Distracting Thoughts

October 1, 2018

One of the things you learn as you start meditating is that even though you have one mind, it seems like you have many minds. And many different ideas come up in the course of just a few minutes. It’s like a big committee. And sometimes the most reasonable members went out, and sometimes the less reasonable members do. They put a lot of force on you. They squeeze your nerves, as they say in Thai, until you feel compelled to follow them. So when you make up your mind to stay with the breath, you have to realize there will be parts of the mind that don’t agree with that decision, and they’ll wait for you to have a lapse in mindfulness or a lapse in alertness. And all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. The Buddha gives recommendations on what to do when that happens. There are five altogether, five big ways. And then there are lots of ways of working variations on the big five. But it’s good to remember you do have five different ways of dealing with this, so you’re not just stuck with one. Sometimes you’re told, “Well, just note that there’s a distinction between distraction and concentration.” And that’s all you do. And that works sometimes, but it doesn’t work all the time. And you want to have an all-around set of skills to deal with the all-around problem that distraction creates. So the first method is simply to note when the mind has gone off, okay, it’s gone off to something less skillful, and you’re thinking of a way to just bring it back. Now, sometimes that way to bring it back may be simply reminding yourself, “Hey, I’m here to work on the breath, to stay with the breath. I didn’t come here to think about my tax returns or to think about old scores I’d like to settle. I’m here to develop concentration.” And in some cases, that’s enough to come back. Although the fact that the mind wanders off, you might take it as a sign that the mind is not quite as comfortable as it could be. So ask yourself, “How can I change the way I breathe?” And be careful when you come back not to berate yourself too much for wandering off. In fact, you want to reward yourself for coming back by breathing in a way that feels really good. Try one really good breath, and then you ask yourself, “Why stop with one?” Try two, three, four, and see what ways you can make the breath interesting. Think about the patterns of tension in the body. Where do you tend to hold tension? Can you release it and continue breathing as it stays relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath? When you can do that, you find that being with the body feels a lot more comfortable, and you’re more likely to want to stay. Sometimes you want to use an alternative method of meditation. You might think of goodwill, goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all beings. Especially if the thought that pulled you away was a thought of anger. Or you might want to contemplate the parts of the body. If you’re being pulled away by lust, think, “What is there in a human body?” You go through all the different parts. Think of them spread out on the floor in front of you, and ask yourself, “Which part there is anything really worth desiring?” In other words, when an unskillful thought comes up, you replace it with a more skillful one. And among the skillful ones, there’s a ranking. If you think goodwill for a while and you’ve dealt with the issue of whoever it was that you were angry at, come back to the breath. The breath should always be your home base. It’s just that sometimes you need to think yourself back to the breath a little bit. And then you can stay. That’s one method. If that method doesn’t work, the Buddha says, “Think about the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking, whatever it was that pulled you away.” You might ask yourself, “If I actually acted on this thought, where would it lead me?” One method I like using is asking myself, “If this were a movie, what I paid to watch, at most of the movies that go through your mind, you’ve seen them many times before, the acting is usually horrible, the script is pretty predictable, why bother?” But if you find, say, that thoughts of anger are really compelling, you might want to ask yourself, “Where would this lead me?” And the person you’re angry at, is that person suffering from your thoughts right now? No, but you are suffering from those thoughts. Why are you imposing them on you? Think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. It makes you realize, “I really don’t want to go there.” It makes it easier to come back to the breath. That’s the second way. The third way is simply to ignore the thoughts. In other words, here again, think of the mind as a committee. You’ve got a couple members that are just chattering away, and they don’t stop. But you don’t have to listen to them. It’s like going to a meeting where someone’s droning on and on and on, and you realize you’re not missing anything by not paying attention. Just because a thought is in your mind, doesn’t mean you have to pay attention to it. And remember that the thought is not destroying the breath. The breath is still there. Ferret it out. Where do you feel it? Those other committee members just chatter away as they like. When you’re not interested in them, after a while, they begin to realize that you don’t care. And they go away. It’s like a dog who comes and whimpers and whines and wants to be fed. It’ll keep it up as long as it has some hope that you might feed it. But when it’s convinced that you’re not going to feed it, then it goes away. That’s the third method. The fourth is to realize that whenever a thought comes into the mind, there’s going to be tension someplace in the body. That’s the marker that we use in order to keep that thought. So where is the marker? Where is the tension? Can you find it? This is why it’s really good to be able to spread the breath energy around the body, because you get more sensitive to these patterns of tension that might be in the head, might be in the arms, might be in the legs, someplace, any place in the body. You’ll be amazed at where the tension is. These patterns of tension that are associated with different thoughts get lodged. They say that when a person receives a heart from somebody else, they pick up some of the memories from that other person. They’re embedded in the energy of the heart. So every thought has a part of the body where it’s embedded. There’ll be a little tension there. Breathe through it. Relax around it. And you’ll find that the thought will go away. That’s the fourth method. If none of the other methods work, then the Buddha says, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” And just push the thought out. You might want to use a meditation word to go along with this. Bhutto is one. Repeat it to yourself, really rapid fire. Jam the airways. This is the method that requires the most force and the least discernment. But it’s there in your toolbox. The other methods are more like surgical tools or tools for your kitchen. But this is like a sledgehammer. You just bang the thought. When it’s been out of the mind for a while, then you can use one of the other four methods to finish it off. It’s what you want. It’s a full toolbox. When the Buddha teaches these five methods, he gives an image for each of them so you can remember them. This is very typical of his teachings. As I said earlier, you fashion your mind partly by the perceptions that you hold in mind. And you want a series of perceptions that helps you see that these thoughts that pull your way are not that desirable. Because they will try. They’ll dress themselves up in all kinds of ways to make you think that it’s really worth thinking thoughts of desire, thoughts of anger, thoughts of whatever. So the Buddha gives you another set of perceptions. For the first method, when you replace the unskillful thought with a more skillful one, he says, it’s like a carpenter who uses a very fine peg to drive out a bigger peg. For the method of seeing that drawbacks of the thoughts, he gives one of his more graphic images. He’s just like someone who’s young and likes to look good in the mirror, and suddenly finds that he or she has a dead dog or a dead snake around the neck. You want to learn to see your thought with that kind of disgust. The third method, when you simply ignore the thought, he says, it’s like you see something you don’t want to look at, you turn your eyes away. The fourth method, when you relax around the thought, he says, it’s like a person who’s walking and says, “Why should I walk? It’s taking up unnecessary energy. I’ll just stand.” Then as he stands, he says, “Why am I standing? Why don’t I sit?” So he sits down. He sits down and he says, “Why am I sitting? Why don’t I lie down?” In other words, you find that being with the breath is more relaxing. Finally, the fifth method, he says, it’s like a strong man taking a weak man and just crushing him. So remember the methods, and also remember the images, the perceptions, that the Buddha teaches along with the methods. Or you can try other perceptions as well. For instance, with ignoring the thought, you might think of it as being like a crazy person coming to talk to you. You’re trying to speak to the crazy person, even enough just to chase the crazy person away. The crazy person’s got you, pulls you into his crazy world. So you just ignore him. And the crazy person will try to say things that are even more outrageous to get your attention. But after a while, he’ll see that you’re not interested and he’ll go away. So it’s good to arm yourself with these different methods and arm yourself with the perceptions that help you remember them. So when a thought comes up and it seems compelling, you remind yourself, “This is not what I’m here for. I don’t want to be a slave to my thoughts.” Because, as the Buddha said, when you master these five methods, you become the owner of your thoughts. You’re not owned by them. You’re their master. You think the thoughts that you want to think, and you don’t have to think the thoughts you don’t want to think. And at the same time, as you get more and more practice, you get a better idea of what thoughts really are worth thinking about. So you develop maturity in two ways. One, in having the skills to turn off your thoughts. And two, in getting a better sense of judgment about what you really want to think about. Realizing that you have the choice not to think, or at the very least just thinking about the breath and not having to take up anything else. You’ve got this whole hour where you have to think about no other responsibilities. So don’t fritter away with thinking about this, that, or the other thing. Think about one thing. Think about the breath. How the breath is moving through the body, how it feels good, where it doesn’t feel good, what you can do to release the tension in different parts of the body. There’s a lot to explore here. In fact, if you learn how to see why the breath is interesting, here it is. It’s the force of your life. Without it, you wouldn’t be able to move the body, you wouldn’t be able to sense the body. It’s the medium through which the mind and the body interact. And because it’s the force of life, it only stands to reason that when the breath flows well through the body, it’s going to be good for the body and it’ll be good for the mind. So here’s an important issue, an important quality of our experience that gets pushed aside. It gets pushed out of the way as we take interest in other things. And the potentials that the breath has for giving a sense of well-being to the body, well-being to the mind, are not getting used to their full advantage. But here, now, you have the time to look at it straight on, without anything else getting in the way. So don’t you put other things in the way. And if anything does come in to interfere, you’ve got these different means. You’ve got the different methods, you’ve got the different perceptions. So you can have the mind where you want it, right here at the breath, alert, mindful, ardent, experiencing well-being in a way that causes no harm at all.

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