

Lessons of Distraction

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One of the more frustrating parts of concentration practice is when you find that your mind won't stay where you tell it to. You could leave that as a lesson in not-self and just let it keep happening, but that wouldn't really accomplish much. The important thing is not to get frustrated, and to realize that you're going to be living with distraction for quite a while and you might as well make the most of it. Because here's your opportunity to see the mind in action as it creates what are called states of becoming. As the Buddha said, the craving that leads to becoming is the cause of suffering. So you want to look for the craving that goes into distraction, because that right there is the craving that causes suffering.

The best way to watch it is, one, to create a really good state of becoming, which is what concentration is: something you develop, you bring into being. And, two, use whatever stillness and alertness you can muster to notice what's going on as the mind slips away from this state of becoming to another.

The Buddha gives you tools or strategies for not going along with it, because that's the only way you're going to be able to see these things as processes: by not going into them. We tend to slip into a thought world. That's what's so disorienting about it. You're sitting here with the breath and suddenly you find yourself off in Albania. And you had no idea of what the steps were in between. It's as if someone took a big sack and threw it over your head and carried you off, then dumped you out, and there you were. What's actually happened is that the mind has been putting up screens around things. Often, it actually plans its escape well before it happens, and then puts a screen up to pretend it didn't do that.

So even when you're determined not to go, you find that your determination is a little slow in the beginning, or you're slow on the draw in figuring out what's happening. But as you maintain that determination—"Okay, the next time this is going to happen, I'm not going to go"—you begin to see, bit by bit by bit, the steps by which the mind creates these states of becoming and then slips off into them.

The tools the Buddha gives for helping you to get out of these states of becoming once you've noticed you've got in, or to step back from them when you see them happening—are, first, simply to replace the object of whatever the thought with something better. This is why we work with the breath. It gives you something better to work with—"better" in the sense that it's more calm, keeps you anchored in the present moment, and it gives you a sense of well-being right here. You learn how to breathe in ways that are comfortable, that feel right for the body right now.

Because one of the main reasons we have craving for becoming is our hunger for pleasure. Well, here's some pleasure right here. It's harmless, it saturates the body when you do it right,

so you're more inclined to come back. But then you still find yourself going off again, repeatedly. So you've got to do a little bit more analytical work, to remind yourself of the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. Because, after all, our tendency to go running off into states of becoming is not only why we have distractions while we're sitting here concentrating. It's also why we're born here to begin with and how we're going to be born again if we don't overcome it.

The Buddha's teaching is the exact opposite of materialism. Materialism says that the real things in the world are material processes, physical processes, while your consciousness is just what they call an epiphenomenon, a by-product of the physical processes, but it's not the real action. The real action is down there in your atoms.

Well, the Buddha's perspective is just the other way around. Look at the very first verse in the Dhammapada: The mind precedes all experiences; it precedes all the phenomena that you can take as objects. It's in charge. It's because of the quality of the mind that you're going to experience pleasure, pain, happiness, suffering. Things come out of here first. When you can't stay here, you find someplace else to go. This can be a very strong craving at that moment: You've got to go someplace. If you're desperate, you end up going to all sorts of places you don't want to go. You didn't look at the fine print. Or you thought you had a ticket to someplace really nice and then you find yourself off in Albania again.

So you've got to be careful. This ability of the mind to create states of becoming is something we often like to play with, but we're all like little children, playing with fire or explosives that can blow up in our hands. So you have to remind yourself: Just wandering off, looking at the flowers, looking at the birds, may seem harmless, but it's not. It's creating ruts in the mind.

Especially at the point when you're facing death, the mind is going to be weakened by either the pain in the body or just by the fear of what's going to happen. An opening comes, in line with the mind's ruts, and you're going to run for it. If you don't look carefully, you're going to find yourself someplace you wish you hadn't jumped into.

It's like that old story of hell: There's a hell where it's burning all the time. And every now and then a little door opens in one of the side walls, and people go running through the fire to get there. But just before they get to it, the door slams shut. Then another door opens in another wall, and they go running out toward that door, but then it, too, slams shut. Finally, they get to a door that doesn't slam shut, but then they fall into a hell of excrement.

So you have to be careful. If you notice that your thinking goes in a particular direction that's imbued with lust or anger, remind yourself of the drawbacks of lust and anger: They can take you to the hell of excrement. This kind of thinking is another way of pulling back from those distractions. If that doesn't work, you just ignore them. In other words, try to have a sense that whatever is going on in the mind, you're in a different part. It's like people chattering in one corner of a room and you're in another corner of the room, doing your work. You're

going to stay here, working with the breath. They can chatter as much as they like, but you're not going to get involved.

Another strategy is when you notice that the creation of a thought world requires a little bit of tension someplace in the body, as a marker that keeps your place in the thought, that keeps the thought going. But if you can find that pattern of tension, breathe through it. Relax it. And the thought should disappear.

And finally, if none of these methods work, just determine you're not going to go anywhere else but right here. As the Buddha says, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and "crush your mind with your mind." In other words, really put pressure on yourself that you're not going to go anywhere. This is the method of last resort and it'll work only as long as your willpower holds up. It's the method that uses the least discernment and the most force. But sometimes you need it, and you find that it works. One variation on this is to repeat your meditation word very fast in the mind, to consciously jam the circuits. Then, when the mind had enough of that and feels ready to settle down, it's ready to go back to the breath.

So what you're doing here is trying to see the processes of becoming by refusing to go along with them. It's only by standing outside them that you can see what they're doing. And you find as you keep this up and get the breath more and more comfortable, the sense of your space in the body gets bigger and bigger. You begin to see more easily, then, where in the body that little thought kernel develops, that little tangle of potential thoughts. And you comb it out. Comb out the tangle. Zap the kernel. You get quicker and quicker at this, and you see more precisely the stages as your mind creates these state of becoming.

So there are lessons to be learned from your distractions—not by following them but by resisting them, while at the same time not getting frustrated over the fact that they're there. Each time you catch yourself in a thought, just learn how to drop it, unfinished. Step back from it and watch out for the next one.

It's in this way that, even though you don't want to get involved in the distractions, the fact that they're there is educational. There are lessons to be learned. And as long as you're not frustrated, you can absorb those lessons and get better and better, more and more skilled at avoiding these things—noticing when the first stages are happening, what little agreements go on in the mind that say, "Okay, just a few seconds. The next time you're a little bit more mindless, a little less alert. Okay, then we're going to jump for it." You see those agreements, and when they're exposed, it's like the agreements between criminals. When they're exposed, they deny it. And if you expose them even earlier, they won't happen.

So be on the alert. This is one of the ways in which doing concentration gives rise to discernment, even before the concentration is good. You're getting insight into the ways the mind lies to itself. And that's a very valuable lesson to learn.