



## **Absorption & Distraction in Meditation**

As we meditate, we will notice that, at times, our minds are quite calm and settled, and we're relatively easily able to stay with the breath or with metta. And at other times, we will notice that we get distracted, our mind wanders off onto something else, or we get lost in thoughts and emotions. This week we're going to look at both of these experiences.

### **Distractions: 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 become more aware of the many ways in which the mind wanders. It is only through this kind of awareness that change is possible. And the great news is that it is possible to go beyond these distractions and patterns of thought and emotion for the better.

We need to engage and work with our mind when it wanders off the breath or metta, otherwise it'll be difficult to go deeper in meditation. When these distractions are absent, we are left feeling light, joyous, expansive, creative and one-pointed.

#### ***The Five Hindrances to Meditation***

There are five ways the mind wanders in meditation, as taught by the Buddha:

##### **1) Sense Desire**

Sense desire is, at its most basic, a 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!

The key to working with sense desire is to notice yourself doing it – be aware of what you're dwelling upon, and make a choice as to whether to engage in this way with the object of desire again. Often when we look at the things we dwell upon, they're not as pleasurable as we think they are; indeed, it can even be rather tedious to keep planning our holiday over and over again! The breath, by contrast, can be very enjoyable indeed to focus upon, though it can be a more subtle pleasure that might take us a while to tune in to.

##### **2) Ill Will or Aversion**

Ill will is the opposite of sense desire – here we are preoccupied with unpleasant or 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 roadwork noises just down the street.



The source of our ill will might not be external – it could be sparked off by replaying to yourself a conversation you had with someone that annoyed you and you can't let it go, what you'd like to say to that person if you had a chance, or wish you had said. Or you might analyse an idea or opinion endlessly, one that you really didn't like when you heard it, and draw out all its shortcomings. Ill will might arise in the fourth stage of the metta practice, or just an experience of grumpiness generally in meditation!

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, roadwork noise, car alarms and sore knees are all unpleasant. Though we try, we just can't let go of our preoccupation with the painful experience. We try to push it or the person we associate it with away, and it only returns stronger. We tell ourselves that if we could only 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.

The Buddha said that ill will was like picking up a burning-hot coal to throw at someone: you are hurting yourself first; ill will is corrosive to our wellbeing. So the main thing we need to do first with ill will is to see it as a hindrance, as unhelpful, as corrosive, and then try to let it go. We stop adding to it, at the very least, and then it may be all we can do to sit with it and let it burn itself out.

### **3) Restlessness and Anxiety**

Restlessness and anxiety, or 'worry and flurry' as it's sometimes called, 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. We can be in a state of worry or anxiety about work, about our friendships, about our family. And it can be very difficult to let go of this in meditation, and the stories we tell ourselves when we're in a state of anxiety are very convincing.

Restlessness and anxiety 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 mind or even something on our conscience. Whatever it is, our minds simply won't settle, and we don't enjoy sitting there.

When we experience restlessness, the main teaching is to not move! If we move, we risk dissipating any momentum we have built up in the meditation so far. So simply sit still, and investigate the itch or desire to move. Our meditation focus can be not moving until the restlessness goes away. If we have a postural problem and really need to move, then we can move very slowly, so as not to disturb ourselves too much.

If we experience anxiety, the main thing to do is to not get caught up in the stories involved. We should come back to our physical bodies; bring our awareness down into the body to ground ourselves. We can breathe deeply for a moment or two, and with each out-breath try to soften the physical tightness that accompanies anxiety. At the very least, we try to stop feeding the anxiety, so that it can eventually burn itself out.

### **4) Sloth and Torpor**

Sloth and torpor is the opposite of restlessness and anxiety. Our body feels heavy and our mind sleepy and dull. We may even nod off to sleep! This may simply be because we 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! We might need to clarify this outside of meditation with a friend, find out what the resistance might be.

Sloth and torpor often arises if we have previously been restless or overly busy. It is as if after all that frenetic mental activity our mind simply crashes and needs to rest. If this is the case, we just have to be patient, and let the mind recover at its own pace.

Sloth and torpor also can arise if we've had a particularly good meditation the previous sit – our mind will need time to absorb this deeper experience.

The main thing to do with sloth and torpor is to try to stay awake! Open your eyes slightly if necessary. Sit more upright. Move your awareness higher in the body. And be patient – it may take some time for the sloth and torpor to break. In the meditation, you might just have to wait. Outside of meditation, look at the conditions of your day and see if you can rearrange your life so it's less frenetic.

### 5) Doubt and Indecision.

Doubt and indecision is where you are paralysed in meditation by questions such as: Is this the right practice? Does that person teaching it know what he or she is talking 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? Have I picked the right person here for this stage of metta?

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. This is usually a subtle form of avoiding doing the practice.

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. But any normal human being can use meditation to grow and develop – it's worked for everyone else, why not you?

Doubt and indecision is different from having rational doubts about the practice and what you're doing. But it is best to sort these positive doubts outside of meditation, not in the meditation itself. When meditating, just meditate! So the main thing to do when we experience doubt and indecision is to simply commit to doing the practice.

### *What to do when the Mind Wanders – General Strategies*

- i. The first thing to do is to **turn with kindness towards whatever is going on** in our experience. This is vital. Unless we turn with kindness to our experience, we can't really be effective with regards working with what's going on in our experience.
- ii. **Come back to the body** and investigate / experience where we feel what's going on.
- iii. 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. In traditional stories in the East and West, knowing the true name of someone gave one a power over them. This is much the same.
- iv. Next we have to **acknowledge** it and allow it. Simply let it be, don't fight it. Remember kindness... You must come back to faith in our own potential to grow and develop, and overcome specific hindrances.
- v. See if you can now simply **let it go**. This doesn't mean stopping it happen; rather it means simply not being emotionally caught up in it. It is possible to watch a distraction arise, hang around for a while, and



then dissolve away again, without getting caught up in it. If we can't do this yet, that's ok too. At least we try not to add any more fuel to the flames.

Again, come back to the general awareness, especially the Four Foundations of Mindfulness we looked at earlier in the course: namely awareness of body, feeling tone, emotions and thoughts. We check in with ourselves to see what is going on in each of these departments of our being. What is going on in our body? What is the feeling tone? What emotions are there (in this case probably the hindrance we have identified already) and what thoughts are connected to it?

This is often enough of itself to work and help with whatever way we've become distracted. But if it's necessary, we can also apply the specific antidote. As ever in meditation, we can't skip stages, so do go through the general strategies before moving on to the more specific antidotes.

### **What to do when the Mind Wanders – Specific Antidotes**

- i. The first antidote is to **Consider the Consequences**. Pay particular attention to what the feeling tone of whatever way our 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 see that it is actually not really enjoyable to do anxiety or ill will etc., we have a chance of lessening its grip on us
- ii. 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 we are experiencing *sloth and torpor* we can open our eyes, open a window, turn on more light in the room. 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. We can clarify any rational doubts afterwards. Recognise any doubts that arise during the sit for what they are – a hindrance.

- iii. 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 our 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 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.

- iv. 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. This can be more successful than people think; for example, suppression is actually very good with persistent, low-level sense desire. Deciding to just not think about food in a meditation would be an example of suppression.



- v. And fifthly, we can take solace in the **Bigger Perspective**. This means to take refuge in our potential to grow and develop as a human, to become much more than we are at present, and not to get too overly-identified or concerned with any one particular meditation session we may have. It is especially useful at the end of a sit. Rather than getting despondent about a sit that maybe was not very concentrated, we 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 we will develop clearer, calmer states of mind.

## Absorption: The Deepening Mind

It's worth making a warning at this point: meditation is not all about finding out what's going wrong. When we talk of the hindrances it's easy to focus on the negative. But we should be open to the fact that our experience can go well too!

In some ways meditating is like cycling a bike – when we cycle, we invariably end up cycling up and down hills. Meditation can, at times, require us to work with anger or anxiety, and when we're engaging with and working with distractions, we're involved in the more 'cycling uphill' aspect of meditation.

But the good thing about cycling uphill is that we invariably get to cycle back downhill again at some point. Here we can just free-wheel down the hill, making only the smallest adjustments here and there. There's an effort involved, but it's more the effort of steering things, staying on the road and not crashing into the ditch, so to speak.

Similarly, in meditation, we can have downhill sections, where things are much easier. Here meditation naturally unfolds, almost of its own accord, just as a bike naturally wheels downhill. We don't have to do much when cycling downhill, just keep our hands on the handlebars and steer a little - in fact, it can be quite unhelpful to pedal going downhill, as it can be quite destabilising.

So when meditation is unfolding in this way, our effort becomes much more relaxed, and we need to be much more receptive to that enfoldment. We just relax into it, and enjoy it! Stay with the breath or with metta, and let go into it more and more. We might even get into a state of full absorption, called *Dhyana*, which is very pleasurable and positive. A general rule of thumb is that if our meditation is enjoyable, focused and positive, then trust it and go with it.

### Home Practice

This week alternate the **Metta Bhavana** (track 3) and the **Mindfulness of Breathing** (track 2). (If you're using the CD both tracks are on CD 1.)

For the Mindfulness of Breathing, you might also like to try out the longer, less intensively lead track (track 4 online, or track 1 on CD 2.)

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