Distraction & Pain

February 19, 2025

We have a whole hour now where you can explore your breathing. Because when we talk about the breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the flow of energy in the body that allows the air to come in, allows the air to go out, allows the blood to circulate around the body, energizes your nerves. This energy. As you get to know it, you find you can do a lot of things with it. When you have a disease, you can think of the breath energy going to the diseased part of the body and nourishing it. When there are pains, the breath can flow through the pain, sometimes dissolve the pain away, or at the very least put you in a position where you’re not feeling threatened by the pain. When the body feels heavy and tired, you can breathe in ways that give it more energy. When you feel frazzled or tense, breathe in ways that are more soothing and relaxing. There’s a lot you can do with the breath. It gives you a good place for the mind to settle down, just be still. The problem is there are things that get in the way when you’re trying to do this. Number one problem is distraction. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath, you choose a spot in the body to focus on, and suddenly you find yourself someplace else, in the past, the future. You’re going to catch yourself and bring yourself back. That’s what mindfulness is for, together with alertness. Alertness is when you notice, “Oh, this has happened.” If you’re not alert, you can find yourself wallowing in thought worlds for a long time before you realize what’s going on. You realize, “Oops, I’m supposed to be meditating.” So you’ve got to be alert to what you’re doing, and mindful to keep coming back. We had that in the chant just now. “Atthapisambhujana Siddhima.” You’re ardent, alert, mindful. The ardency, of course, means trying to do this as well as you can. That comes from a strong sense that you’re going to learn something good. It’s not just in, out, in, out, in, out. Lots of ins and lots of outs to the breath. And the more you get the mind quiet, and more consistent in your awareness, the more you’re going to see. But then again, distractions come up, you find yourself someplace else again. So it’s good to know there are different ways of dealing with these distractions. Number one is simply when you notice you’ve slipped off, you just come right back. The problem is simply a lack of awareness. A lapse in mindfulness, a lapse in alertness, so you reestablish mindfulness, you reestablish alertness, come back to the breath. No matter how many times this happens, each time you come back, try to breathe in a way that’s especially rewarding, especially gratifying, so you’ll want to come back. That’s one way of dealing with these things. If, however, you find that the mind keeps going to a particular topic, the next course of action is to think about the drawbacks of letting yourself think long periods of time about that topic. That’s why you’re drawn to it. What does it do for you? There are plenty of other times you could think about it. Why do you have to think about it now? So you can see the drawbacks of going there. Then it’s a lot easier to come back. Another approach is that when there’s a discussion going on in the mind that’s not related to the breath, you let it stay there, but you don’t get into it. Think of yourself as being in a large room like this, and someone is over in the corner talking, and you’ve got a job to do in this corner, but you don’t drive the other person out, but you don’t listen to that person. You don’t get involved in the conversation. The image of the Buddha gives is of seeing something you don’t like to see, so you turn your eyes away. Whatever it was you saw, it’s still there, but you don’t pay it any attention. Another image you could use is of a stray dog. The dog comes and wants your attention, wants you to feed it. If you feed it, it’s going to hang around. If you don’t feed it, it may whine for a while and scratch at you. But if you keep on ignoring it, after a while it will go away. That’s the third approach. The fourth approach is to realize that when you’re thinking about something, it takes energy. And the energy is not just mental energy, there’s a physical energy that goes into thinking as well. Because in order to keep a thought in mind, there has to be a little bit of tension in the body someplace. This is one of the reasons why mental work can be so exhausting. You’ve got this little piece of tension here for that thought, and that piece of tension for this thought. You’ve got to keep them all in mind in order to make sense of what you’re working on. And you have little thought markers all over the body, where basically the breath energy is not flowing well. So if you can catch where those thought markers have been placed, just think of the breath going through them and dissolving them. And you find that the thoughts have no place to stand. And when they have no place to stand, they go away. That’s the fourth approach. The Buddha compares it to a person walking and telling himself, “Why am I walking? It would be easier to stand.” So he stands. Then he tells himself, “Why am I standing? It would be easier to sit.” So he sits. “Why am I sitting? It would be easier to lie down.” So he lies down. So you see where you’re putting energy into those thoughts. You just relax the energy. The fifth method is when none of these other techniques work. You just tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” You press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. And in Buddhism, as you wrestle with the morning downs, “I’m not going to think that thought, anything else but that thought.” This technique works for only a little while. Some people use the meditation word really fast. The traditional word is bhutto, which means awake. We call the Buddha the Buddha, but in the time when he was alive, he was called the Bhutto. So we think awake, awake, awake, really fast, rapid fire, like a machine gun. And that kind of blocks the channels in the mind, so you can’t think about anything. But as I said, this works only for a little while, but it clears the air sometimes. And when you’re tired of that, then you can go back to any of the others. In other words, replacing an unskillful thought with the thought of your meditation topic, or looking at the drawbacks of your distractions, deciding that you’re simply not going to pay attention to the chatter that goes on in your mind, or realizing that you can relax wherever that thought marker was in your body, and the thought can go away. Those are some of the ways you can deal with distractions. Another obstacle is pain. You sit here for a while and you get numb in one part of the body, or if you have a chronic pain, you’re not moving around and it seems to aggravate it. Make sure you’re sitting with a posture that does not aggravate whatever the physical condition is. But also realize that if you’re sitting here with your legs crossed, and you’re not used to it, it’s going to be a while before your body adjusts. It does have this ability to reroute the blood. If its normal channels are being blocked, the blood starts going to the capillaries, that’s where you get numb, that’s where there’s pain sometimes in the body. But if you sit here frequently enough, stretch the time in which you sit, those little capillaries begin to expand and they become new arteries and new veins. So you can think of yourself as breaking the body in. You don’t want to break it, though, of course. Be very careful with your knees, with your hips. Make sure they’re properly aligned. And if the pain continues, remind yourself it doesn’t have the whole body. You can think of it in such a way that you feel like the whole body is awash with pain. But if you look carefully, you can realize the pain has certain parts of the body, and there are other parts of the body that are perfectly fine. If the whole body were in pain, you’d die. The fact that you’re alive means there must be some place in the body that’s not in pain. Try to find that. Focus your attention there. And you can maintain it by the way you breathe. See if long breathing feels good, short breathing feels good, fast, slow, heavy, light. Think of the breath coming into the body from the front, from the back. Nourish the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. That gives you a place where you can settle down. Once you’ve got that place where you can settle down, then you can start thinking of the good breath energy in that part of the body spreading through the pain to loosen up any tightness or tension around the pain. It also gets you in a position where you don’t feel afraid of the pain. Because ultimately you’re going to want to look at the sensation of pain itself to see if it corresponds to your perceptions of it, the images you have of it. We can often think of the pain as being a solid block that just sits there. But when you get really clear about it, when the mind settles down and is not afraid of it, you begin to realize that it comes and goes in moments. Sometimes the moments come really fast. But the important thing is that you don’t see those moments of pain coming at you. They’re just there. Or you can think of them going away. If that perception doesn’t work, just think, “Well, they’re just there.” But they’re not coming at you. That’s the important thing. The mind has this tendency to be like a vacuum cleaner. It just sucks up all the bad stuff. The sensations of pain are there. And you can ask yourself, “Are they the same thing as the sensations of the body?” The sensations of the body fall under what the Buddhists in the time of the Buddha would call the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. And by that they meant not so much elementary, primitive chemistry. It was more the qualities of that light. I know that you have a body right here, right now. There’s warmth. There’s solidity. There are cool feelings and there are warm feelings. That’s the water and the fire. So those are how you know you have a body sitting at you. There’s a sense of warmth and solidity and movement of energy. But then the pain is something else. It’s none of those things. We try to glom it together with them so that the body itself seems to be pain. But the pain is what? The body is something else. Your awareness is something else. When you can divide things up in this way, the pain can be there. But it’s not infringing on the mind. But to get to that state, it requires good, steady mindfulness, good, steady alertness. That’s what we’re working on as we stay with the breath. The more you can consistently stay with the breath, the more meditation you can do. The more mental strength you have to deal with the pains that come up in the body. So focus on the breath. Focus on staying with the breath and develop the mental skills you need to stay. Mindfulness, alertness, urgency. And you find that the obstacles begin to melt away. And even when they come back, you know what to do with them. You’re developing a skill here, how to relate to your body in the present moment, and your mind in the present moment, in a way that’s not causing you any suffering, not causing you any stress, not causing you any pain. That’s the skill we’re working on here. And a lot more steps to the skill. But these are the two main obstacles you’re going to face at the beginning. And it’s by no means the case that pain happens only to beginners and distractions happen only to beginners. But if you get enough skill inside so you can deal with these things as they come up, and have a sense of confidence in the face of them, you’re less likely to be overwhelmed.

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