The Lessons of Distraction

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Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, as long and as deep as you can make them, and see how that feels. If it feels good, keep it up. The breath has to settle down to a rhythm that does feel good. Not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light. Something that brings the body into balance. If you’re feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that’s relaxing. If your energy level is low, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If your energy level is high, try to breathe in a way that’s relaxing. If your energy level is low, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If your energy level is high, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. An animal that you can call, that will come when you call. It’s more like something that’s hiding here, and you have to pay very, very careful attention to what’s going on right here, right now. Don’t let yourself get distracted by thoughts of the goal. So do what you can to bring some interest to the breath. If you have any pains or illnesses in the body, focus on the breath energy in those parts to see if it can help. If focusing on that part doesn’t help, you might want to focus on its mirror image. For instance, if there’s a pain in your left leg, focus on your right leg. Look at the breath energy in the right leg. If there’s a pain in your stomach, focus on your back. Then try to notice when the mind is going to wander off from the breath how it happens. At what stage do you realize that it’s happening? Again, we think of distraction as something you just want to get past so you can get to the real thing. But it turns out that distractions contain a lot of the real thing. In other words, the things you need to understand about your mind. Because each distraction is called a “becoming.” Bhava is the Pali term. It’s a little world that the mind creates, and then you get into it and you go traveling off. You’re taking on an identity in that world. This is what birth is on the immediate level. And becoming and birth, these are the big issues. These are the things that give rise to suffering. And they’re based on craving and clinging, all of which you want to learn how to understand so you can finally let go of the craving and clinging. That’s where you’re going to understand it. You’re going to wait until the mind is still and then have these miraculous insights. That’s not how it works. You gain insight into the mind as you try to bring it down. And the more interest you take in this process, not getting upset when you’re trying to let go, but taking it as an opportunity to observe the mind, the more likely you are to gain progress, the more likely you are to settle down and gain insight into the mind. This is how they say we take a long journey. We take it one step at a time. Most people, as they’re taking a journey, their mind runs back and forth between where they are now and the end of the journey. So if it’s a journey of a thousand steps, it’s the mind’s journey. You can do the math, but it’s a lot more than a thousand. And you’re not watching yourself make the steps. And so you can get careless. You can trip and get tired out and give up. So you want to focus on what the mind is doing with each second of each breath. And you’ll learn that you can begin to detect the advanced signals of when the mind is going to wander off, how it gets a little bored with a breath, how it stops paying attention, how things go on automatic pilot and the mind starts looking around for something else. It hasn’t fully left the breath yet, but it’s hanging on with only one hand. It’s got another hand stretched out trying to find something else. If you can catch it at times, at that stage, so much the better. Otherwise, you find yourself in that other thought world and you have to learn how to drop it. And that’s an important skill, learning how to drop it. But whatever the skill you need to learn right now, focus your full attention on it. Don’t get frustrated. I was talking to someone this evening who was concerned about how many years he’d been practicing meditation and how more advanced other people who’d been practicing meditation that number of years should be. I basically told him, “It’s none of your business. Your business is where you are. Because you can learn from where you are. You can’t learn from where other people are. You learn from what you’re doing right now. And you can see it most clearly right now. There are two ways of learning about your actions. One is watching them while they’re happening, and then two is reflecting back on the results after the action is done and after the results are in. And although you learn both ways, you’re more likely to see new things if you watch what you’re doing while you’re doing it. Unexpected things come up. For instance, you’ll see that certain memories are associated with certain parts of your body. As you loosen up the breath energy in a certain part, like the knee or in your hip, you may find something flashing into your memory. So you’ve got to learn two things. One is that you do have these things implanted in your muscle memory, in your bodily memory. They talk even of people who’ve received heart transplants who suddenly have memories of the other person, other person’s experiences. There’s that. But at the same time, you have to learn how not to get involved in these things as they come flashing into the mind. If it’s a memory of another person, you just spread some thoughts of goodwill to that person, back to the breath. Then you have to learn how to overcome the temptation to follow a thought to its conclusion. Tie up all the loose ends or see where it’s going to go. Just drop it unfinished and come back. Otherwise you find yourself getting pulled into all sorts of TV melodramas. These are totally unrelated to what we’re doing right here. We’re trying to understand the process of how the mind creates states of becoming and the details of what are in those states. We have to let go. This applies to visions that come up in the meditation as well. The content of the vision may be true or false, but that’s not the point. It’s not the issue. How does the vision arise? What Dhamma lesson can you learn from its arising and from its passing away? One thing you can learn is that the visions come when the mind is beginning to settle down but hasn’t really fully latched onto its object. It’s not really snug with its object. So you realize that when things get comfortable, you can’t get complacent. This is what Ajaan Lee has you spread your awareness to fill the whole body. The Buddha talks about this, too. In fact, it’s step number three in breath meditation. You see short breathing, you see long breathing, and then you learn how to breathe in and out sensitively to the whole body. This is so that when things get pleasant, you don’t lose your frame of reference and start wandering off. You don’t lose your moorings and drift away like a balloon. Once there’s a sense of ease, you have to work in the ease. You can’t just take the time off. It’s like being someone who gets a job and gets his first paycheck and then goes off and has a good time for a couple days before he comes back to his job. He’s going to lose his job. Or if the employer does take him on, he’s never going to get very far with it. But you can’t get carried away with the pleasure that does come up as you’re working through tensions in the breath and releasing them. You have to maintain your frame of reference with the breath and not get carried away by the pleasure. And you can’t let your awareness shrink to a small spot, because that’s in danger of disappearing, too. Try to make your awareness fill in the whole body and try to do more detailed work. You should notice if the breath feels comfortable in your toes, or in between your toes, or in areas where it seems to be blocked off. Work around the blockage. In other words, you’ve got work to do here. And you should gain interest both in the times when the mind is with the breath and take interest in times when it’s wandering off. You find that you don’t get impatient, you don’t get bored, because there’s lots to learn here, lots to observe right here. Take each meditation as an opportunity to learn something, an opportunity to explore. Don’t go in with a lot of preconceived ideas of how it’s going to have to go, because that’s all you see is whether it’s going in line with your ideas or not. What you do want to have is a fund of experience that you can draw on when you need. But at the same time, this willingness to observe very carefully something you’ve been over many, many times, but there may be something new here. So take an interest in what’s happening right here, right now, because it’s in the development of the path that you also learn to realize the cessation of suffering. These two are very intimately connected. Watch what you’re doing right now and you’ll see something really special. But if you pay only half attention to what you’re doing right now and try to anticipate,”Well, how much further down the road is the end of the road?” you’re not going to see anything at all. What you do see is going to be blurry. So whatever comes up right now has lessons to teach. If you take that attitude, you’re going to learn a lot.

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