When Attacked by Distractions

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As we’re meditating here, it’s like walking down a path. We want to get to the end of the path, but the problem is there are things on the side of the path that are very interesting. So we stop and look, and then sit down, and sometimes wander off into the underbrush. It takes a while for us to get back. And then if we spend the hour surveying the land on either side of the path, we never get anywhere. We’ve got to make up our minds that we’re going to stay right here with a breath. And whatever comes up along the side, you’ve got to realize, “This is not where I want to go. This is not what we’re here for.” You want to be an adult about this. If an adult has a place to go, the adult usually goes there. Children tend to wander around, get easily distracted, forget what they’re doing. So you want to be an adult meditator. Sometimes animals will come off from the side of the path and come to attack you, and you’ve got to learn how to fend them off—in other words, your distractions. But all too often a distraction comes, and we don’t see it as a vicious animal. We see it as something really nice. We want to get involved, and it bites us. And we think that it’s just playing, so it bites us again. And we never seem to have enough of this. So when distractions come up in the course of the meditation, you want to be able to fend them off as quickly as possible. Learn how to see that they really aren’t worth getting involved with. In other words, you want to learn how to develop some dispassion for them. Sometimes it’s easy enough, as soon as you’ve wandered off, to realize, “Okay, this is not where I want to go,” and you can come back. But other times you get wandering off and it gets really interesting, which is where you’ll have to learn how to cut through things. If there’s an insight that comes up in the course of the meditation, ask yourself, “Does this apply to what I’m doing right now?” If it’s an insight about the situation at work or something in the family that comes from your childhood, just put it aside. If it’s really worthwhile, it’s really helpful, it’ll stick there in the mind. And you’ll find that you have it in your pocket when you get to the end of the path. So you don’t have to worry about trying to memorize it. If it’s worthwhile, it’ll follow you back there. The problem is that even if it’s not directly related, we tend to really want to remember and want to get involved. This is something that we find really interesting, these distractions. And sometimes what we think is an insight is the most distracting of all. Then, of course, there are other things that are obviously not insights, but they’re lots of fun to think about. This is why in the Buddhahead you think of these things in terms of what’s going into this preoccupation you’ve got here, what’s so attractive about it. It’s basically five questions you ask, what’s attractive about it, and also what are its drawbacks. The purpose of that is to see that the drawbacks really aren’t worth it. This is the Buddha’s main strategy for dealing with distractions, any kind of attachment. He never talks about things being empty, aside from being empty of self in a way that it’s meant to make you feel dispassionate for. It’s not really yours and why you’re holding onto it. Things are intrinsically empty or intrinsically interconnected or whatever, because they’re based on causes. That’s not enough to cut through your attachment. And the reason you hold on to certain things is not because you think that they have an “oh” nature. It’s because you think you can get enough pleasure out of them that rewards the amount of effort that goes into them. And that’s what you’ve got to learn how to see through. And we’re so bad at that, usually. It’s like those billboards on the way to Las Vegas when they announce that they give a 97 percent payback rate. They’re basically telling you, “You give us a dollar, we’ll give you 97 cents back if you’re lucky.” And yet people still go to the highways to Las Vegas on Friday night, just choked with cars. That’s the way most of us are about our pleasures. Sensual pleasure is number one. It doesn’t even have a 97 percent payback rate, and yet we still go for it. So you’ve got to look at what the Buddha calls the metal fabrications that go around this. What are the feeling tones and what are the perceptions you’re holding in mind that make this kind of thinking attractive? The same applies to anger. It applies to whatever thoughts you find addictive. What perceptions do you hold in mind? The Buddha offers a few alternative perceptions, save for sensual desire. He says it’s like a drop of honey on a knife blade. You try to lick it off and you can get cut. It’s like bones that they throw to a dog. There’s no nourishment there. You’re just gnawing, gnawing, gnawing away. And as Ajahn Lee says, all you get is a taste of your own saliva. And Ajahn Lee has a nice added image on this. He says if you think about sensual pleasures from yesterday, it’s like licking the soup pot from yesterday. There’s not a drop of soup left. If you think about sensual pleasures you’re going to have tomorrow, it’s like licking the pot that hasn’t had anything in it yet. The Buddha says sensual desire is like a hawk that has a piece of meat and all the other hawks and crows that we’ve seen around here. We’ve seen the crows attacking the hawks. They’ll try to get it away from you. Sensual desire is like a dream. It’s like borrowed goods. You go around showing it off, but if the owners ever see you showing it off, they’re going to take it back. There’s a whole series of perceptions that you can apply here. Or if you find yourself going back again and again and again, you think of that perception of the horse. As the Buddha said, there are five kinds of horses. There’s one kind of horse that all you have to do is say, “Whip,” and it’ll do what it wants you to do. Others, you have to actually show it the whip. The third group, you have to touch them on their skin with a whip. The fourth group, you have to dig a little bit into the flesh with a whip before they go. The worst ones are the ones that have to have the whip go all the way into the bone. Ask yourself, which kind of horse do you want to be? It’s your choice. So bring these perceptions to mind and see what other perceptions that are already there that object to them. Because all too often, when we have thoughts like this, we think we’re actually getting something out of them. And the Buddha’s making the point that you’re not getting much at all, and there’s a lot of danger that goes along with it. All the more so with anger. Anger can get very self-righteous. Whoever you’re angry at really did something really bad, and you can document it. But as the Buddha said, if you focus on the other person’s bad qualities, it’s like you’re going across a desert. You’re hot, you’re tired, you’re thirsty. Then you come across a little puddle of water and a cow’s footprint. If you spend your time looking at the mud around it, you’re never going to get the water. In other words, that main perception there is that you get down and are willing to slurp it up. You’re right down on all fours. You probably wouldn’t want anybody to take a picture of you in that position, but it’s necessary. You do what’s necessary to nurture your own goodness. And the important part of that perception is that you are hot, tired, and thirsty. All too often, when we’re thinking in terms of anger, we’re a judge sitting up on a high tribunal, and the person we’re angry at is way down there below us. We don’t feel that we’re being affected in any way by how we pass judgment on that person. But the Buddha said it has a huge impact on you. The more that you focus on the negatives, negatives, negatives around you, the more you’re going to be thirsty. Your goodness is going to die. All this is related to the fact that, as the Buddha said, our minds are shaped by perception. Then you want to dig around and see what those perceptions are. One of the best ways to do that is to offer some alternative perceptions. And the ones that have been in charge will dislike them, they feel challenged, but they actually may come to the surface. So you can see, “Oh, this is what’s holding me back. This is what’s holding me there.” Now, if you find that applying this helps, and you really are understanding things, okay, drop the breath for a bit and focus on this. Although you also can find that using the breath to deal with whatever has got you distracted can also be helpful. In other words, there’s probably some dis-ease someplace in the body that may be very subtle that makes you want to go out and look for something else and see how you can breathe to help work through that dis-ease. So you have something better to compare things with. You have this level of stillness, you have this level of calm, this level of well-being. But then you’re going to throw it away for what? A lump of flesh? A drop of honey on the edge of a knife? A mirage? A dream? That doesn’t just come floating in. It takes energy to think about these things. Is the energy well-spent? That’s the basic perception that the Buddha’s trying to have you induce, that these things just aren’t worth it. Sometimes you have to work through this fairly systematically before the mind is willing to agree. But once it’s worked for you, it really does dig things up for the time being at least, you’ll find it goes quicker and quicker the next time, until you run into something that is slightly different, that’s going to require a different perception. But the basic process is always the same. You want to see how these things are not worth the effort. Sometimes you may be discouraged, your meditation is not settling down as quickly as you’d like it to, and you want to go off and have a little pleasure hit. But you come back and you’re worse off than you were before. In other words, even though your meditation is not going well, stick with it. Some people say, “Oh, my meditation is not going well tonight. I’d better stop.” No, that’s the time to keep at it, to figure out what’s going on, what’s going wrong, what it’s like to be sitting in a mind that’s thinking about all kinds of things all at once. Learn how to step back and observe that a bit. See what’s going on in terms of the breath, what’s going on in terms of what you’re saying to yourself, what’s going on in terms of your feelings or perceptions, all these things that the Buddha calls fabrication. And maybe a little bit of insight will come, a little bit of stillness will come. But that’s better than giving up entirely. Remember, the mind is always weighing things. There’s a part in there that’s always saying, “Is this worth it? Am I getting what I want?” And a large part of the meditation is learning how to be more objective and be more clear-seeing about, “Is it worth it?” This applies to greed, aversion, and delusion—all the defilements that would pull you away. Sleepiness, restlessness, and anxiety. We have ways of justifying these things to ourselves, and you’ve got to learn how to question that. There are some old, habitual ways of doing things that we’re really attached to. Because they’re habitual and we find that we can do them easily, the meditation is hard. And there’s this tendency to want to slip back to something you can do easily. But you’ve been doing these things all along, all along, all along, and what have you gotten out of them? Jon Sawat used to like to ask us, “Central pleasures you had last week, where are they now? They’re gone.” Were they totally free? No. There’s an awful lot you had to put into them. So you take that and you compare it with the pleasure of a skill that you’ve mastered, that you can focus in on the breath and have a sense of well-being. And your way of calculating effort and the results of the effort will be measured against a much better standard. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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