Dealing with Distractions

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There are two basic ways of dealing with distractions in meditation. One is simply to chase the thought away, and the other is to analyze it. There’s no clear line between the two methods, because a certain level of analysis is enough to chase them away without really uprooting your attachment to that kind of thought. But it’s enough to get the mind to settle down, which in the beginning is what you need. You need to know how to turn these things off quickly so they don’t draw you in. So you can remind yourself, “This thought is unskillful. This thought is burdensome. It’s impermanent. It’s stressful. It’s not self. It’s empty.” Sometimes reminding yourself simply of that much is enough to help you to drop the thought, and then you can get back to work with your meditation, with the breath. But simply that much of analysis is not enough to uproot the problem, because you find that even though you can chase the thought away that way, it comes back. But in the beginning, this is really all you need to clear a space in the mind so you can establish a foundation for yourself. So you can become familiar with the breath, at home with the breath. Know that whenever there’s anything disturbing the mind, you’ve got a place you can go to. It’s like clearing away enough of the forest so you can build a little shack for yourself. You haven’t uprooted the trees, you haven’t uprooted the weeds, but at least you do have a place you can go to. And this is important. Sometimes people will try to attack really big problems in their minds. They say, “Just be with the suffering. Be with the anguish. Be with the anxiety.” But if you don’t have a foundation, it can be overwhelming, and you may not be ready for that kind of stuff. You have to know your strength. Some thoughts you can push away, and you can push them away for a while. You know they’re going to come back, but go ahead and push them away, because you need to create this foundation. To make another comparison, it’s like training yourself in a sport. When you learn baseball, you don’t go right ahead and play against the Yankees or the Red Sox or whatever. You play against people who are just a little bit better than you are, so you can work on your skills. And then gradually you get better and better, and then you can take on better and better opponents. And that way you maintain your sense of commitment, enjoyment, and the sport. Because if you try to play against people who are really, really good, and you’re nowhere as good as they are, it’s no fun. It’s no fun for them, either. But the defilements aren’t like that. You’ve got greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. They kick you out. Of course, there’s no intention there, but you don’t want to just get knocked over by how strong, say, your anguish may be, or how strong your sadness may be, or how strong your anger. You need a place to stand. You need a place of refuge. This is what the concentration practice is all about. It’s to give yourself a good, strong place to stand, to have your mind established, and to know that you can go there at any time. That’s why it’s important to have that skill. We have these sort of quick, shorthand references. “Oh yeah, this is impermanent,” or “this is inskillful,” or “if I followed this thought for two hours, what would it lead me to do?” You realize you don’t want to go there. Or maybe an old movie, an old story in your life that you just play over and over again asks you, “Aren’t you tired of this? You know it’s going to come out.” In other words, any way of thinking that pulls you out right away is useful for getting the mind back to concentration. So there’s a certain level of wisdom that comes, or is necessary, for the practice of concentration. It’s not that you just do concentration and then develop the wisdom. You use your powers of concentration to put yourself in a place where you can analyze things, and then you use your powers of beginning analysis to get back to the concentration when you need to. There’s no jhana without discernment. There’s no discernment without jhana. The two qualities—the insight, the wisdom, or the discernment, and the concentration—help each other along. The stronger your concentration, the more you’re able to analyze things. It’s in the analysis that you really begin to let go. What kind of analysis? Watching. When you find yourself getting pulled into a thought, why do you want to go? What’s the intent? What’s the allure? And then you balance it against the drawbacks while you’re there, involved in that thought. What kind of stress do you have? In order to see these things, you have to be able to step back a little bit from the process and not be totally taken in by the narrative, not be totally absorbed into that thought world. But it’s only when you see the relative drawbacks. This is the amount of pleasure you get out of, say, your anger. And if you don’t see the fact that you enjoy your anger, you’re not going to be able to deal with it effectively, because the delight you take in anger will just go underground and you don’t see it at all. But if you admit to yourself, “Yes, there is an aspect of anger that I really like. I get a charge out of it. I feel my energy is flowing. I feel freed from shackles or whatever. Then you ask yourself,”Okay, if I give in to the anger, what happens? Or if I just allow myself to think about it, what does it do to the mind? It eats away at the mind. It builds tension. It builds a sense of frustration. The flow of energy becomes a problem. And it’s only when you see, deep down inside, that it’s not worth it. That’s when you can let go. The reason we hold on to things is not because we believe that they have an inherent existence. The idea that seeing that things are empty is enough to let go of them may work in a few cases, but it’s not effective across the board. We hold on to things, we get attached to things, we cling to things because we think that the happiness they give, the pleasure they give, is more than worth the effort that’s put into holding on to them. Even if we know that they don’t have any inherent existence, that they’re empty, but if we feel that there’s a certain effort that goes into maintaining them, keeping them in the mind, it’s worth it because we get this pleasure or that pleasure out of it. You’re going to continue holding on, no matter how much you can talk about how empty it is. So you’ve got to be able to analyze the mind as it’s getting involved, and to do that, the mind has to be pretty solid in concentration first. So there are levels of discernment. There’s the discernment that allows you to get the mind to settle down, and then there’s the discernment that can analyze a thought process while it’s happening in the mind and yet not get entangled. And this is tricky. Some people ask the question, “Well, how much concentration do you have to do before you can do discernment work and do insight work?” And you’ll find that it depends on the particular defilement, the particular distraction. Some things are pretty simple. It doesn’t require that much concentration, and you can see right through them. So the quick test is, if you find yourself trying to analyze a thought and you gain some understanding, you gain some clarity about it, you’re ready for that particular kind of thought. But if you find yourself analyzing something and you’re getting pulled in, you’re not ready for that thought yet. Then use whatever skills you’ve mastered for dropping it. Say, “Okay, I’m not ready for this yet.” This is the defining quality of a good Dhamma warrior. Some people want to be warriors and just want to attack everything. They don’t like the idea that they’re not ready to take on everything, every situation in life. But that’s not a wise warrior. That’s a warrior who’s going to die pretty quickly. The wise warrior realizes, “Okay, there’s this battle and I have a possibility of winning it. I can take it on. There’s this other battle. I’m not ready for that one yet.” So you learn how to avoid it. Avoiding is not cowardice. It’s wisdom. There’s a story I’ve told many times before. A Chinese martial arts master was teaching a group of students. One day they were going to have a demonstration of their skill in this pavilion in the forest. On the road into the pavilion, there was a really nasty donkey on the side of the road. So some of the students were on their way to the pavilion. They came across the donkey and they decided that they would use this as an opportunity to show off their skills. So the number one student approached it using one of his stances and got kicked across the road. The second student said, “No, that’s not how you do it. You do it this way.” He tried another stance. Well, he got kicked across the road. All the different students tried different stances. In every case, they got kicked across the road. So they figured, “Okay, this must be something special here. Let’s see how the master handles this one.” So they hid in the bushes on the side of the road to see how he would handle it. Finally, he comes along. He sees the donkey and he walks way around. He avoids it entirely. That’s the sign of a master. You know what you’re ready to take on and you know what you can’t take on. And you learn that from trial and error. So there’s no clear line between concentration practice and insight practice. The two practices infiltrate each other. You need a certain amount of insight in order to let the mind let go of things so it can just settle down and be still. And then you use what concentration you have to analyze deeper problems. And you find that some are a little bit too difficult and the roots go too deep and you can’t figure them out yet. You say, “Okay, I’ll put those aside for the time being.” And you just drop them unresolved. But you know you’re going to come back. Then you work more in your concentration. And you’ll find that as you let go of certain defilements and certain distractions, the mind does settle down to a deeper level. So the two processes work together. Just be clear on the fact that letting go is not simply a matter of a particular technique. There’s no technique that can really uproot defilements, if you just simply follow the technique by rote. When you will yourself to let go of something, that’s an act of concentration. You can will yourself to analyze it. And in the course of the analysis, it means asking questions. This is how you regard things, this is how you question things, this is how you probe, as the Buddha said, fabrications, these processes in the mind. Learning how to look at your thoughts, not so much in terms of the content, but in terms of the process. How a thought arises and how you take it on, like what started out just as a little impulse in the mind is caused by past karma. Then you get entangled with it, that’s present karma, and then you turn it into a big thought world. What’s the allure, what’s the attraction, why do you want to do that? What gratification do you get out of it? You’ve got to be able to see that in action if you’re really going to be able to let go. So as you’re practicing, use what level of understanding to sort of be able to muster. Remind yourself, though, that you’re trying to get the mind at the moment to just settle down and be still, so you can establish a sense of being at home with the breath, at ease with the breath, that you’ve got your refuge, you’ve got your foundation. And then you’ll use that foundation. Gradually undangle more persistent distractions, distractions that have deeper roots, more tangled roots. And so it’s a back-and-forth practice, an analogy that John Lee uses. He says it’s like walking. You walk with your left foot, then with your right foot, then you step with your left foot, then you step with your right foot. You can go a lot farther that way than simply hopping along on your left foot. Or hopping along on your right foot. You depend on your discernment and you depend on your concentration. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth like this. That’s how you get to the end of the path.

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