

Mindfulness in Plain English
Bhante Gunaratana
Chapter 11 “Dealing with Distractions I”
Selected Quotes

“Concentration and mindfulness go hand-in-hand. If either one is weak, the other will eventually be affected. [When the mind floats away] you need a method of reestablishing your concentration, even in the face of mental adversity. You can choose from an array of traditional practical maneuvers.

Maneuver 1 – Time Gauging

A distraction has pulled you away from the breath, and you suddenly realize you’ve been daydreaming. The trick is to pull all the way out of whatever has captured you, to break its hold on you completely so you can go back to the breath with full attention. You do this by gauging the length of time you were distracted. This is not a precise calculation, just a rough estimate. You can figure it out in minutes, or by idea significance. Just say to yourself, “I have been distracted for about 2 minutes,” or “since the dog started barking,” or “since I starting thinking about money.” You make the thought the object of inspection. Once you have a rough approximation of its duration.....drop the whole thing and go back to the breath.

Maneuver 2 – Deep Breaths

When your mind is...agitated, you can often reestablish mindfulness with a few quick deep breaths. Pull the air in strongly and let it out the same way. Make a strong act of will and apply some force to your attention.

Maneuver 3 – Counting

Counting the breaths as they pass is a highly traditional procedure. As discussed in Ch. 5, you can count breaths in a number of different ways. Remember to keep your attention on the breath. You will probably notice a change after you have done your counting. The breath slows down, or it becomes very light and refined. This is a physiological signal that concentration has become well-established. When counting becomes a bother, go to the next step. Drop the numbers and forget about the concepts of inhalation and exhalation. One breath blends into the next in a never-ending cycle of pure, smooth flow.

Maneuver 4 – The In-Out Method

....an alternative to counting. Mentally tag each cycle ...”inhale.....exhale,” or “in....out.”

Maneuver 5 – Canceling One Thought With Another

Some thoughts won’t go away. We humans are obsessional beings. It’s one of our biggest problems. Buddhist psychologydivides thoughts into “skillful” versus “unskillful”. An unskillful thought is one connected with greed, hatred, or delusion. These are the thoughts that the mind most easily builds into obsessions. They are unskillful in the sense that they lead you away from the goal of Liberation. Skillful thoughts...are those connected with generosity,

compassion, and wisdom. They are skillful in the sense that they may be used as specific remedies for unskillful thoughts, and thus can assist you toward Liberation.

You cannot condition Liberation. It is not a state built out of thoughts. Thoughts of benevolence can produce a semblance of benevolence, but it's not the real item. It will break down under pressure. ...Skillful thoughts will not, in themselves, free you from the trap... They are skillful only if applied as antidotes to the poison of unskillful thoughts. Thoughts of generosity can temporarily cancel greed. They kick it under the rug long enough for mindfulness to do its work unhindered. Then, when mindfulness has penetrated to the roots of the ego process, greed evaporates and true generosity arises.

This principle can be used on a day-by-day basis in your own meditation. If a particular sort of obsession is troubling you, you can cancel it out by generating its opposite. For example, if you hate someone, try generating thoughts of love and friendliness toward that person. If that doesn't work, take a good strong look at the emotional response you are trying to get rid of....See how it makes you feel. Look at what it is doing to your life, your happiness, your health, and your relationships.... The Pali scriptures advise you to work up the same sense of disgust and humiliation if you were forced to walk around with the carcass of a dead and decaying animal tied around your neck. [VIMS teacher comment – John Peacock, a former Theravadan monk and now Vipassana master teacher, once wrote an article titled “The Buddha Doesn't Do Cozy”.] Real loathing is what you are after. If this step doesn't end the problem, then balance out the lingering remainder of the obsession by once again generating its opposite emotion.

Maneuver 6 – Recalling Your Purpose

[if your mind] feels like a flag flapping in a stiff wind....you can say to yourself, “I'm not sitting here just to waste my time with these thoughts. I'm here to focus my mind on the breath....”

These techniques can be used singly, or in combinations. Properly employed, they constitute quite an effective arsenal for your battle against the monkey mind.”