Drowsy & Bored

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One of the biggest frustrations in meditation is one after you’ve been dealing with lots of distractions, where it seems like the mind wants to think about anything but the breath. You finally get it focused on the breath, and then you fall asleep. It’s like that picture of hell. The Buddha gives in one of the suttas of these beings in hell that are in this huge iron box. There’s flame coming from each side of the box, and they have to run across the flames. There’s a little door that opens on one side of the box, and so they go running to the door. And then as soon as they get to the door, the door slams shut. Then a door opens on another side, and they go running to that door. And so they get there, and the door slams shut. Finally, after running around a lot like this, running through the flames, they get to the door, and it doesn’t slam shut. And they go running, and they get into the hell of excrement. The question is, how do you find the right balance so that you can stay with the breath and not be distracted and not fall asleep? Particularly with the sleep, the drowsiness. There are different reasons for being drowsy. One is that the mind has too much energy. The other is that it has not enough. There’s too much energy when the mind wants something to think about and finds the breath boring. And so it puts itself to sleep. So the way to deal with that is either to try to find a way of making the breath interesting. Go through the different parts of the body and find out if there’s some part of the body where things tend to be tied up or tight, and ask yourself, “How long has this been here, this tightness?” Because sometimes it’s been there for years—the way you hold the body, your posture, the way you walk. There may be an old wound there. There may be some part of the body that has a painful memory around which you’ve tightened up. So look around. If you find something like that, very gently, as if you’re rubbing a little cloth over it, just breathe around it, breathe around it. Try not to breathe through it yet, because if you breathe through it, it’ll resist. But breathe around it. Or you can play with different ways of thinking about the breath. Instead of thinking about the breath coming in, think about the breath originating in the body and spreading out through the body, and see which parts of the body resist that. One of the hardest places to do that is to think about radiating out from the middle of your head. Instinctively, we tend to create a little flow of energy where we think our nose is to bring the breath in. What happens if you think of the breath radiating out as you breathe in? You give the mind something to play with. If you don’t like playing with the breath, you can contemplate the different parts of the body. Where are the bones right now? Try to go through the whole body. Start with the bones in your fingers, and work up the bones in your hands, the bones in your forearm, the elbows, the upper arm, the shoulders. Then start with the toes and come on up. Try to visualize the bone that you’re focused on and get a sense of exactly where in the body it lies. When I was meditating in Varasokaram, they had a skeleton and a little glass cabinet. If I’m sitting there looking at the skeleton and trying to imagine where in my body is that bone right now, it was really riveting. As you begin to notice, there are some spots in the body where there’s a tightness that you’ve assumed to be a bone, and there’s really no bone there. This is a good way of clearing through some of the unnecessary patterns of tension in the body. If you find the contemplation of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is interesting, do that. Give the mind work to do. If it’s got all this energy to think, that way it won’t be bored. As long as you’re rooted here in the body, you’re fine. Or you can try the brahma varas, asking yourself, “Is there anybody out there for whom you have some ill will, or anyone who’s suffering and you’re happy to see them suffer?” Try to have some goodwill for that person. Try to have some compassion for that person. Remind yourself that you’re not endorsing what that person is doing now, and you’re not gaining anything from that person’s suffering. Having goodwill means hoping that that person will understand the causes for your happiness and be able to act on them. Then reflect on what that means in terms of your relationship to that person. To whatever extent you can help that person come to his or her senses, the better. If you can’t, that’s when you have to develop equanimity. In other words, when you’re doing the brahma varas, it’s not just thinking of radiating pink thoughts or pink rays out into the world. You’re actually going through, “Where in my mind is there some ill will? Let’s dig it up,” like a weed that you’re trying to get out of the mind. So when the mind has excess energy, you give it more work to do. Now it’s ready to settle down, to come back to the breath. When you come back to the breath, don’t focus on one narrow little point. Try to think of the whole body. All at once. You can go through the body section by section, or you can try just the whole body, whole body, whole body, right from the beginning. Take the excess energy you have and put it into keeping that perception of whole body and that receptivity to whole body going as long as you can. There’s another reason why you might be getting bored with the mind as it settles in. As the mind begins to settle down, part of it will realize, “Okay, something’s going to come up in the mind and I don’t want to deal with it.” And so you have make-believe boredom, make-believe drowsiness, as a way of obscuring what might be coming up. This is where you have to remind yourself, “Whatever comes up, I’m ready for it. I want to know. If I’m afraid to deal with uncomfortable things coming up in my mind, how am I ever going to gain insight?” So those are ways of dealing with drowsiness when you have too much energy. When there’s too little energy, you’ve got to learn how to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. We have this belief that concentration has to have a nice, gentle, shallow breath to be really peaceful. But sometimes you need a stronger breath, deeper, where you put more energy into it. And when you put more energy into it, you get more energy out. Or you can think seriously about death. You have to remind yourself that death could come at any time. Here we are in California. Earthquakes can happen at any time. Fires now can happen at any time. We used to have a fire season, but now it seems like the whole year is a fire season. Or it doesn’t have to be California. Your body is ready to die at any point. It doesn’t take much. Are you ready to go? The answer usually is no. Okay, what’s holding you back? Or what would hold you back if you had to go? Try to actually sort through that. What would tie you down if all of a sudden a little clot of blood started wandering around your blood system and suddenly found itself lodged in your brain or your kidney or your heart and things would stop? What would you grab at? I know when I was almost electrocuted in Thailand, looking back on it, it was really fascinating to see the things that went through my mind at that point. The first was, “It’s not right. I was too young to die. I was only 35 at the time.” The other was, “My father would be really upset. I’ve got to let go of those things. The idea that I haven’t had enough time yet, I’ve got to let that go. Other people, I’ve got to let them go. I’ve got to deal with my mind right here, right now.” And if you haven’t had any practice in letting go, it’s going to be really hard at that point, because the mind is going to be desperate. It’s going to grab at anything. So at the very least, you should train the mind to cut through whatever the “anythings” might be as they come up. So use that as an exercise in your imagination. If you really had to go tonight, or if you really had to go within the next few minutes, what would your mind run to? And often that contemplation can wake you up. Now, it is true that there are times when the body really does need to rest, and the mind’s not making up its drowsiness. But you’ve got to test it first. The Buddha recommends rubbing your limbs, going out, looking at the stars, doing walking meditation. And if you still find that you’re drowsy, then you lie down. But even then, you have to make the promise to yourself that, “As soon as I wake up, I’m going to get up again.” I’m not going to lie wallowing in the pleasure of lying down. Because after all, we are looking for awakening here. And part of the path means learning how to wake yourself up, even in a very mundane way. So search around for topics of meditation that might work for you. That might wake you up. That might engage the mind. And if you’re going to stick with the breath, try to work with the breath. Give yourself work to do with the breath in terms of getting it to flow in better ways. Try to find what it means to breathe with a sense of rapture, breathe with a sense of ease. Think of a bathman’s apprentice who’s kneading the big ball of soap powder, soap dough, basically, trying to find any little spot in that ball of soap powder where the moisture hasn’t gone, or find any part of the moisture that’s a little excess. So everything is rightly balanced, everything is totally permeating the body, every little cell. Which cells are you missing? Balance them out. Give yourself work to do. You’re working in pleasure. You’re working in the body. So it all counts as concentration. The mind is gathered around one topic. That’s what concentration is. It’s a gathering into one, around one. And as long as you’re here, grounded, thinking along with the Dhamma, it counts as concentration. right meditation.

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