

Coping with distracting thoughts

(by Santikaro Bhikkhu)

Due to the ways we have lived our lives & trained our minds, aided & abetted by social conditioning, we find many thoughts & emotions arising & spinning around out-of-control. This fact confronts us as we begin to bring attention to the breathing. To establish mindfulness securely in the breathing we must be able to let go of these thoughts & emotions. They may keep coming but we are able to let them pass without getting caught up, involved, and trapped. Learning to let go is one of the great benefits of this meditation. Here are a few tips to help you do it.

- ☺ The content of the thoughts aren't important. Don't try to analyze or figure them out. Just come back to & stay with the breathing.
- ☺ When you notice your thoughts wandering, be aware whether mindfulness returned on an in or out breath.
- ☺ Observe the breathing more carefully. Note the beginning, middle, and end of each breath. Note differences between the inhalations & exhalations.
- ☺ Don't look on them as enemies. Better to see them as naughty little brothers & sisters. *Metta* is healthier than aversion, hatred, violence, & wanting to kill them.
- ☺ Don't identify with or personalize them. They are not "you" or "yours." They arise out of conditions & pass with those conditions. Let them go, just as you do with your breathing.
- ☺ Ask yourself, "Who is distracted?" What is this "who"? Is it really "somebody"?
- ☺ Note the +/- which is tricking you. How has it fooled you into attachment?
- ☺ Look "over their shoulders" to the inherent peacefulness & quiet of the mind.
- ☺ Cultivate the wisdom of *ATAMMAYATĀ*: "I ain't gonna mess with you no more!"

ALL OF THESE TIPS are to help the mind recognize & drop its self-distraction. Use these tips only for as long as it takes to let go & return to the breathing. Keep it simple. Just let go. Remember, the task is to pay careful attention to the breathing in & out.

Particularly persistent, harmful, & obnoxious thoughts

Sometimes a particular thought or emotion will really grab hold of us & we can't shake it (that means, we grabbed hold of it & won't shake it). When these come up, we aren't practicing very much mindfulness with breathing. Rather, we're all wrapped up with "my problem." Patience, commitment, & diligence are required. Since we're aren't getting anywhere with our chosen meditation, we had better make these things the objects of investigation. Obviously, there's something Nature is telling us we must learn about it. Here's how to do so.

Always remember to smile & take it easy. It won't kill you.

Take deeper, longer, slower, more relaxing breaths (but not forced!).

First, replace it with a wholesome object ☞ some good thinking (which is less subtle & easier to keep in mind than the breathing) ☞ one that is the opposite of what ails you. Some examples:

Replace **ANGER** with thoughts about kind things people have done for you, about how much you owe to others, & with gratitude. Consider how everyone desires happiness & hates suffering, just like you!

Replace **FEAR** with reflection on something secure & safe. Especially, develop confidence in spiritual refuge.

Replace **GREED** with thoughts about giving up unnecessary luxuries, about sharing, about the benefits of simplicity.

Replace **LUST** with reflection on the true nature of your own body & a healthy respect for it.

Replace **BOREDOM** with reflection on the wonder & potential of life. Nature has given you wonderful gifts, please don't waste them in boredom.

Replace **RESTLESSNESS** with images of something peaceful, quiet, & soothing.

Replace **GUILT** with the determination to not "do that again" & clear awareness that you are doing your best to overcome selfishness. Remember, "I'm OK."

Replace **FANTASIZING & DAY-DREAMING** with clear awareness of death, that it may come at any time. You can only live **right now!**

That should give you the basic idea. It may not be easy at first, and it may take some time, but keep working on it. Never give up; find the right effort between forcing & slacking. These experiences are the fuel & fertilizer of Dhamma realization.

If, however, the above approach doesn't work ☞ and please make sure you really give it a good try ☞ there is something a bit stronger (also, cruder & more busy).

Next, contemplate the harmfulness of the thing, see how it hurts you & messes up your life, see its ugliness & nastiness. Here are some examples, to which you must add detail & depth from your own experience:

ANGER is hot, it burns the mind & squeezes the heart. It twists up your face & makes you ugly. It turns your speech into venom & your actions into violence. It harms you, while the "victim" of your rage just laughs at your silly reaction.

BOREDOM is ungrateful. We don't appreciate what life gives us. Think of all the people who don't even have the opportunity to meditate because they are poor, oppressed, or whatever. Yet you, who are so fortunate, don't even care to pay attention & appreciate this moment. Help the world by discovering life.

LAZINESS is to waste life. Opportunities come & you're too lazy to take advantage of them. Don't complain when you don't get anywhere in life. Imagine yourself wallowing in mud & feces which no self-respecting pig would ever do.

GREED prevents you from appreciating what you already have. What a hungry ghost! Instead of enjoying what you've got, you hunger for more, sometimes even killing to get it.

LUST turns you into a hideous fool. You do the most stupid things just for a few thrills. And you call it "love." In fact, you're just turning another human being into a piece of meat, and yourself too. Respect your body.

ENVY eats at your guts. It distracts you from being what you are, because you foolishly want to be someone else, which is impossible. What's wrong with just being yourself & following out your own Duty?

FEAR turns you into a shadow. It paralyzes. Afraid to live & learn, it keeps you stupid & selfish, unable to take advantage of the opportunities life offers.

WORRY insures that you'll have lots of problems. So busy worrying, you never actually do anything right. You can't even sleep right!

DAY-DREAMING traps you in escapism, which is just what certain people want. They don't want you to actually know what's going on, they want you to hide. Thus, they can easily manipulate you. Do you like being "nowhere"?

Last, if the above methods don't work, forget about the "problem." Ignore it. Pretend it isn't there. (Sometimes, temporary suppression is the best you can do; but don't make a habit out of it.)

Once again, don't use these methods any more than is necessary to drop out of "your problem," to nestle snugly into the breathing, & to re-establish mindfulness in lesson one again. Yes, you may have to start anew each time you get lost.

Ultimately, the way to deal with all of these things is to see them as impermanent, miserable, & not-self, as merely concoctions of ignorance, as void of any real substance, just products of our imaginations. The way to do so is to be mindful 📧 pay attention. You don't need to dwell on them or analyze them. When the mind is calm & clear (*samadhi*), you will see these things as they really are. You've seen them well enough when you can drop them. You've really seen them when you never see them again.

By the way, these thoughts & emotions should not be confused with the *nivarana* (hindrances), which are more subtle, more like moods than thoughts or emotions. Dealing with the *nivarana* is the work of *samadhi*, not reflection (thinking). More on them later.

Finally, the suggestions on this sheet are just hints & friendly advice. Each suggestion must be made your own, that is, you must think carefully until understanding the principle and then practice applying it until successful. Life, common sense, and your desire for liberation (salvation), peace, & a useful life will give you the strength.

MAY ALL BEINGS BE HAPPY!