
The Ways the Mind Wanders

Our minds do not wander in a haphazard way. In fact if we can pay attention we will notice that they often travel along familiar grooves. These grooves that our emotions and our thoughts run along are often circular and repetitive, and we may realise that we have been thinking or feeling in these ways for years! If you do realise this, don't be despondent: it is in fact a great success to realise what pattern your thoughts and emotions take. It is only through this kind of awareness of yourself that change is possible. And the great news is that it is possible to change the unsatisfactory patterns of thought and emotion for the better.

These patterns of unsatisfactory thoughts and emotion are to be worked with in meditation, since they stop us concentrating. When they are absent, we are left feeling light, joyous, expansive, creative and one-pointed.

There are five ways the mind wanders in meditation:

Sense Desire is the first. It is the basic preoccupation with pleasant feeling, especially feeling as experienced through one of the five senses, and the mind, which for Buddhism is a sixth sense organ. Traditionally it is described as desire for Food, Sex or Sleep. But we could also add in preoccupation with fascinating ideas, pleasant memories or exciting plans for our holidays! These all give us pleasure when we think about them, and seem far more interesting than the boring old breath, or the elusive feelings of metta!

Ill Will or Aversion is the second. Here the opposite is the case and we are preoccupied with painful experience. This might again be something through the five sense organs; such as a pain in our knee we really wish would go away, or that irritating drill just down the street. Or instead it might be experience by the mind; a conversation with someone that annoyed you and you can't let it go, what you'd say to that guy if you had a chance, or wish you had said; or you analyse an idea or opinion endlessly, one that you really didn't like when you heard it, and draw out all its shortcomings!

The real trouble here is not in fact the painful experience in itself, but the preoccupation with it. People do actually do things to us that are painful; drills, car alarms and sore knees are all unpleasant. We can't let go of our preoccupation with the painful experience, and try to push it away, or the person we associate it with. If only we could give them a piece of our mind, if only they would stop doing that really annoying thing, then everything would be okay! Unfortunately we can't change people, drills or car alarms, at least most of the time anyway, but we can let go of the preoccupation with the painful experience that adds an extra unnecessary layer of suffering to our experience.

Restlessness and Anxiety is classically experienced as a speedy, unsettled mind, and a body that just won't sit still. You may find yourself plagued by itchiness or you just can't get comfortable, and the more you move, the worse it seems!

This mental state can be a background mental state for many of us living busy, city lives much of the time. It also may arise if we sit down to meditate too quickly and don't allow ourselves

enough time to prepare. Or we may have a lot on our minds, or even something on our conscience. Whatever it is, our minds simply won't settle, and we don't enjoy sitting there.

Sloth and Torpor can sometime be a reflex of this. Our body feels heavy and our mind sleepy and dull. We may even nod off! It's just so warm and comfortable sitting here, you just feel like dozing off...! It may simply be that you are tired or have recently eaten, but Sloth and Torpor is an interesting hindrance in that it may often indicate a deeper level of resistance to meditation. We just don't want to do it! You might need to clarify this outside of meditation with a friend, find out what the resistance might be. And as mentioned previously, Sloth and Torpor often arises if you have previously been restless. It is as if after all that frenetic mental activity your mind simply crashes. If this is the case, you will just have to be patient, and let the mind recover at its own pace.

Finally there is **Doubt and Indecision**. Is this the right practice? Does that guy teaching it know what he is on about? Can I do it? Me, with all these things to think about? Shouldn't I be doing something better with my time instead of all this sitting around?

You might recognise some of this. Doubt and Indecision is the inability to commit to doing the practice. It is as if we have to be convinced that it will work, without trying it out for ourselves! We end up sitting on the fence, and not meditating at all.

Sometimes the doubts may be a manifestation of self-doubt. It may be that you don't have enough faith in your own potential to grow and develop. Rational doubts are fine, but it is best to sort them out outside of meditation, not in the meditation itself.

Working when the mind wanders:

Generally:

The first thing to do is to recognise how your mind has wandered and **Name** it. This is Doubt! This is Sense Desire! Even just naming a hindrance can loosen its grip. The Indian Sage and Meditation Master Padmasambhava was the first to bring Buddhism successfully to Tibet, but in order to do so it is recounted that he had to tame many demons. This he did by finding out their name. Once he knew this, he converted them to his cause and from then on he helped him spread Buddhism in the Land of the Snows.

Next we have to **Acknowledge** it and allow it. Simply let it be! Don't fight it! Remember 'No Scolding'! You must come back to faith in your own potential to grow and develop, and overcome specific hindrances.

Next come back to the General Awareness, especially the Four Foundations of Mindfulness we looked at earlier in the course: namely awareness of Body, Feelings, Emotions and Thoughts. Just check in with yourself to see what is going on in each of these departments of your being. What is going on in your body? What is the feeling tone? What emotions are there (in this case probably the hindrance you have identified already) and what thoughts are connected to it, like the foam on the top of the waves that are the emotions?

Now you are ready to apply the specific antidote. But as ever in meditation, you can't skip stages! Do go through these last few stages before moving on to the more specific antidotes.

Specific Antidotes:

The first antidote is to **Consider the Consequences**. Pay particular attention to what the feeling tone of whatever way your mind has wandered. Often, perversely, we think that to do anxiety or another hindrance is actually more pleasurable than not. Check this out for yourself! Sometimes the fact that these hindrances are familiar makes them feel more pleasurable than they really are. If we can pin point that it is actually not really enjoyable to do anxiety or ill will etc., we have a chance of lessening its grip on us

Secondly we can **Cultivate the Opposite**. If we are feeling *sense desire*, we can cultivate contentment with our lot, or try and get more interested in the object of meditation. If it is *ill will* we are experiencing, then we can cultivate metta, or simply look for enjoyment in our experience. For *restlessness and anxiety* we can cultivate calm, especially paying attention to our body, and the weight of it.

If experiencing *sloth and torpor* we can open our eyes, open a window, even get up and jump up and down a bit to get the energy flowing (don't do this if you are meditating with others – they might think you a little strange!). And of course we can clarify any resistance outside of meditation. With *doubt* the opposite is commitment. The trick is to 'just do it!' Forget about whether or not it is the right practice or whether you can do it or not – just do it as taught for the length of the practice. You can clarify any rational doubts afterwards. Recognise any doubts that arise during the sit for what they are – a hindrance.

The Third Antidote is to develop a **Sky Like Attitude**. In Buddhism our minds are often said to be like a vast, beautiful, clear blue sky, and any thoughts or emotions imply clouds that are passing across it. What your mind has wandered to is not permanent – it has arisen in dependence upon conditions, and when those conditions cease it will pass away. Things arise, things pass away. There is no need to feel oppressed by them, feel cowed by them.

So in this antidote, we try to simply allow things arise, and then allow them pass away, trying to develop perspective on them. It might be useful to think in terms of having Big Mind, and small mind. Your Big Mind is the clear blue sky, open and creative and free. Your small mind is the intellectual thoughts and emotional habits that manifest as distractions etc. which pass across, and sometimes even cloud over your true nature. But somewhere behind it all is your Big Mind, just as behind the clouds there is always the brilliant blue sky.

Fourthly we can **Suppress** it. This really only works if what the mind has wandered onto is weak and you are not much caught up with it.

And fifthly, we can **Go for Refuge**. This is a technical Buddhist term that means to take refuge in your potential to grow and develop as a human, to become much more than you are at present. It is especially useful at the end of a sit. Rather than getting despondent about a sit that maybe was not very concentrated, you can reflect that this sit might not have been easy,

but in the long run, you will keep plugging away, and the mind will wander less and you will develop clearer, calmer states of mind.