

Coach Thyself: The Mind in Meditation

THERE'S THIS VIDEO, TEN QUESTIONS FOR THE DALAI LAMA. Blockbuster has it. I'm sure Netflix must also. If you watch it, apart from stunning visuals of India and Tibet, set to beautiful music—you will see two things. On the one hand, the movie contains a visual chronicle of the atrocities China has committed against the people and spirituality of Tibet. Honestly, I wept. And on the other, you watch images of the Dalai Lama growing up, and an interview with him in which he is asked questions about this whole, terrible experience. And the thing is—he's laughing. To paraphrase, he sounds like this: "Yes it's horrible what they're doing to us, ha ha ha... and we really need to honor them as a people, ha ha--and talk to them with honesty and integrity." His laughter is not sarcastic. It's absolutely childlike. Very quickly, you realize, this man is either an idiot or a saint.

Now if he's a saint, and this present-tense enjoyment of the interview is as real as it seems—how does he do it? Clearly, he's not in denial. He spreads his non-violent, tolerate-all-religions gospel everywhere, and spends endless hours personally comforting refugees. But the other thing he does, which is much less prominent in the film, is spend equally many hours meditating. What I'd like to suggest here, in explanation of his laughter, is that he's never not meditating. And that such laughter and easy presence can be the fruit of your meditations as well. And though, as a coach, my job is to elicit answers from within you—still, at times, I'm allowed to share perspectives and ask what you think of them.

To say, "In meditation, we quiet the mind"—that's the usual starting point. But it's already lacking. Better to go immediately further and add, "and we begin that by placing the body in a balanced, relaxed state." That said, going back now to mind, we are trying to stop an endless parade of thoughts about the future and the past, along with our emotional reactions to them. Well, you can't do that. You cannot, so to speak, "get there from here." There's an ancient analogy that helps explain this.

Among the four elements, the intellect is likened to air, and the emotions to water. Both of these are fluids. Except for the fact that water moves more slowly, and carries much more weight than air—their behavior is exactly similar. Pushing fluids around creates eddies, loopbacks. Instead of smooth flow, which goes where you pushed it, you get a little flow and a lot of turbulence. Visually, you might think of those huge, roiling clouds of smoke and ash being pushed from a volcanic eruption. The harder the push, the greater the turbulence. So the thing is, all those thoughts, and their heavier buddies, the feelings that get going with them—they already are turbulence. Any effort you make to "stop" them is just another push. "Stopping" one will just start three more.

There's a kind of classic experience meditators often have that illustrates how subtle, light, and elusive the fluid of our thoughts is—how quickly and endlessly it can loop back and reflect on itself. Let's say you've managed to stay focused just simply on your breath, in and out, for a while. It's going great. In a little burst of happiness, you think, "Wow, I'm really doing it." And then you realize, aw nuts—that was a thought. Thinking that took me away from my breath and ended my successful run. And then you realize that, well nuts, becoming aware that it took you away—that's still another thought... Which is itself yet still another thought. "Help," you say. "It's endless. I'm trapped."

Do you see this? We are dealing here with infinite eddies of quicksilver mind stuff, with endless reflective loopbacks. And maybe when that little cry for help erupted, the heavier fluid, a feeling of fear around perhaps being trapped—that also started to swirl around. And like as not, something even heavier than the feeling, such as some muscles in your body—they clenched up. And there goes your relaxed state. So here's the key. You cannot "stop" turbulence. You can only leave it alone, refrain from the pushes that feed it, and let it die down on its own.

In meditation, you are looking for the reflection of the full moon in the surface of an agitated lake. It's an old Zen



metaphor. As you stop disturbing the lake, you will start to see the moon. The more you see the moon, the less the ripples matter and the easier it is to just let them swirl on down. They'll go away. They are not you, really, anyway. And gosh maybe actually it's the moon that's you. Whatever made you think you were the ripples? For me personally, the most valuable tool I have in meditating is just a kind of patient, expectant waiting. I'm being patient with the ripples, and waiting to glimpse more moon.

What the Dalai Lama exemplifies is the kind of life this leads to—not disengaged, fully engaged actually, but rather dis-identified. He's not the ripples in his or his people's experience. The clash between China and the Tibetan people is a terrible form of turbulence. But this is the ultimate result of what Eckart Tolle, in *The New Earth*, calls "the insanity of identifying with thoughts." Turbulence in the minds of millions produces turbulence in their feelings, which produces turbulence in and then between their bodies, which produces the cataclysmic wars and vendettas between their social and ethnic groups. Despite the horror of what has happened to his people, because the Dalai Lama's life is also his meditation, he knows that pushing violently back against it is just more turbulence. It won't cure anything.

At the end of the movie, when asked what the hopes are for peace in the Middle East, the Dalai Lama says, "too much emotion there... it needs to die down... I would say they need more festivals, ha ha... more picnics!" Why do you think he said that? What's your take on these ideas about mind and meditation? How can they help you? ▲