why not?

Thynn: Probably because they are less dangerous than driving. But you can apply the same principle to other activities. Suppose you are eating. If your mind is distracted, you may not even be aware of tasting the food, let alone enjoying it. Only when you focus on eating can you really enjoy the food.

The same is true even in passive activities. Suppose you are sitting on a bus. Try simply to be where you are, rather than letting your mind wander. Train your mind to focus on your surroundings. Be aware of the other people on the bus, how fast the bus is going, and where it is going. This is a very good way to start meditation. Simply be where you are rather than letting your mind roam.

Student: I have tried being mindful of the moment. But it is strenuous and I get all tangled up.

Thynn: For goodness sakes, staying with the moment is only a figure of speech. It is not a commandment to be followed rigidly. This is not a proficiency test. You must understand this from the outset; otherwise you will be tied up in knots trying too hard every second of the day.

If you become too involved with staying in the moment, you lose the art of living — of free flowing.

You must realize that staying with the moment is just a means to break the mind's old habits. Usually the mind flitters between thoughts and feelings about the past, present and future. Staying with the moment is just a way to train the mind to cease flitting.

It is not important that you be with the moment every single moment of the day. What is important is that you learn to get out of the constant mental run-around and to be more focused and grounded.

Once you break the habit of the roaming mind, you will find you are more centered and more with the present moment.

Student: What do we gain from this?

Thynn: That is a very pertinent question. Of course, you will have better concentration, but you can achieve concentration without learning the art of meditation. Many activities — golf, chess, reading — enhance concentration.

Student: What is the difference between those activities and moment- to-moment meditation?

Thynn: If you look into the process involved in those activities, you will see an element of desire — the desire to achieve perfection, to win a game, to feel good, whatever. You are motivated by desire. Also, there is an end to the activity and so to the concentration. Concentration is also very important in meditation, but it is not everything. If we simply concentrate, we will not get any further benefit. To meditate, it is crucial to be mindful without desire, without aversion, without likes and dislikes, and without goals.

If you can be mindful without judgments and without likes and dislikes, then you are practicing with an inner silence or equanimity, called upekkha in Pali.

This is true in both formal sitting meditation and in the informal, unstructured meditation we are discussing now. Two elements are involved: staying with the moment and viewing everything without likes and dislikes.

Student: Oh, it's not that easy. We have to do more than just notice our surroundings.

Thynn: No, it's not easy. That's why it's better to start slowly by focusing on a particular moment. You may not be good at it all at once. But you will find that this practice of staying with the moment facilitates the inner silence. If you concentrate on the moment, and if your concentration is good, then no stray thoughts will enter your mind. As you practice, not only will you be more focused, but you will also become more alert and sensitive to what is happening around you. When your mindfulness is strong, then you can direct your attention inward to your mind, your emotions or your thoughts.

Student: So just being mindful is not enough?

Thynn: That's right. Being mindful is not sufficient. It is only a means. What is crucial is incorporating equanimity or upekkha into your mindfulness.

Student: Will upekkha (equanimity) lead to inner silence?

Thynn: Yes, the only way that will lead the mind to silence is upekkha. Upekkha is not just a product of meditation training. It is itself a tool in meditation. When you become proficient at looking with equanimity at your own mind, your thoughts and your emotions, then this upekkha approach will also spill over into other areas of life. You will begin to listen, look, feel and relate to everything with upekkha (equanimity).

Just mindfulness and concentration do not constitute meditation; equanimity must be a constant ingredient.

Student: Doesn't upekkha (equanimity) mean detachment?

Thynn: Sometimes it is translated as detachment, but that translation is very inadequate. You have to understand that upekkha transcends both detachment and attachment. When you are detached, you may also become indifferent if you are not careful. This indifference can lead to dissociation and subtle rejection. Upekkha transcends not only non-attachment, but also rejection. The mind is very tricky and has many nuances you have to be aware of.

The full essence of upekkha is to go beyond attachment and detachment, beyond likes and dislikes, to relate to things as they are.

So it is crucial that you begin your mindfulness right from the start on the basis of upekkha, the nondualistic, the Middle Way. When you can view the world and your own mind or yourself with upekkha, then you are already on the right path of meditation.