Distractions

March 14, 2024

We go through life with many layers of thoughts going on in our minds. Events of the day, older events. Some thoughts don’t have much emotional charge. Other thoughts have lots of emotional charge. And as you’re sitting down to meditate, trying to get the mind quiet, the usual chatter that occupies the mind, that keeps the lower levels tamped down, is no longer there. This is when the lower levels begin to show themselves. As the Buddha pointed out, there are lots of different ways of dealing with them. He lists five. But tonight I’d like to talk about two big issues, those that have been preoccupying you, that are nibbling away at your concentration. If you can disperse them, fine. This is one of the reasons why we have those chants at the beginning of the meditation. You think about the parts of the body, for instance. You think about aging, illness, and death. You think about thoughts of goodwill for all beings, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Sometimes those thoughts are good for putting things into perspective. So when issues of the day come up, you can see them as being very minor. You realize that as you meditate, it’s not simply creating an empty space in the mind. You’re working on some necessary skills for dealing with the bigger issues in life. So staying with the breath is more important. When you can keep that in mind, the importance of the breath, the importance of training yourself in concentration, then you can just leave those thoughts alone. They may be nibbling away at the edges, but you don’t have to pay attention to them. After all, we’re trying to create a world where everything is perfect before we can sit down and get them off our mind still. We’d never get the mind still at all. There’s always going to be unfinished business in the world. That’s the nature of the world. All of its business stays unfinished. You could call it a work in progress, although sometimes it seems to be a work in regress. But the affairs of the world are never done. One job gets done and then it creates another issue and another job. Or one job gets done and it’s immediately replaced by others that are thronging in. So you have to learn how to get the mind still in the midst of the activity of the world. Remember, we’re creating the perfections here, but we’re creating them in an imperfect world. And we’re starting with an imperfect mind. So don’t be surprised if there are going to be issues on the edges, but keep them on the edge. As for issues that have more of an emotional charge, you’re going to have to deal with those, at the very least to remove the charge. You’ve got to learn how to think of them in different ways. And here, again, the contemplations we have. Say the five recollections. We’re all subject to aging, illness, and death. We’re all subject to separation. And whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall error. We’ve been doing this many, many, many times. In the sutta where the Buddha recommends this recollection, he doesn’t stop with just recollecting on the fact that we are subject to these things. Everybody is subject to these things. When you think about that, wherever you go, wherever you could be reborn, it’s these things over and over and over again. And again, putting things in a larger perspective helps to take away some of the emotional charge. When you think back on incidents where either you were mistreated or you mistreated other people, the Buddha recommends that you recognize the mistake and resolve not to repeat it. And then just lots of goodwill for yourself and for all other beings. Compassion for yourself and all other beings. Empathetic joy for when you’re able to avoid that kind of behavior. And equanimity over the fact that, yes, you have not been a totally pure person in your past. It’d be hard to find anybody in the human world who has been totally perfect. Even the Buddha started out imperfect. As for times when you were wronged, well, remember, there’s the principle of karma. There’s that story about some dead toad, a young monk, who came to see him one time, complaining that another monk had hit him. Some dead toad said, “Well, you hit him first.” The monk said, “No, I haven’t done anything at all to him. He just came up and hit me.” Some dead toad said, “No, you hit him first.” The young monk complained to another senior monk. The other senior monk came to see some dead toad and said, “What do you mean by this?” Some dead toad said, “Well, it’s the principle of karma. You’re not going to get hit unless you’ve hit somebody else.” So some place in your past, you would have some bad behavior. That’s why you’re subject to it now. Take some of the sting out, the sense of self-righteousness, which is one of the flavors of that kind of thinking, one of the allures of that kind of thinking. They say that the sense of wronged self is the strongest sense of self there is. Then it does have its allure. It does have its appeal. So you have to see that it’s a pretty miserable appeal. So why roll around in it? This is a case where the Buddha would say you have to think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. This is what it means to think about the drawbacks. Learn how to think in ways that pull you out. That’s why it’s useful to think about the Buddhist teachings on karma and rebirth. So many people tell us that meditation is one thing and the teachings on karma and rebirth are something else. But they’re very intimately connected. The reason we’re trying to get the mind to settle down in the present moment is so we can see our intentions really clearly. Set up one good intention, and then you’re going to learn about all the other intentions that come charging through the mind. Whichever ones fight against the good intention you’re trying to set up, you’ve got to realize that you don’t want to identify with them anymore. You may have identified with them strongly in the past. “This is who I am. This is my background. This is where I come from.” But you don’t have to carry that baggage around. The Buddhist teachings on karma help you get some distance from these things. So we’re trying to learn new skills so that we can see where we’ve been unskillful in our thinking in the past. That’s why the concentration is not just an exercise in getting the mind still, but you develop some discernment as part of learning how to get the mind to settle down. It’s not the case that you get the mind really, really still and only then the discernment comes. You’ve got to borrow the Buddhist discernment first and see what you can do to use that to develop more skill in your mind. So, as the Buddha says, you learn how to “think the thoughts you want to think, and you don’t have to think the thoughts you don’t want to think.” And you get a better and better sense of what thoughts really are worth thinking. That’s an important part of the skill that doesn’t often get mentioned, but it’s how the skill develops and how you become more discerning as a meditator.

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