Battling Distraction

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There’s a famous passage from the Canon about a monk who was trying too hard. He’d been very delicately brought up, so delicately brought up that he had hair growing on the soles of his feet. That’s the story. His feet were that tender. So when he became a monk and he was doing walking meditation, his feet got all bloody and he got discouraged. He thought, “Maybe it might be better just to give up. Here I’m trying as hard as I can and nothing seems to be happening.” So the Buddha came to him and asked him, “Before you were ordained, didn’t you play the lute?” The monk said he had. He said, “When the strings were too taut, what was it like?” “Well, it didn’t sound right. And when they were too loose, it couldn’t get any sound out of them at all. You have to tune them just right.” That’s what we’re doing in the path. He said, “In the same way, when you’re tuning your lute, you start out with one string, get that tuned properly, and then you tune the other strings to that one, and then you can play.” He said, “In the same way, when you’re practicing, you have to figure out your level of energy. How much energy can you apply? You start out with that one. Once you get that level of energy properly tuned, then you can tune the other elements—your conviction, your concentration, mindfulness, discernment. But you’ve got to start with your level of energy. And this doesn’t mean whatever feels comfortable, because, as the Buddha says in other places, if you find that by just following your sense of comfort, unskillful mental states arise, and you’re being too lax, you’re being too lazy. Sometimes you have to come down hard on yourself. Other times, when you’re coming down too hard on yourself, and that’s giving rise to unskillful states, that’s when you have to back off. So this is a process of constant adjustment, figuring out what level of energy is just right for right now. In particular, you have to be very careful not to be complacent, because when things are going well, it’s very easy to start getting careless. The mind seems calm, everything seems perfectly okay, and you start letting down your guard. When you let down your guard, little thoughts come in. At first, they’re not destroying your calm. They just calm and go. There’s no real problem. After a while, they begin to get a toehold. Then the toehold turns into a foothold, and then after a while they take over. So you’ve got to be careful not to get lazy when things are going well. It requires a different level of energy. When things are going well, you still have to be consistent, you have to be persistent in your practice. Simply, you don’t have to apply as much strength. The persistence, the energy here, gets focused on being very, very sensitive to even the slightest little thing that’s coming up, not letting it destroy your concentration. And again, it’s not always the case that the destruction will be immediately apparent, but anything that would come in and would have an effect, you don’t want to allow to gather up, because one becomes two, and then it becomes four, and then it becomes sixty, and then two hundred fifty-six. It grows exponentially. So when things are going well, you can’t be careless. When things are not going well, you can’t let yourself get discouraged. You simply have to realize what’s going to require extra energy to ward off the thoughts that are coming into the mind. The Buddha gives five different techniques for dealing with these thoughts. The first one is simply noticing that you’ve slipped off your meditation object and just bring yourself back. In other words, you give yourself something better to think about, something more refined to focus on. The second one is if you notice that the mind continues going back, back, back to the same thought, you’ve got to look at the drawbacks of staying with that thought. If you were to think that thought for twenty-four hours, where would it leave you? When you realize that it wouldn’t amount to anything good, then you’ve got to be very determined just not to go there. Many times, just the realization that this is a bad place to be, this is going to lead to all kinds of problems in the future, that can be enough to pull you back. Other times, it’s not. That’s when you have to consciously ignore it. In other words, let it have a part of your mind, but you’re going to stay with the breath. Think of the breath as surrounding the thought. It’s forming the stage or the arena in which that thought appears. But you’re going to focus on the stage and the arena and not on the thought. You know it’s there. You’re not going to deny it, simply that you’re not going to give it your attention. It’s like that sound of the airplane. If you focus on the sound of the airplane, you’re going to get distracted. But you can stay with your breath. The sound of the airplane is not destroying your breath. The breath is still there. It’s just that you make up your mind where you’re going to focus your attention, and then you can consciously ignore the distracting thought. Think of it as a crazy person coming to talk to you, or a stray dog coming around asking for food. If you give food to the stray dog, it’s not going to be a stray dog much longer. It’s going to be your dog. So allow your thoughts to be stray. They don’t have any owners. They don’t have to claim ownership, and they’re actually not hungry. Actually, it’s not their hunger that’s coming. You have to be kind to them and give them food. You’re the one that’s hungry. You’re feeding off the stray dogs. Think of it that way. Then you can ignore them. If that doesn’t work, you can consciously relax around the thought. In other words, you notice that it’s a lot more relaxing to stay with the breath than it is to think things. This works especially well if you’ve gotten sensitive enough to see how every time a thought goes through your mind, there’s going to be a tensing up someplace in the body, particularly when you latch on to a thought and follow it. You stay with that sense of relaxation. Wherever you see the tension building up in the body, relax it. It’s like those video games when you zap the enemy. Whichever part of the screen it appears in, you stay here with the breath. You see any little bit of tension building up, you know that it’s going to turn into a Pac-Man or whatever. You zap him. Relax them. Breathe right through them. If that doesn’t work, if you’re still feeding on those thoughts, going back to those thoughts again and again, that’s the time you’ve got to cleanse your teeth, press the tongue against the roof of your mouth, and just say,”I’m not going to go there.” The effort here begets more physical, and involves less discernment and just more physical pressure. This can work for a while. A lot of people don’t like this technique. It’s the bludgeon in your toolbox. But there are times when you need your bludgeon. Some thoughts require scalpels and other delicate instruments, but every now and then you run into one that’s going to require a bludgeon. So you use your bludgeon. After you’ve cleared the air for a while, sometimes then you can drop that and then get back to your regular meditation. But in each of these cases, you have to apply the right amount of energy, whether it’s subtle energy or subtle attention, like dissolving the tension around the thoughts, or just stronger stuff where you have to cleanse your teeth. Just don’t provide the mind with any space for that thought to come in. If you want, you can just repeat the word butto, butto, butto. That’s another kind of mental bludgeon. Really, really fast in the mind. You don’t have to coordinate it with the breath. In the old days, when they jammed the circuit, they jammed the airwaves for Radio Free Europe. So whatever level of energy is required, that’s the one you’ve got to give it. Sometimes it’s when you’re feeling least up for the problem. Your energy is low. That’s when the mind starts wandering all over the place. But you’ve got to learn how to be up for whatever comes. It’s like the way they train soldiers. They tell you you’re going to run a mile, and so you run for the mile, and you think, “Ah, at last, when we get to the end of the mile, we’ll be able to stop.” And they say, “Uh-oh, sorry, you’ve got to run for another half mile.” It teaches you to draw on your reserves when you think that everything is all done. Because warfare isn’t like that, where you can just know ahead of time how much energy you’ve got to put into it. Sometimes you come home, you think you’ve finished a job, and you find there’s another huge job. You’re done with the enemy, and there’s another whole battalion coming in. That’s the way it is with the distractions in the mind. You think you’ve taken care of them, and here comes a whole other pack of them. So you’ve got to train yourself to be up for whatever comes and learn how to give yourself pep talks in order to spur you on. In every case, what it comes down to is being heedful. When things are going well, you can’t relax too much. When things are not going well, you can’t tell yourself, “Well, I’ve put all the energy I can into this. I’m not going to put any more energy.” Because sometimes thoughts of greed, anger, and delusion come in, and they can really wreck whatever you’ve been working so hard to maintain. And you can’t allow them to win just because you’re feeling lazy. It’s important that you realize that just because a thought comes into your head doesn’t mean it’s your thought. It doesn’t mean it’s a thought that you have to side with, a thought that you have to explore, a thought that you have to think. You have to treat all these thoughts with wariness, no matter how they come. Someone was telling me the other day of someone who was meditating and suddenly felt they were hearing the Buddha speaking in their head, telling them how well their meditation was going. You have to ask yourself, if something like that happens, exactly what use is that message? You don’t have to ask who it comes from, whether it really is the Buddha or whether it’s Mara or whether it’s yourself, your subconscious. Because no matter where the message comes from, it could be wrong. So you have to look at the message and say, “If I believe this message, where is it going to take me? If I believe this thought, if I get involved with this thought, where is it going to take me?” And many times you know full well. If you know it’s going to take you someplace you really shouldn’t be going, then you just drop it, because these things are dangerous. The dangers that come from outside are nothing compared to the dangers that the mind can cook up, the vagrant thoughts that come wandering in and then suddenly take over. So you’ve got to be careful. Whatever comes into your head, you have to ask it, “Where is it coming from? Where is it going to go?” If you latch onto it, where will it take you? This is why those Zen teachers used to teach their students, “If you see the Buddha, kill him.” It doesn’t mean have disrespect for the Buddha. What it means is you get an image of the Buddha, you don’t bow down to it, because you have no idea what it could be. If it comes with a message, you have to be very careful on how you interpret those messages. Just because something pops into your head doesn’t mean that it’s popping in from some area of buried wisdom. It could also come from buried foolishness. Many of us think that if only we could clear away the mess in our minds that we’ve picked up from society, all this great wisdom would come pouring out of our subconscious. If our subconscious attitudes were wise, we wouldn’t have had to bury them to begin with, and we wouldn’t fall for the false messages that society sends our way. This shows that there’s a lot of delusion inside our subconscious. So when something comes bubbling up out of your subconscious, again, ask yourself, “Is this coming from buried wisdom or is it coming from buried foolishness? Or is it just totally random?” Ultimately, the question is, is this a useful thought to deal with? Is it going to be helpful in the practice? Is it showing you new areas of defilement that you didn’t know about before? Is it giving you new techniques to deal with things that you hadn’t thought of before? You’ve got to put things to the test. After all, the Buddha’s great insight was causality, the fact that things go someplace. Everything is fabricated. Every experience, except for nirvana, is fabricated. So what matters is what use you make of it, what you do with these fabrications, how you fabricate them further. Are you going to fabricate them towards more aging, illness, and death? Or are you going to fabricate them in the direction of the opening to the unfabricated? Look at everything as an activity, because even your experience of the solid physical world is an activity on your part. So the question is, how can you be skillful in this activity to lead to less and less suffering? Once that question is foremost in your mind, everything else tends to fall into place.

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