

HOW TO DEAL WITH DISTRACTING THOUGHTS
(Based on a talk given at a retreat with Vietnamese meditators.)
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During the various kinds of mindfulness meditation, such as sitting and walking meditation, yogis may find that distracting thoughts arise in their minds and prevent them from keeping mindfulness and concentration. It would be very beneficial if yogis knew how to deal with these distracting thoughts. We are fortunate that Buddha gave a short but powerful Sutta on this subject. This Sutta is in the Majjhima Nikāya (Sutta no. 20), and the Commentary to the Sutta is translated by Soma Thera in The Wheel Series (no. 21), published by the Buddhist Publication Society of Kandy, Sri Lanka.

The term *distracting thoughts* here means thoughts connected with greed, hatred and delusion, which are the unwholesome or unprofitable thoughts that may arise in connection with objects of our consciousness. In this Sutta, Buddha gave five ways or methods to deal with them. This Sutta was delivered when Buddha was staying at Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

Buddha started the Sutta as follows: "Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu is pursuing the Higher Mind, five means or methods can be given attention by him from time to time. What are the five?"

'Higher Consciousness' here means the attainment of jhānas. So a monk or yogi who is intent on the attainment of jhānas should reflect on these things from time to time, meaning whenever distracting thoughts arise. And although it is meant for monks and yogis who are intent on the attainment of jhānas, it is

equally effective for those practicing Vipassanā meditation.

Buddha continued: "When, owing to some means (*nimitta*) to which he is giving attention, there arise in him evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then some means (*nimitta*) other than that means (*nimitta*) which (some means) is connected with what is profitable (*kusalūpasāçhita*) should be given attention by him. When he gives attention to some means other than that means which is connected with what is profitable, then any evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, are abandoned in him; they subside. With the abandoning of them, his mind is settled in himself, quieted, brought to single-ness and concentrated."

The first method which the Buddha gives to us is to reflect on the same object in a different way, or to have recourse to some other means. If, by reflecting on a certain object, there arise in a yogi thoughts connected with desire, hatred, and delusion, he or she should reflect on that same object in a different way which is connected with what is profitable (*kusala*), or a different means which helps wholesome thoughts to arise.

The Commentary here explains *nimitta* as meaning a cause, and *kusalūpasāçhita* as something depended upon or to be depended upon by *kusala* (*kusalena nissitaç nissayitabbaç*. Subcommentary), that is, something which is the cause of *kusala*.

Here 'other means' means the development of the perception of foulness (unloveliness) when thoughts connected with desire arise with regard to living beings, and giving attention to impermanence when they arise with regard to inanimate things; the development of loving kindness when thoughts connected with hate arise with regard to living beings, and giving attention to elements when they arise with regard to inanimate things; relying on five things when thoughts connected with delusion arise with regard to beings or things.

Thoughts of desire can arise with regard to animate as well as inanimate objects. For a man, the object of a woman can cause thoughts of desire to arise, and for a woman, thoughts of a man can cause desire to arise in her. Inanimate objects, such as luxury items, for example, may cause thoughts of greed and desire, to arise. When such thoughts arise, yogis should reflect on that object in another way, that is, they should look at the object from a different angle, a different viewpoint. Yogis may get thoughts of desire, attachment, or lust because they think of a desired person as lovable or beautiful. In order to get rid of these thoughts connected with desire, they should contemplate on the unloveliness of that person; they should contemplate on what is called the foulness of the body. When yogis contemplate the details of the body of a person in a superficial way, thoughts of desire tend to arise. To combat that tendency, one has to see what the body of a person is really composed of. The real constituents that compose the body of a person are such things as hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, organs, blood, bile, and other parts which are not only

not beautiful but are disgusting, contemptible and repellent. So instead of dwelling on the superficial exterior of a desired person, yogis should dwell on the different parts of the body and see them as foul and unlovely. In this way, they will be able to get rid of thoughts of desire connected with that person.

If thoughts connected with attachment arise with regard to things, a yogi should contemplate on the temporariness (or impermanence) of those things. If, for example, thoughts with attachment to a car or a house arise, he or she should contemplate on that object as impermanent, being subject to decay and dissolution within a short period of time. As yogis realize that all things are impermanent, all things last only temporarily and are of short duration, they will naturally lose attachment to the objects.

If thoughts of hatred about anyone arise, yogis should get rid of these thoughts by practicing loving kindness towards the hated person. Loving kindness is the antidote for hatred and ill-will. Yogis should try to send thoughts of loving kindness to a person with whom they are angry in order to remove these distracting thoughts of anger. One may also think of the four elements in connection with anger. Yogis may try to comprehend all beings as a combination of the four elements, and try to ask themselves whether they are angry with the earth element or water element or fire element or air element. When yogis ask themselves such questions, they realize that there cannot possibly be anger directed against any one of the four elements, and thus those thoughts will disappear. When thoughts with anger arise with regard to things such as a stump of a tree or a thorn or

any other thing, then yogis should definitely pay attention to the four elements, and ask themselves such questions: 'With whom are you angry? Are you angry with the earth element or the water element?' 'Who is it that is angry? Is it the earth element or the water element?' When they put these questions to themselves, the anger will vanish.

If thoughts dominated by delusion arise during meditation in connection with some phenomena, then it is wise to approach a person who is knowledgeable, such as a monk or person who follows the Dhamma, and ask that person for advice. Here delusion means confusion, indecision, or lack of knowledge about an object.

Here the Commentary gives five means for removal of thoughts dominated by delusion in any circumstance. They are

1. Living under the guidance of a respected teacher,
2. Learning the Teachings,
3. Inquiring into the meaning of the Teachings learnt,
4. Hearing Dhamma talks at suitable times, and
5. Inquiring into what are causes and what are not causes.

By following these pieces of advice, a yogi will surely be able to remove thoughts connected with delusion. (They are termed 'reliance on five things' in the Commentary.)

Thus we have the first method given by the Buddha to counteract distracting thoughts. By this method of seeing an object in a different way, from a different angle, unprofitable thoughts can be eliminated. By their elimination, the mind stands firm, settles down,

becomes unified and concentrated, and remains on the object of meditation.

The second method was then given by the Buddha as follows: "If, while he is giving attention to some means other than that means first mentioned which (some means) is connected with what is profitable, there still arise in him evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then the danger in those thoughts should be scrutinized by him thus: 'These thoughts are such that they are unprofitable, that they are reprehensible, that they result in suffering.' When he scrutinizes the danger in those thoughts, then any evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him ; they subside. With the abandoning of them, his mind is settled in himself, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

The second method is to ponder on the disadvantages of unprofitable thoughts, to find fault with the unwholesome thoughts. The first method was to see the object from a different angle, and now the second method is to see faults in distracting thoughts. Here Buddha is referring to the law of kamma. If one follows these thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion, and if these thoughts are allowed to develop further, then one may come to committing transgressions, to breaking rules of moral conduct, and other *akusala* actions. As a consequence, one may be reborn in one of the four woeful states. Yogis should contemplate that these thoughts connected with greed, hatred, and delusion will never send a person to a better existence. They will, on the contrary, drag a person down to the four woeful states. A yogi must think, "If I nurture these thoughts, I will

suffer a lot in a woeful state." Thoughts connected with greed, hatred, and delusion are called unwholesome, in Pàṭi, *akusala*. *Akusala* has the characteristic of being blameworthy and of giving painful results through the operation of the law of kamma. That is why yogis should not nurture such thoughts in their minds—such thoughts are dangerous and conducive to misery. By rightly comprehending *akusala* thoughts, these thoughts can be eliminated. If a yogi is unable to think wisely by himself or herself, he or she should seek help from the teacher, or a fellow meditator, or from the assembly of meditators. When the distracting thoughts are eliminated by any of the means mentioned, the mind stands firm, settles down, and becomes unified and concentrated. Then the mind can be on the meditation object.

The third set of instructions given by the Buddha is as follows: "If, when he is scrutinizing the danger in those objects, there still arise in him evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then forgetting of those thoughts and non-attention to them should be tried. When he tries forgetting those thoughts and practices non-attention to them, then any evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him; they subside. With the abandoning of them, his mind is settled in himself, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

The third way to remove distracting thoughts is to endeavor to be without attention to or reflection on them. That means ignoring them. If by thinking of something, thoughts of desire, hatred, or delusion arise, then one should not think of that thing. Sometimes, this may take

the form of the desire to achieve something in the spiritual domain through meditation, and this desire may distract the meditator from the meditation object. It often occurs to persons who have arrived at certain stages of Vipassanà knowledge and development, but cannot go any further because they have too many expectations or because they put forth too much energy to achieve more. They are essentially greedy for spiritual development. They may not be able to make any progress for days. In such cases, the best thing to do is to not pay attention to meditation, or rather to stop meditating temporarily and think of something else. This is advised in the Commentary to this Sutta (*aññavihitakena bhavitabbaḥ*.) If one cannot go further because one is anxious to achieve attainment, one should leave meditation alone. One may talk with other persons or do some work or just go to sleep. It is also suggested in the Commentary that they may read or recite something which they have learned by heart. Meditation must be put aside for some time in order to remove distracting thoughts, and when these thoughts are removed, the yogi must go back to meditation.

The Commentary gives more detailed advice in this regard. If yogis have no book to read, they may open their suitcase (bag) and pay attention to what is in the suitcase, calling out mentally the name of the objects: this is a purse, this is a tweezer, this is soap, and so on. Or yogis may mend their clothes or do some other simple tasks, such as repairs at the monastery. But yogis must be careful not to do too much and thereby get taken too far away from meditation—at the monastery there is so much work to do! The key to this

method is just to slow down and ignore meditation for a while. A meditation teacher may tell a yogi to water the plants or wash something in order to have the yogi slow down for a while. In this way a yogi is dissuaded from going too fast; the teacher wants the yogi's effort and energy to concentrate to decrease somewhat, so that the practice of meditation is balanced.

The fourth method of the Buddha is as follows: "If, when he tries forgetting those thoughts and non-attention to them, there still arise in him evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then he should pay attention to the cause of the cause of thoughts (*vitakka-saëkhàra-saäähàna*). When he gives attention to the cause of the cause of these thoughts, any evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him; they subside. With the abandoning of them, his mind is settled in himself, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

The Pàøi word *vitakka-saëkhàra-saäähàna* in the Sutta is explained in the commentary thus: "What forms is *saëkhàra*; it means condition, cause or root (source). Something on which some other thing exists is *saäähàna*. *Saäähàna* of *vitakka-saëkhàra* is *vitakka-saëkhàra-saäähàna*. " Here *saäähàna* also means a cause or condition, so the whole word means 'the cause of the cause of thoughts'. What is meant here is that one should pay attention to the cause and the cause of the cause (or the original source) of thoughts by thinking, "By what condition, by what cause, by what reason has this thought arisen?"

Following this advice, yogis should try to find the cause of the thoughts, the

origin of the distracting thoughts. Before these distracting thoughts arise, there are other, more subtle thoughts which have arisen before them. When thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion arise, yogis should reflect on why these thoughts arise, what causes them, and, during meditation, try to see the subtle thoughts, the subtle imaginations that precede these distracting thoughts. When yogis can find the causes of the thoughts, those thoughts can be eliminated. In the early stages, it will be very difficult to be aware of thoughts as they occur, but with the growth of concentration, *samàdhi*, yogis will be able to detect even the subtle images and intentions which precede thoughts and voluntary movements. Yogis must try to discover why thoughts occur, what causes them to occur. When the causes are discovered, the origins are eliminated, and when the origins are eliminated, the thoughts themselves disappear, and they will not return.

Sometimes, yogis must make great effort to go back to the original source of thoughts. The first thought appears, and then they must find out why it occurs and they will find the thought before that. They must go to the thought before that thought too. In this way, they must go back to the origin of the thought. When that is found, it can be eliminated by the yogi making the resolution not to have these thoughts arise in the future. In this way, the method of going back to the origin of thoughts, the "paying attention to the cause of the cause of the thoughts" is accomplished. When the cause of the distracting thought is found, the origin is found, and then they can be eliminated. When they are eliminated, the mind stands firm, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

When there are no distracting thoughts in the mind, the mind becomes still, unified, and on the object.

The fifth method proposed by the Buddha is as follows: "If, while he is giving attention to the cause of the cause of those thoughts, there still arise in him evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind. When with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he beats down, constrains, and crushes mind with mind, then any evil, unprofitable thoughts connected with desire, hatred, and delusion are abandoned in him; they subside. With the abandoning of them, his mind is settled in himself, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated."

The four methods mentioned earlier are suitable for those who practice meditation on a long term basis, say for one or two years, and so they have plenty of time to stop meditating and dwell on other objects. This fifth and last method is suitable for those who practice meditation for a short time, for only a number of days or weeks, as is common in retreats nowadays. This method uses powerful imagery: "With his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind." This expression is always given when someone has to summon up courage and energy, or when he has to do something very mindfully. It was also said of the Buddha that when he practiced austerities in the forest before becoming a Buddha, he clenched his teeth with the tongue pressing against the palate. When one has to do

something difficult, one wants the feeling of strength and naturally one clenches the teeth and presses the tongue against the palate. The idea of crushing mind with mind means crushing bad (akusala) mind with good (kusala) mind, which essentially means to be thoroughly mindful of the present bad mind. That is the advice given to meditators nowadays at Vipassanà retreats. When distracting thoughts occur, one does nothing else but tries to be mindful of them with great perseverance, making mental notes like "thinking, thinking, thinking." One must have great perseverance and confidence that with practice, with sustained application of mindfulness, the distracting thoughts will disappear. Actually, there is no other way to practice when one has only such a short time, because it is not possible to stop meditation or do some other kind of meditation such as the recollection of the foulness of the body. The only thing that yogis can do on short retreats is to be very mindful of the distracting thoughts; so whenever these thoughts come, they should be mindful of them, make mental notes of them, such as "thinking, thinking," or "planning, planning," or "craving, craving," or "remembering, remembering." This is crushing the evil mind with the good mind with clenched teeth and tongue pressing the palate. If yogis persevere in noting the distracting thoughts, in being really mindful of them, they will disappear. And here we must say that sometimes, one has to be hard on oneself. Although we emphasize comfort and relaxation when meditating, at times one must try very hard, and one must put forth energy strong enough to fight the unruly mind and its distracting thoughts.

These are the five methods given in this Sutta by the Buddha. When the distracting thoughts are removed, the mind stands firm, quieted, settled, unified, and concentrated upon the object of meditation. Meditation is a very delicate task. There are many impediments and hindrances. The only sure way to keep hindrances away during a short meditation retreat is to be mindful of all phenomena, all thoughts, emotions, sensations, and phenomena from outside also, whenever they arise. Let them not miss being mindful of anything that comes at the present moment.

During meditation, the important thing is that effort and concentration be balanced. If yogis put forth too much effort, they will be agitated and become restless. If they put too little effort, concentration will gain the upper hand and they will become sleepy. Effort and concentration have to be balanced if meditation is to be good. In the early stages, yogis may not even know how to balance concentration with effort, or they may not even know whether concentration or effort is too much or too little. Later on, with practice, they will come to know if their energy is low or if their concentration is lagging behind. When yogis know how to balance effort and concentration, these factors of meditation will go together evenly. These factors can be balanced without much trouble in later stages of practice. It is like riding a bicycle. When first learning to ride, one may feel that it is impossible for the vehicle with two wheels to be kept going. But when one sits on the seat and pedals, one can balance and the bicycle goes forward. Later on one will become so adept at riding that one can ride the bicycle

without taking hold of the handles and even turn a corner in the same manner. When one is adept at something, one can do that thing easily and very well. Similarly, when one becomes acquainted with how to balance energy or effort with concentration, meditation will become firm and steady. Effort and concentration should be balanced—not too much effort nor too much concentration.

Another important thing is that, when practicing meditation, yogis should not have too much expectation. People expect something from meditation; in fact, it is expectation that stimulates people to meditate in the first place. But correct meditation requires that hope and expectation be left behind. Expectation is desire, the desire to achieve something, see something mysterious, experience something wonderful. In essence, expectation is lobha—greed. It is a mild form of greed but it is still greed—craving, attachment. As such, it is a hindrance to concentration. Expectation is a distraction and should be avoided.

Other distractions which may come are unpleasant thoughts, pains, visions, or feelings. The right way to deal with them is just to be mindful of them. Yogis must try to be mindful of them as a distant observer, a disinterested observer. If yogis have fear that they will return after leaving, then they will never leave; that is, yogis should not have fear. If fear arises, then make fear the object of meditation. When fearful or unpleasant objects arise, just watch them with dispassion. Do not be attached to what you like, and do not be afraid of what you dislike. Yogis must be able to keep their mind in balance, impartiality and equanimity. Only then can the mind be concentrated on the object and not be distracted by thoughts

of craving on the one hand and ill-will on the other.

One more consideration to be given to the practice of Vipassanà meditation has to do with the labeling or noting of distractions. Yogis should not search too hard for the appropriate expressions or words to define what arises. If, for example, distracting thought arises and a word with precise meaning does not come to mind readily, yogis should just make the general note as "thinking, thinking, thinking" or "knowing, knowing, knowing". Therefore, what is important in such cases is not the precise label, but rather the act of mindfulness of the distraction.

These techniques which I have discussed are inspired by the five kinds of instructions given by the Buddha in the Vitakkasāhāna Sutta. Again, among the five, the first four are suitable for those who practice on a long term basis—say for six months or a year—and cannot make any further progress as the result of too much expectation, energy, or effort. They are also for those yogis who are very advanced. But the last method of vigorous and persistent mindfulness is for yogis who practice at retreats for only a few days or weeks. For these yogis, the fifth method is the best way to deal with distracting thoughts. With this in mind, may all yogis put the Buddha's teaching into practice!

Note. In this Sutta only distracting thoughts connected with desire, hatred and delusion—in other words, unwholesome thoughts—are mentioned. But there are thoughts that are not unwholesome, but distracting nevertheless. For example, you may be, while meditating, thinking of some Dhamma topic you have learnt before, and so you are being distracted from the object of meditation. Such thoughts can also be dealt with most effectively by the fifth method while some of the other methods may work as well.