Distracting Thoughts

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There are many reasons why we choose the breath as the focus for our meditation. One is that it’s what the texts call “gaya-sankara.” It’s the factor that fashions your experience of the body right here and now. And so as you get in touch with the breath, get sensitive to the breath, work with the breath, you find that you can make your experience of the body in the present moment a lot more pleasant than it might otherwise be. This makes it easier to settle down. Because you find there may be aches and pains in different parts of the body, and there are cases when simply changing the way you breathe, either changing the rhythm, changing the depth, or changing which muscles in the body are involved in the breathing process, can make the pain go away. It’s as simple as that. Some pains are caused by the way you breathe. And if you get in touch with that fact, you’ve got a very useful skill. This becomes especially apparent when there’s severe pain or a long-term illness. In fact, when I was in Thailand and had malaria, I found after a couple days that the muscles I normally use to breathe were just getting worn out. It became more and more difficult just to breathe. It was a painful process. And then I remembered a John Lee’s instructions about the difference between the spots in the head where the breath energy could come in and out. So I focused my attention on those spots and just allowed myself to conceive of the breath coming in and out there instead of the nose. And all of a sudden I found that I was using a different set of muscles to breathe, and it was a lot easier. So this is an important skill. Some people may wonder, “We’re here to learn about the Four Noble Truths and the First Noble Truth, which is stress and pain.” But you don’t really understand stress and pain unless you play with the causes. At the same time, it’s difficult to focus on them if you’re feeling threatened by the pain, if you’re feeling overwhelmed by the pain, if you have a sense that you have a handle on it. It’s not so threatening, and it’s a lot easier to look at it with a more detached curiosity. To ask questions to yourself. What is this pain? What is this sensation that we call pain? What happens when you don’t label it pain? What happens when you breathe differently? You’re a lot more open to trying different ways of approaching the pain. So this is one of the reasons we focus on the breath. It makes it easier to settle down. Another reason is because it helps us get more sensitive to the whole process of how thinking occurs in the body and mind, because it is a body and mind process. When a thought occurs, there’ll be a slight stirring right at that border where the mind and the body meet at the breath. When the mind begins to settle down and stay with the breath, it gets more sensitive to the breath, you begin to see this process very clearly. This is important, because a lot of insight can come just watching the process as it’s happening. Of course, all too often we’re not watching the process, we’re watching the little world that gets created by the breath. So that the background processes that bring that world into being and keep that world going get hidden from view. It’s like the scenery at the back of a stage. It hides all sorts of activity by the stagehands, by the lighting crew, by the actors and actresses that are waiting to come on or just come off the plane. If it weren’t for that backdrop there, a lot of the illusion would be gone. One of the things we’re trying to do here in the meditation is to take down the backdrop, so that we can destroy the illusion of these thoughts and look at them as a process. So this is another good reason to be sensitive. It’s not that thoughts are going to come from someplace else. They’ll come from a different part of the body sometimes, from the one you’re focusing on. But there is that stirring that’s right in the very beginning of a thought process. It’s hard to say whether it’s physical or mental. In the very beginning, it’s at the meeting point of the two. Then there’s a perception that you place on it, saying, “Well, this is a thought about x, and there’s a question. Do you want to follow it?” And oftentimes, there’s a “yes.” These steps happen so quickly that it’s hard to … They seem almost automatic. But as you get more and more sensitive to the process, you see there are these stages. And before you see the stages, you first have to learn how to destroy the thinking process, abort it. That way, you’re more in control of it, and you’re a lot more sure of the issue of whether or not you’re “watching” your thoughts, simply indulging in thoughts. So to prevent the indulgence, you go through a period in your practice that, as soon as you sense that stirring, as soon as you sense that a distracting thought has come up, you just destroy it. Breathe right through it. Try to find which part of the body it’s getting started in, or where the tension corresponding to the thought is. Breathe right through that part of the body. And to prevent those thoughts from arising, you want to get your awareness of the body as full as possible. So as soon as the breath is comfortable, spread your awareness. Go through the body, section by section by section. But ultimately, you want to be able to be aware of the whole body all at once, so that as soon as there’s the slightest bit of a stirring, you can zap it. Breathe right through it. Relax the tension. And you’ll find, of course, that in the very beginning, it’s not all that easy to be on top of every little stirring there is, and you’ll lose yourself in these little thought worlds. But as soon as you do, try to find which part of the body is associated with that thought, and then just relax it. And as you do this repeatedly, over and over and over again, you get quicker and quicker about the process. You find yourself able to zap the thought even before it forms as a thought. This is what allows you to see the stages as you get quicker and quicker and quicker in sensing when a distracting thought is going to arise, and you abort it. I’ve sometimes wondered if the old koan about one hand clapping refers to this process. Normally, there’s a dialogue in the mind that starts out with the arising of a thought. Basically, the dialogue is this, “Hey, how about this? What’s this?” And there’s an answer. “Want to follow it?” “Yes.” “What happens if there’s no answer?” “What about this?” “Silence.” Nothing happens. The thought just dissolves. The first time you see that, it’s really unsettling, in a good way. What’s unsettling about it is realizing how much of that dialogue has been going on, but it’s been behind the curtains, behind the scenery at the back of the stage. And when you see it, there’s immediate recognition that this has been going on for a long time. But it’s an important insight, because it allows you to undercut that thought world, so you can stay focused on the process. Once you’re really clear about this, then you can start analyzing the thought itself, watching the thought, because you have the ability to turn it off at any time you want. This way, you start seeing other features of these thoughts that you didn’t see before. You can see how they form. You can see how they’re maintained. You can see all the various dialogues that are going on in the mind. And this way, you see how that committee in the mind allows anger to seep in, how it allows passion to seep in, lust, fear, all the unskillful emotions. And seeing them in action, you can see how they’re seen in action. So this is an important step in not being overcome by them, not being taken in by them. In a way, you might say you’re watching the politics of the mind. If you simply watch TV, the normal channels, you get a very finished and polished view of the political process. When you actually go into the centers of power, you have a very different picture. You don’t see the product. You see the process, and it’s a very different experience. Well, the same holds true with your mind. There are the politics of your different desires, the politics of your different interests, the politics of the different ways you identify yourself, of your different selves, as the janky four positions in the mind. And it’s through seeing them, seeing the process, that’s what’s liberating. One of the words they use in Pali is actually “disgust.” You get disgusted with the whole process. And although it sounds aversive, it’s not. It’s just a sense that you’ve outgrown it. You realize there’s no true happiness to be found here. You’d be better off not playing along. And that allows you to let go. So this is what you might call the politics of the mind, the way there’s a stirring and then there’s a perception, saying, “Well, this is a thought about such-and-such.” And then there’s the construction, the fabrication that continues. These two kinds just keep throwing things back and forth. That first stirring is a very beginning kind of fabrication. Then there’s the label that’s placed on it, and then there are the elaborations you build on top of the label. In the same way as a person who suddenly sees the backroom deals and all the other unattractive sides to politics decides that you want to get out. You’ve had enough. It’s the same with this, in the mind. When you really see these processes clearly, you want to get out. And meditation offers you the tools that you need in order to escape, to gain release. But the way to release from these things is through. The way out is through. Very clearly learning to see the processes of how a thought arises, how these thought worlds take place. This is the process of the Buddha called bhava, or becoming. When you dig down deep enough into it, you find the clinging that underlies it. And from the clinging you find the craving that underlies it. When you get rid of the craving, you find release. Some people complain, “I can’t meditate because I have so many distracting thoughts.” Well, the distracting thoughts are the things you’re going to learn about in the course of your meditation. In the course of learning about them, you learn all the other things you need to know about the mind in order to gain release. It’s simply a question of taking the right approach to them. That’s what makes all the difference between being taken in by them and learning from them. And it’s by staying with the breath, getting us out of our heads, down into the body, that gives us the starting position where we can take that skillful approach.

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