

## *Distractive Thoughts*

*July 31, 2007*

The Buddha taught five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts, and it's good to know all five. If you know just one way of dealing with them, you'll find that one way doesn't cover all the contingencies, all the different ways the mind can find to distract itself. So as meditators, it's good for us to have a large repertoire of techniques, of approaches, so that if one doesn't work, you've got backups.

As we mentioned today, sometimes you find yourself meditating, and all of a sudden you're off someplace else. You don't know how you got there, but you've totally dropped your meditation. There are other times when you're with the breath, but there are still thoughts talking in the back of your mind. It's a different type of distraction and it requires a different approach.

So here are the five.

The first is that when you notice that you've slipped off your meditation topic, you just come right back. In other words, you've been with the breath, suddenly you realized you're off the breath, so first thing, come right back to the breath. This is the first approach.

When you come back—this is not written in the texts—you might ask yourself, “Why did I slip off the breath to begin with?” One common reason is that the breath isn't yet interesting enough. So try to make the breath more interesting when you come back to it. This is particularly useful if the way you slipped off is a drowsy slipping-off. It's a sign that the breath is too weak, so you make the breath stronger. Try to think of the breath as bringing energy into the body, energizing all the nerves of the body. If you've been sleepy, it's good to think of breathing in long and out short, in long, out short, to emphasize the in-breath. As you get sensitive to the way the breath energy goes throughout the body, you'll begin to notice that if you breathe out too long, you're starving the nerves of breath energy, which is one of the reasons you were falling asleep. So charge things up: in long, out short; in long, out short.

That's the first approach. Just come back to the breath, and try to make it more pleasant, make it more interesting, make it a better place to stay, so that you'll be less likely to wander off again. But know that you probably will wander off again, because that's the way the mind is used to operating. When they talk about samsara, it's not a place, it's an activity of the mind that wanders around. This is what the mind's been doing for who knows how long. So take it for granted that

the mind will wander off again, and be prepared the next time. Try to notice how it wanders off, what the stages are. When you sense the stages, you can catch yourself before you're totally gone and you can come back. Again, try to make the breath more interesting. Try to make it a better place to be.

Now, the Buddha said, if that doesn't work, the next step is to analyze the distraction, and particularly with the purpose of seeing its drawbacks. Maybe it's something you'd like to think about, like tomorrow's meal, so ask yourself: What gets accomplished by sitting here thinking about tomorrow's meal? It's a waste of time. If you thought about tomorrow's meal for the next fifteen hours, what would it do? Wouldn't get you anywhere at all.

In fact, most of the distracting thoughts are things we've thought about many, many times already: old movies that just keep getting played over and over again—a few variations here, a few variations there, but often it's the same old themes over and over again. Ask yourself, where have these gotten you in the past? Usually not very far. Especially if it's an obvious defilement, like greed, anger, delusion, or lust: If you thought about it for a while, you'd develop ruts in the mind that would be hard to get out of. Like driving through snow: You suddenly find yourself falling into some ruts, and the ruts take you right into the back of a parked car.

So think about the drawbacks of those particular distractions. Think of where they lead you. Often you may wonder about where they come from, but primarily the analysis here is just seeing: Is this something you really want to stick with? If the answer is No, then it's easier come back to the breath. That's the second approach.

If that doesn't work, you can simply ignore the thoughts. In other words, they're still there in the back of the mind, but you begin to realize that you can still focus on the breath even though the thoughts are there in the back of the mind. The breath is always coming in; it's always going out.

Years back, I was teaching meditation in a room that had a very loud clock: *tick tock, tick tock*. And after the first meditation session, everybody opened their eyes and said, "That damned clock!" I had to point out the clock hadn't destroyed their breath. The breath was still coming in, still going out. It was still there even though the clock was ticking away. Even though there's chatter going on in the mind, the breath is still coming in, still going out, so you hang out with the sensation of the breath and you consciously ignore the thoughts. Like a beggar coming to you: If you pay any attention to the beggar, the beggar's got you. Or a crazy person coming to talk to you: Even if you focus on the crazy person just enough to tell the crazy person to go away, the crazy person's got you. These

thoughts keep trying to pull you into their conversation, into their crazy worlds. So you have to pretend they're not there. You know they're there, but you act as if you didn't know. Just stay with the breath as much as you can.

You might want to use the word, *buddho*, to help fix your attention on the breath, to make it more and more obvious, to make the thought of *buddho* louder than the distracting thoughts. Think of every cell in your body screaming *bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out: a huge chorus of voices all in unison, *buddho, buddho*. That helps to emphasize the breath, which is an important part of *vitakka*, or directed thought, in your meditation. You try to make the topic as prominent as possible.

If that approach doesn't work, the Buddha said, you can start surveying the body. When we talk about where thoughts come from, we can think about sort of the intellectual background of the thoughts, what assumption is behind them. That's one thing, but there's also a physical component to every thought. Every time a thought comes in and grabs hold of the mind, there's going to be a pattern of tension that gets held on to in the body. It's the mind's marker for keeping the thought in mind. So you might want to survey your body: Where are the markers for this particular thought that keeps coming, coming, coming into the mind? Maybe a little tension in the arms or in the legs or in the back or someplace around the head. When you can locate the spot, just breathe right through it, think of relaxing the tension, and often the thought will go away because it doesn't have any place to land, it doesn't have any place to hold on to.

The fifth approach is the one of last resort. When none of these other techniques are working and the thoughts are still pulling you away from your meditation, you press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and as the Buddha says, you beat down in the mind with the will. In other words, you're determined: "I will not think that thought."

Here again, *buddho*, as a meditation word is really useful. You might want to divorce it from the breath and say *buddho, buddho* really fast. Jam all the circuits with *buddho* until you've cleared the air. The last one is a technique that a lot of people really dislike. It seems too forceful, too heavy-handed, but sometimes you need a heavy hand. To make a comparison with tool in a box, sometimes you really need a sledgehammer, so have one on hand in case you need it.

These are the five main ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. It's good to keep all five in mind, and then apply whichever one is appropriate for your particular situation as you're meditating. As I mentioned earlier today, if you try to meditate while you're doing other activities, the simple method of calling the mind back, calling the mind back, is probably the best one. In other words, have

your center someplace in the body, maintain a spot in the body where it feels relaxed, the breath energy feels good right there, and you try to keep it feeling good all the way in with the in-breath, all the way out with the out-.

When the mind slips off, you don't have to ask many questions or do much analysis, just come back, come back, come back. Because the analysis requires more quiet time, more space, you can save the analysis for when you get back home and sit down to meditate. Just make a little mental note: "This issue kept coming up, so I've got to look into it. I can't really look into it now, because I've got other things going on, and all I can do is maintain my center." Then you come back to the issue later.

The important point is that you realize that there are many techniques for dealing with distraction, and there are actually others aside from these five. If the mind feels really drifty, or when you're wallowing in vague feelings of pleasure, one thing you can do is just keep on sitting until pain comes up. Then you've got a new problem: how to deal with pain. Or when you're feeling irritable, do your best to make the breath really, really comfortable. Again, think of the nerves in your body as requiring a fullness of the breath energy. Wherever it's lacking, you just breathe in there, being full and staying full, all the way with the in-breath, all the way with the out-. In other words, learn to use both pleasure and pain where it's appropriate.

Last night I was talking about the different kinds of fabrication you can use to deal with unskillful thoughts in the mind. This type of mental fabrication—i.e., using pleasure and using pain as tools in the practice—was the one that fell through the cracks. But it's an important element in the meditation, an important approach. If you're willing to sit with pain, you'll learn an awful lot about the mind. When the mind is drifting, pain really transfixes it. Then the issue is: How are you going to relate to the pain in such a way that the mind doesn't suffer from it?

If you're up for that kind of analysis, you can learn a lot, particularly about how your perceptions of the pain, the labels you apply to the pain, can form a bridge so that the physical pain turns into a mental pain. If you see the perception in action—precisely the mental picture or whatever the label that the mind applies to the pain—when you see the label coming and going and then the mental suffering coming and going along with the perception, you've got your clue: This is something you need to focus on. You need to learn how to drop that perception. You've gained an important insight into how the mind creates suffering, how things don't have to entail suffering. There was an element of

intention, and you were doing something to the pain that actually made the mind suffer. That's an important lesson.

On the other hand, if there are states of mind that are fascinated with lust, turn around and try to make the body as comfortable and full of breath energy as possible right now, because lust feeds on a sense of lack. Think of your hands all relaxed, your feet all relaxed, every finger, every toe, feeling really full of breath energy, and working up from the hands and feet up the arms and legs till you've got the whole body filled with breath energy—so full that you don't have any room to think.

That won't solve the problem of lust but at least it gets it out of the way for the time being. And that sense of fullness can provide you with a really good place for looking at other ways you look for happiness. Here you've got a fullness that you can tap into simply by the way you relate to the breath, whereas those other ways you look for happiness require a lot of effort, and they don't provide the same kind of fullness when they do come, so why would you want to get involved? Especially if they're unskillful. When you've got this sense of fullness here, a lot of other attachments will just drop away.

So learn to use both pleasure and pain as part of your arsenal, part of your meditators' toolkit, so that—as the Buddha said in the discourse where he was describing these five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts—when you've mastered these five methods, you're a master of the ways of your thoughts. If there is a thought you want to think, you can think it. If there's a thought you don't want to think, you don't have to think it. You're in charge. And that's the way it should be.