Distractive Thoughts

July 31, 2007

The Buddha taught five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts, and it’s good to know all five, because often we’re taught just one way of dealing with them, and we find, of course, that one way doesn’t cover all the contingencies, all the different ways the mind can find to distract itself. So, as a meditator, it’s good to have a large repertoire of techniques, of approaches, so that if one doesn’t work, you’ve got backups. Because, as we mentioned today, sometimes you find yourself meditating and all of a sudden you’re off someplace else. You don’t know how you got there, but you totally dropped your meditation. But there are other times when you’re with a breath but thoughts are still talking in the back of your mind. It’s a different type of distraction, and it requires a different approach. So, here are the five. The first one is, you notice that you’ve slipped off your meditation topic, well, you just come right back. In other words, you’ve been distracted. You’re meditating with a breath, and suddenly you realize you’re off the breath. First thing, come right back to the breath. This is the first approach. When you come back, this is not written in the text, but you might ask yourself, “Well, why did I slip off the breath to begin with?” One common reason is because the breath is not really interesting yet enough. So try to make the breath more interesting when you come back to it. This is particularly useful if the way you slept off was kind of a drowsy slipping off. It’s a sign that the breath is too weak. So you make the breath stronger. Try to think of the breath as bringing energy into the body, energizing all the nerves of the body. And if you’ve been sleepy, it’s good to think of breathing in long, and out short. In long, out short. Emphasize the in-breath. And as you get sensitive to the way the breath energy goes throughout the body, you will begin to notice that if you breathe out too long, you start starving the nerves of breath energy, which is one of the reasons you were falling asleep. So, sort of charge things up. In long, out short. In long, out short. That’s the first approach. Just come back to the breath and try to make it more pleasant, make it more interesting, make it a better place to stay, so you’ll be less likely to wander off. But know that you will probably wander off again, because that’s the way the mind is used to operating. It’s an activity of the mind. It wanders around, and this is what the mind has been doing for who knows how long. So take it for granted that the mind will wander off again, and be prepared the next time. Try to notice how it wanders off. What are the stages? When you sense the stages, then you can catch yourself before you realize it. You’re totally gone. Come back to the breath. Again, try to make the breath more interesting, make it a better place to be. Now, the Buddha said if that doesn’t work, the next step is to analyze the distraction, and particularly with the purpose of seeing the drawbacks of it. In other words, it may be something you like to think about, like tomorrow’s meal. But then ask yourself, “Okay, what gets accomplished by sitting here thinking about tomorrow’s meal?” It’s a waste of time. And if you thought about tomorrow’s meal for the next fifteen hours, what would it do? It wouldn’t get you anywhere at all. In fact, most of the distracting thoughts are things we’ve thought about many, many times. They’re old movies. They just keep getting played over and over again. A few variations here, a few variations there, but often it’s just the same old themes over and over again. Ask yourself, “Where have these gotten you in the past?” Usually not very far, especially if it’s an obvious defilement—greed, anger, delusion, lust. If you thought about it for a while, you’d get them to develop ruts in the mind. It would be hard to get out of, like driving. You’d be driving through snow. You’d suddenly find yourself falling into some ruts, and the ruts take you right into the back of another car. So think about the drawbacks of those particular distractions. Look at where they lead you. Often we wonder about looking where they come from. But primarily the analysis here is we’re just seeing, “If you stick with this, is this something you really want to stick with?” If the answer is no, then it’s easier to come back to the breath. That’s the second approach. If that doesn’t work, you can simply ignore the thoughts. In other words, they’re still there in the back of the mind, but you begin to realize that you can still focus on the breath even though the thoughts are there in the back of the mind. The breath is always coming in, it’s always going out. Years back I was teaching meditation in a room that had a very loud clock. Tick, tock, tick, tock. After the first meditation session, everybody opened their eyes and said, “That damn clock!” I had to point out that the clock had not destroyed their breath. The breath was still coming in, still going out. It’s still there, even though the clock is going on, even though there’s chatter going on in the back of the mind. The breath is still coming in, still going out, so you hang out there and you consciously ignore the thoughts. It’s like a beggar coming to you. If you pay any attention to the beggar, the beggar’s got you, or a crazy person coming to talk to you. Even if you focus on the crazy person enough to tell the crazy person to go away, the crazy person’s got you. They’re going to keep pulling you into their conversation, pulling you into their crazy world. So you have to pretend like they’re not there. You know they’re there, but you act as if you didn’t know. Just stay with the breath as much as you can. You might want to use the word bhutto to help fix your attention on the breath, to make it more and more obvious, to make the thought bhutto louder than the distracting thoughts. Think of every cell in your body screaming bhut, with the in-breath, to, with the out. A huge chorus of voices, all in unison, bhutto, bhutto. That helps to emphasize the breath. This is an important part of vittaka, or directed thought, in your meditation. You try to make the topic as prominent as possible. If that approach doesn’t work, the Buddha said you can start surveying the body. When we talk about where thoughts come from, we can think about the intellectual background, the background of the thoughts, what assumptions there are. That’s one thing. But there’s also a physical component to every thought. Every time a thought comes in and grabs hold of the mind, there’s going to be a pattern of tension that gets held onto in the body. It’s kind of the mind’s marker for keeping the thought in mind. You might want to survey your body. Where are the markers for this particular thought that keeps coming and coming and coming into the mind? Maybe a little tension in the arms, or in the legs, or in the back, or someplace around the head. When you can locate this spot, just breathe right through it. Think of relaxing the tension. Many times a thought will go away, because it doesn’t have any place to land, it doesn’t have any place to hold onto. The fifth approach, which is the mantra, is the one of last resort. None of these other techniques work, and the thoughts are still pulling you away from your meditation. That’s when you press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and, as he said, beat down the mind with the will. In other words, you determine, “I will not think that thought.” Here again, bhutto, as a meditation word, is really useful. You might want to divorce it from the breath and just think bhutto bhutto really fast. It’s going to jam all the circuits with bhutto until you’ve cleared the air. The last one is the technique that a lot of people really dislike. It seems too forceful, too heavy-handed, but sometimes you need a heavy hand. To make a comparison with the toolbox, sometimes you really need a sledgehammer. So have one. These are the five main ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. It’s good to keep all five in mind. Then apply whichever one is appropriate for your particular situation as you’re meditating. As we mentioned earlier today, if you’re trying to meditate while you’re doing other activities, the simple method of calling the mind back, calling the mind back, is probably the best one. In other words, have your center someplace in the body. Maintain a spot in the body that feels relaxed. The breath energy feels good right there, and you try to keep it feeling good all the way in with the in-breath, all the way out with the out. If the mind slips off from that, you don’t have to ask many questions or do much analysis. Just come back, come back, come back. The analysis requires more quiet time, more space. You might save the analysis for when you get back home and sit down to meditate. In other words, just make a little mental note that, “Okay, this issue kept coming up. I’ve got to look into it. I can’t really look into it now because I’ve got other things going on, and all I can do is maintain my center.” Then you come back to it later. The important point is that you realize that there are many techniques for dealing with distraction, and there are actually others aside from these five. If the mind feels really drifty and wanders off into sort of vague feelings of pleasure, one thing you can do is just keep on sitting until pain comes up. Then you’ve got a new problem—how to deal with the pain. When you’re feeling irritable, do your best to make the breath really, really comfortable. Again, think of the nerves in your body as requiring a fullness of breath energy. Wherever it’s lacking, just kind of breathe in there. Think of it as being full and staying full, all the way with the in-breath and all the way with the out-breath. In other words, learn to use both pleasure and pain where it’s appropriate. Last night I was talking about the different kinds of fabrication you can use to deal with unskillful thoughts in the mind. This one is this type of metal fabrication, i.e., using pleasure and using pain as tools in the practice. That was one that fell through the cracks. But it’s an important element in the meditation, an important approach. If you’re willing to sit with pain, you’ll learn an awful lot about the mind. The mind is kind of drifting. The issue is how you’re going to relate to the pain in such a way that the mind doesn’t suffer from the pain. If you’re up for that kind of analysis, you can learn a lot, particularly about how your perception of the pain, the labels you apply to the pain, can form a bridge so that the physical pain turns into a mental pain. If you see the perception in action, precisely the mental pain, the mental picture or whatever it is that the mind applies to the pain, when you see the label coming and going and then the mental suffering coming and going along with the perception, you’ve got your clue. This is something to learn, how to drop that perception. You’ve gained an important insight into how the mind creates suffering out of things that don’t have to entail suffering. There’s an element of intention. You were doing something to the pain that actually made it suffer. That’s an important lesson. On the other hand, say the mind is fascinated with lust. Well, turn around and try to make the body as comfortable and full of breath energy as possible right now, because lust feeds on a sense of lack. So think of yourself as an object of lust. Your hands all relaxed, your feet all relaxed, every finger, every toe, feeling really good with breath energy, and then working up from the hands and the feet, up the arms and legs, until you’ve got the whole body filled with breath energy and it’s so full that you don’t have any room to think. That may not solve the problem of lust, but at least it gets it out of the way for the time being. That sense of fullness can provide you a really good place for looking at other ways that you look for happiness. Here you’ve got a fullness that you can tap into simply by the way you relate to the breath. Those other ways you look for happiness require a lot of effort, and they don’t provide the same kind of fullness when they do come. Why would you want to get involved, especially if they’re unskillful? You’ve got this sense of fullness here. A lot of other attachments you’ll just drop away. So learn to use both pleasure and pain as part of your arsenal, as part of your meditator’s toolkit, so that, as the Buddha said in the Discourse when he was describing these five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts, “When you’ve mastered these five ways of distracting thoughts, you are a master of the ways of your thoughts.” If there’s a thought you want to think, you can think it. If there’s a thought you don’t want to think, you don’t have to think it. You’re in charge. And that’s the way it should be.

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