

***Mindfulness in Plain English***  
**Bhante Gunaratana**  
**Chapter 12 “Dealing with Distractions II”**  
Selected Quotes

“Distractions [my back is killing me, did I pay that gas bill.....]...are what it is all about. The key is to learn to deal with these things. Learning to notice them without being trapped in them. ...Mental wandering is unpleasant...but it is the normal mode of operation of your mind. Don't think of it as the enemy. It is just the simple reality.

Distraction in Insight meditation ....is any preoccupation that pulls the attention off the breath. When any mental state arises strongly enough to distract you from the object of meditation, switch your attention to the distraction briefly. Make the distraction a temporary object of meditation. ....the word *temporary* is quite important. Switch your attention only long enough to notice certain specific things about it.

**What is it? How strong is it? How long does it last?**

As soon as you have wordlessly answered these questions, you are through with your examination of that distraction and you return your attention to the breath. These questions are not an invitation to more mental chatter. We want you to move away from thinking, back to a direct, wordless, and non-conceptual experience of the breath. To answer the 3 questions wordlessly, we must stop thinking the thought or feeling the feeling in order to view it as an object of inspection. This very process is an exercise in *mindfulness*, uninvolved, detached awareness.

When you first begin to practice this technique, you will probably have to do it with words. You will ask your questions in words, and get answers in words. It won't be long before you can dispense with the formality of words. Once the mental habits are in place, you simply note the distraction, note the qualities of the distraction, and return to the breath. It's a totally non-conceptual process, and it's very quick. The distraction itself can be anything: a sound, a sensation, an emotion, a fantasy.....Whatever it is, don't try to repress it. Don't try to force it out of your mind. ...Just observe it mindfully with bare attention. Examine the distraction wordlessly and it will pass away by itself. [if you find yourself condemning yourself], just observe the process of condemnation as another distraction, and then return to the breath.

[with practice] you just glide through the distraction and your attention returns to the breath quite easily. Of course, the very same distraction may pop up a moment later. If it does, just observe that mindfully. If you are dealing with an old, established thought pattern, this can go on happening for quite a while, sometimes years. Don't get upset. Just observe the distraction and return to the breath. Don't strain or struggle. ...Every bit of energy that you apply to that resistance goes into the thought complex and makes it all the stronger.....the more bare attention you pay to disturbances, the weaker they get. Observe them long enough and often enough with bare attention and they fade away forever. Fight with them and they gain strength. Watch them with detachment and they wither.

Mindfulness is the most important aspect of meditation. It is the primary thing that you are trying to cultivate....The crucial thing is to be mindful of what is occurring, not to control what is occurring. ...Concentration is a tool. It is secondary to bare attention. From the point of view of mindfulness, there is really no such thing as a distraction. Whatever arises in the mind is viewed as just one more opportunity to cultivate mindfulness. Breath is an arbitrary focus and it is used as our primary object of attention. Distractions are used as secondary objects of attention. It actually makes rather little difference what the object of mindfulness is.....you can be mindful of the fact that your mind is still...The purpose of meditation is to achieve uninterrupted mindfulness. Mindfulness, and only mindfulness, produces Enlightenment.

Distractions come in all sizes, shapes and flavors. Buddhist philosophy has organized them into categories. One of them is .....called hindrances because they block your development of both components of meditation, mindfulness and concentration. The word “hindrances” carries a negative connotation...that does not mean, however, that they are to be repressed, avoided, or condemned.....Let’s use greed as an example. ...The continuation of the state leads to bondage and sorrow. That does not mean we try to toss the thought out of the mind when it appears. We simply refuse to encourage it to stay.....We watch what greed does,...how it troubles us, how it burdens others.. it keeps us perpetually unsatisfied...From this first-hand experience, we ascertain at a gut level that greed is an unskillful way to run your life. There is nothing theoretical about this realization.

All of the hindrances are dealt with in the same way.

*Desire:* Notice the thought or sensation as it arises. Notice the mental state of desire which accompanies it as a separate thing. Notice the exact extent or degree of that desire. Then notice how long it lasts and when it finally disappears....[then] return your attention to breathing.

*Aversion:* ... you find yourself rejecting or repressing – trying to avoid it, resist, or deny it. Handling aversion is essentially [the same as desire].

*Lethargy:* ....this is a mental state ranging from slight drowsiness to total torpor...Mental lethargy is closely related to aversion in that it is one of the mind’s clever little ways of avoiding those issues it finds unpleasant. ... a dulling of sensory and cognitive acuity.... Nearly the reverse of mindfulness. Handle it the same [as above]. The only thing special is the importance of catching the phenomenon early. You have to get it right at its conception and apply liberal doses of pure awareness right away. If you let it get a start, its growth will probably outpace your mindfulness power. When lethargy wins, the result is the sinking mind, or even sleep.

*Agitation:* ....states of restlessness and worry.....Unsettled feeling is a definable characteristic. Handle it the same as the other hindrances. Note how much of it is present. Note when it arises. Watch how long it lasts, and see when it fades away. Then return your attention to the breath.

*Doubt:* ....an inner dialogue of vacillation.....Be aware of this mental state of wavering as an object of inspection. [steps as above].

By distraction, we mean any mental state that arises to impede your meditation. Some of these are quite subtle. It is useful to list some of the possibilities. The negative states are

easy to spot: insecurity, fear, anger, depression, irritation, and frustration. Craving and desire are more difficult to spot because they can apply to things we normally regard as virtuous....craving for greater virtue...attachment to the bliss of the meditation experience itself. Trickiest of all are those really positive mental states that creep into your meditation. Happiness, peace, inner contentment, sympathy, and compassion for all being everywhere. ...They are mental states. They arise and they pass away. As you continue your meditation, these states will arise more often. The trick is not to become attached to them.

We generally become aware of distractions only when they have released their hold on us and are already on their way out. It is at this point that we are struck with that sudden realization that we have been somewhere, daydreaming, fantasizing...

Since mental states arise first in the unconscious, to catch the arising of the mental state, you've got to extend your awareness down into this unconscious area. This is difficult.... But you can learn to get a vague sense of movement and to operate by a sort of mental sense of touch. This comes with practice, and the ability is another of the effects of the deep calm of concentration. Concentration slows down the arising of these mental states and gives you time to feel each one arising out of the unconscious even before you see it in consciousness. As your concentration deepens, you gain the ability to see thoughts and sensations arising slowly, like separate bubbles, each distinct and with spaces between them. They bubble up in slow motion out of the unconscious. They stay a while in the conscious mind and then they drift away. The ideal that you are striving for is to experience each mental state fully, exactly the way it is, adding nothing to it and not missing any part of it.

When you introduce "I" into the process, you are building a conceptual gap between the reality and the awareness viewing that reality. Thoughts such as "me," "my," or "mine" have no place in direct awareness.....When you bring "me" into the picture, you are identifying with [for example] .... pain [or any other sensation]. That simply adds emphasis to it. If you leave "I" out of the operation pain is not painful. It is just a pure surging energy flow. It can even be beautiful. If you find "I" insinuating itself in your experience of pain or any other sensation, then just observe that mindfully. Pay bare attention to the phenomenon of personal identification with pain.

The general idea is almost too simple. You want to really see each sensation, whether it is pain, bliss, or boredom. You want to experience that thing fully in its natural and unadulterated form. There is only one way to do this. Your timing has to be precise. Your awareness of each sensation must coordinate exactly with the arising of that sensation. If you catch it just a bit too late, you miss the beginning. You won't get all of it. If you hang on to any sensation past the time when it has faded away, then what you are holding onto is a memory. The thing itself is gone, and by holding onto that memory, you miss the arising of the next sensation. It is a very delicate operation. You've got to cruise along right here in present time, picking things up and letting things drop with no delays whatsoever. It takes a very light touch. Your relation to sensation should never be one of past or future but always of the simple and immediate now.

The human mind seeks to conceptualize phenomena....Every simple sensation will trigger a burst of conceptual thinking if you give the mind its way. When you hear a sound, be mindful of the process of hearing. Everything else is just chatter. Drop it. This same rule applies to every sensation, every emotion, every experience you may have. There are times when a number of sensations may arise at once. Don't keep switching back and forth or wondering what to pick. One of them will be strongest. Just open yourself up, and the most insistent of these phenomena will intrude itself and demand your attention.

Mindfulness grows by the exercise of mindfulness. It is like exercising a muscle. Every time you work it, you pump it up just a little....You will find yourself relatively willing to apply this technique to certain parts of your experience, and you will find yourself totally unwilling to use it on the other parts.

Clear awareness is more than a pleasurable pastime. It is a road up and out of the quagmire in which we are all stuck, the swamp of our own desires and aversions. It is relatively easy to apply our awareness to the nastier aspects of your existence....fear...depression....It is a good deal harder to apply that same process to mental states which you cherish, like patriotism, or parental protectiveness or true love. But this is just as necessary. Positive attachments hold you in the mud just as assuredly as negative attachments.”