Strategies Against Distraction

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To get the mind to settle down, you have to think strategically. The Buddha talks about the qualities you need in order to succeed at the meditation. You start out with desire. You have to want to do this. You have to want the good results that come, and the mind can settle down. Ever since feeling at home right here, that this is its place. This is where it belongs. But to get it to settle down, you can’t simply want, because it doesn’t respond that way. You have to think about the causes and focus your desires on the causes. The Buddha lists three qualities you have to develop. There’s mindfulness, the ability to keep in mind the fact that you do want to stay with one thing, the breath coming in, the breath going out. Although if you find it difficult to stay just with the breath, you can use a meditation word as well. You can think “Buddho,” “Bud,” “in,” “dho,” “ao.” It means “awake,” the quality you’re trying to develop here. You’re trying to keep that in mind, because other intentions are going to come up. You’re with the breath for a bit, and the mind says, “Well, this is boring, nothing’s happening. Let’s get some action.” And wants to go someplace else. You have to say, “No, I’m here because I have good reasons to try to stay here.” You’re trying to develop a skill that’s going to take time. And the skill of running around, thinking about this, thinking about that, you’re already good at that. What you need to develop is the skill to stay in one place. So you have to keep a watch over the mind. That’s the second quality, which is alertness. You watch what you’re doing. And then there’s the quality of ardency, which means you’re trying to do this well. Any thoughts come up that would pull you away, you say no to them. And if you do get pulled away, then as soon as you realize you’ve been pulled away from the breath, you come back. You don’t let the mind wander around as it likes, because it’s been wandering around as it likes for who knows how long. Again, you’re developing a new skill. When the mind is here, focused on the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to what kind of breathing would feel good. Which parts of the body are sensitive to the way the breathing feels as it comes in, as it goes out. Focus your attention there. And try to breathe in a way that satisfies them. This may involve some really deep breathing for a while. Because a lot of times the different parts of your body are starved of breath energy. You’re trying to feed them. So feed them as long as they need to be fed. If they’re really hungry for good breath energy, well give them a lot of good breath energy. Don’t be in too great of a hurry. Don’t be in a hurry to move on. When the body feels nourished by the breath, it’s a lot easier to settle down. That’s the quality of ardency. That actually connects with the second quality that the Buddha said is going to be necessary, which is persistence. You stick with this. So no matter how many times the mind wanders off, just keep bringing it back, bringing it back. Part of the skill of bringing it back is, as I said, to make the breath interesting, to make the breath comfortable. The other part of the skill is knowing how to treat your distracting thoughts. The Buddha lists five different ways of doing that. So with any particular thought, you figure out which technique is going to work. The very first one is the simplest. You realize you’ve stepped off, you just come back. But if the mind keeps slipping off, you’ve got to go to the next step, which is to look at the drawbacks of the kind of thinking that would pull you away. You can think thoughts of lust, you can think thoughts of anger, or just random thoughts about different things. You’ve got to see that they have their drawbacks. If you think about these things, they’re going to influence your behavior. And again, they’re going to get in the way of developing any kind of skill here. Thoughts of lust will lead you to do unskillful things. Thoughts of anger will lead you to do unskillful things. Random thoughts that are just entertaining, a huge waste of time. The image the Buddha gives is of someone who’s fond of beauty. Looks in a mirror and sees that a dead snake is around their neck, or a dead dog has been hung from their neck. And how they feel about having a dead snake or a dead dog around their neck. That’s the attitude you should have for the thoughts that would pull you away from what you’re trying to do. So that kind of approach takes more thinking. If you’re going to look at the drawbacks, you also have to ask yourself, “Well, why do you like these thoughts to begin with?” And part of you may say, “Well, I don’t like them.” But there’s another part that does. Otherwise, you wouldn’t go after them. The purpose here is to see what kind of gratification do you get out of that wandering mind? And to see that the drawbacks way outweigh the gratification. So you’re less and less inclined to want to go there. This is one of the reasons why we have those chants at the beginning of the meditation, particularly the chant for goodwill. You start thinking about who has harmed you in the past or has harmed you in the present. You have to remind yourself that they’re one of those beings that we said, “May all beings be happy.” Why would you want to see them unhappy? What would you gain from it? You can say, “Well, they’ve been misbehaving and they have to have some sense that they’ve done something wrong.” Well, having a sense that they’re doing something wrong doesn’t mean they have to be unhappy. Maybe that’s the one thing that will make them start changing their behavior. So you really wish that they would see the error of their ways and that it would be good for them to do that. You don’t have to think of any thoughts of punishment or revenge. In the meantime. So this way of dealing with your thoughts involves a fair amount of thinking. But to give you some perspective on the types of things you ordinarily think about and realize it’s a huge waste of time and often leads you to do unskillful things. Another good reason to get the mind just to settle down and be quiet for a while. The third approach is knowing that a thought has arisen in the mind, but you’re simply not going to go there. It can be in one part of the mind, but you’re in another part of the mind. The breath is still coming in and going out. It’s like the noise of the crickets right now. You could make them an obstacle. You could say, “I can’t meditate with all these crickets.” But that would be stupid. They can be in the background. They can do their thing. But your breath is still there. The crickets have not destroyed your breath. And it’s the same with your thoughts. You say, “Well, the difference is that the crickets are not interesting, but my thoughts are very interesting.” That’s something you’ve got to unlearn. There are very few thoughts in the world that really are interesting. So again, learn how to step back from your usual thinking and say, “This is not getting me anywhere. These thoughts are pretty dumb.” The fact that you pay attention to those thoughts is what feeds them. So in this case, you’re just not getting involved at all. Because that technique of thinking through the thoughts, sometimes they get you so involved that you can eat up the whole hour thinking about the drawbacks of other thoughts. They’ve pulled you away. So you can just say, “Well, they can be there, but I’m not going to pay them any attention.” It’s like a dog coming to your house. A stray dog. You know if you feed it, it’s going to hang around. And you don’t want it to hang around. So you just don’t feed it. And it’ll whine and complain in the way that dogs get to complain. But if you don’t give in, eventually, see, there’s no food coming, so it’s going to go away. And it’s the same with your thoughts. You don’t think them. They’ll insist that they’re really important, they’re really interesting, really entertaining. You don’t have to believe them. You just stay with your work, which is the breath. The image the Buddha gives is of seeing something you don’t want to see. You just turn your eyes away. You don’t have to obliterate it. You don’t have to drive it away. Just don’t look at it. You can also think about it. You’re in one corner of the room here, and there are people chattering in another corner. You don’t have to get involved in their conversation. You’ve got work to do in this corner. So they can chat as much as they want, but you stay right here. The difference being that, as I said, if you don’t pay any attention to these thoughts, after a while, they just don’t have any food, and they go away. The fourth technique is to use when you’re getting more sensitive to your breath, and you begin to realize that whenever a thought appears, there’s going to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It can be in the head, it can be in the legs, it can be in the arms, anywhere. And that pattern of tension is your anchor that keeps the thought going. It’s a little marker to remind you to continue with the thought right here. There’s a sense where that pattern of tension is. You just breathe through it, and it loses its marker. It’s like a bookmark. You want to remember where the thought was, so you can pick it up with the next breath, and then the next breath. I’ll just pull out the bookmark and throw it away. And the thought will often disappear. The image the Buddha gives here is of a person who’s been walking. He says, “Why am I walking? It’s less tiresome just to stand.” So he stands. As he’s standing, he said, “Why am I standing? It would be more relaxing to sit down.” So he sits down. As he’s sitting down, he thinks, “Why am I sitting? It’d be more relaxing just to lie down.” So he lies down. In other words, you see that distracting thoughts in your mind require some tension. They require some energy to keep them going. So why bother? As I said, this method is for the times that you’re getting more sensitive to the breath energy in the body. But wherever you can see that you’re engaged in a thought that’s not related to the breath, you can just think of dispersing it. The final method is the one where you have to use some force. The mind keeps going back to a particular thought, so you grit your teeth and press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” This, again, is where a meditation word can be useful. In this case, you don’t have to use it in rhythm with the breath or in sync with the breath. You just keep repeating it really fast, like machine gun fire. Buto, buto, buto, buto. Don’t give any space in the mind for the thought to get in. You can do this for a while. As I said, it takes some force. But for the very least, it clears the air for a bit. Then when the mind settles down a bit, then you can use those other techniques again. The image that the Buddha gives here is a strong man beating down a weak man. The strong man simply uses force. This is the technique that involves the least insight, the least understanding, and the most force. This is not the technique of choice, but when you need to use it, you need to use it. It’s as if you have different tools in your toolbox. You’ve got an exacto knife, you’ve got pliers, and you’ve got other leathermans, small hammers, bigger hammers, and finally you get a sledgehammer. This last technique is a sledgehammer. Not all the work you do has to require a sledgehammer. You’re fixing electricity on my hut. Don’t attack me with a sledgehammer. But there are other tasks that will require a sledgehammer, so have it as part of your repertoire. So as you can see, getting the mind to settle down, it’s not just a matter of forcing it down. You try to lure it down with interesting breath, comfortable breaths. You try to use your discernment and getting it past all the other things that would pull it away. And John Mahambo makes the comment that some people have to do a lot of thinking before their mind’s willing to settle down. Other people don’t have to do much thinking at all. The first group he calls discernment, fostering concentration. The second group he calls concentration, fostering discernment. And the image he uses is of cutting down a tree. For people who find it easy to for their minds to settle down, they’re like a tree out in the middle of a meadow. You want to cut it down, it’s not difficult. You just decide which direction you want it to go. And you cut it so it falls in that direction, and it falls. The discernment, fostering concentration group though, they’re like a tree in a forest with its branches entangled with other trees. And you have to cut it down only in the direction where it falls between some other trees. If it falls against another tree, you can’t get it down. So you have to cut this branch, cut that branch, be very careful about how and where you cut it, and then it goes down. So some of these methods require some thought. They require that you look objectively at the way you think to see that a lot of times your thoughts are either harmful or useless. Or just a waste of energy. In this case, you’re cutting them off with your discernment. But either way, the idea is that you want to get the mind so it settles down. When you get skilled at these different methods, then as the Buddha said, you learn to think the thoughts you want to think, and not think the thoughts that you don’t want to think. And at the same time, your standards for what you really want to think get higher and higher. In other words, the thoughts that used to attract you, now you realize they don’t have that much appeal anymore. So getting the mind to stay with one object isn’t a brute process. It requires discernment. As the Buddha said, there is no jhana, there’s no strong concentration without discernment. And there’s no discernment without strong concentration. The two qualities have to help each other along. But that’s how you get an all-around training for the mind. Stillness plus understanding. Because this mind of ours is, for most of us, is a big mystery. We want happiness, but we think in ways and tell ourselves to talk in ways and act in ways that lead to the opposite of happiness. And then we wonder why. We tell ourselves, “Oh, because we wanted happiness, but that something unhappy is happening. It must not be us. Something else must be causing that.” And we tend to lay the blame outside. That’s because we don’t really see our own minds clearly. Don’t understand our minds clearly. Because the real cause for our unhappiness is coming from within. Our own ignorance of what we’re doing. So learn to bring some knowledge to what you’re doing. And this is one of the ways you gain knowledge. Not by following your thoughts, but by saying no to them. And of course, by saying no to them, you learn a lot about the process of thinking. Just learn how to master the different ways of saying no effectively. That’s how you come to understand.

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