

Dharmette: No Distractions

**Transcribed and edited from a short talk by
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One principle in the kind of meditation we practice here at IMC is that there is no such thing as a distraction. Often when people try to meditate, they will try to focus on the breath, try to be calm, and try to be in the present moment. But they will have trouble doing that because the mind will start thinking about something or imagining something. Or they will get pulled away by their feelings, or by strong sensations in the body. The common response to that kind of experience is to think that this is taking me away from the meditation. This is a distraction. If only I weren't thinking so much, if only I weren't upset, if only my knee weren't hurting, then I could meditate. Then I could get calm and focused.

But the approach to meditation that we do here is to try not to have that kind of attitude. We say that there are no distractions. Whatever is happening in meditation that makes it difficult to meditate – that becomes the meditation. That is

what we pay attention to. What we are trying to do in mindfulness meditation is to be mindful of what is happening, not to get rid of anything, or to make something special happen, but rather to be present for what is happening.

I will give you an analogy. Many years ago I was teaching a retreat in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Running down next to the meditation center was a little creek with shallow, clear water. If you looked into the water, you could not see if the water was flowing. But if you took a stick and put it vertically into the water, a little wake would form at the edge of the stick because of the current. Then you could see that the water was moving.

So when we try in meditation to focus on the breath, it is kind of like putting a stick into the river of your life. It is hard to know the currents of your life. It is hard to know well what is really going on. Sometimes you might kind of know what you are thinking about; but it is hard to know really well what is going on, what feelings are operating, what concerns are operating.

But if you have the reference point of the breath, rather than thinking that being distracted is a

problem, you can see how the breath highlights the busy-ness of the mind. You now notice more fully all of these issues and concerns. There is a big difference between being lost in your thoughts – being caught up and preoccupied so that you hardly know what you are thinking or feeling – versus clearly seeing and knowing what you are thinking and feeling. If you can stay with your breath and get calm, that is great. Congratulations. If you can't be with your breath, that is not a mistake. If you can't be with the breath, the attempt to be with the breath helps you to see what is going on for you in a way that you can't see as well if you don't have that reference point.

What are some of the things you might see that make it difficult for you to be present? In our tradition we name five common activities of the mind that make it hard to stay in the present moment. They are things that hinder our ability to be present in a high quality way, and so are called the hindrances. These hindrances are not considered distractions. They are just something that hinders our ability to be in the present moment. The idea is to stop letting them hinder us by turning our attention toward them and seeing them directly. If you see them with such

directness, then you are no longer caught in the grip of them.

Here are the five. The first one is desire: wanting something, wanting anything at all. The mind gets caught up in its desires and fantasies.

Something has to happen. I want something to happen. The mind gets pulled into fantasies and thoughts about what it wants. The second one is aversion, ill will, disliking something. It is easy for the mind to get caught up in thoughts and feelings of dislike. That is the hook that pulls the mind. Generally when people have strong desire and strong aversion, it is about something. It might be a person we like or we don't like. We might lust after the person, or we might have a really intense dislike for them – or for a thing or an experience. What we do when we try to be mindful of strong desire and strong aversion is to train our mind to stop focusing on the thing we want or don't want. And instead, turn the attention around 180 degrees to notice what it feels like to have that desire or aversion.

What does it feel like – inside of you – inside your body, your mind, your heart, your feelings – to be caught up in wanting something badly? What's it like?

[Participants respond]:

Stressful.

Depressing, crippling, freezing.

Blissful.

Yes, even if you don't get it, it can be pleasant just to have the desire – just wanting it. That sometimes can be a hook.

What we do with mindfulness meditation is to turn our attention away from the object, the thing that we want, and notice in the immediate present what it feels like in our body and mind to be wanting. I might want this bell, but if I focus only on the bell I may fail to notice how my tight grip is hurting my hand, how painful it is to grip the bell. When we meditate, we don't have to have no desires, but the idea is to turn directly and honestly toward the desire, and notice it. This is what is making it hard to be present.

The trick is that when you really see desire happening in the present moment, then you are present. Then what most people find is that turning around and looking at desire and what it feels like gives them more freedom from it. And chances are they are not so caught in the desire. There's some freedom from it.

The same is true with aversion. If you really have strong dislike of something, it is usually an object. Rather than repeating the same story or idea and focusing on what you don't like, which is stressful and crippling, turn the attention around 180 degrees and feel what it is like in the body, in the mind, and in the heart to have this strong dislike. Be with that. Feel that. Then learn to be free of it by seeing it clearly.

Those are two of the five hindrances. Another is resistance or lethargy. Not just being tired, but more like being so bored that you just can't stand it. Or you just don't want to deal with something; it's just too much. When I was about ten years old, my mom would take me to the department store to buy clothes. I hated it, and I would get so tired in the department store that I could hardly keep myself from falling on the floor. But when we would leave the store, my mom would ask if we should get ice cream, and, boy, was I awake! I had all the energy in the world. The resistance, the lethargy was a strategy for "I don't want to be here." Sometimes that is what makes it difficult to meditate – this strategy of lethargy and resistance.

Another hindrance is restlessness and regret

making it hard to be present – this current of the river in the form of restlessness and regret. In the same way as with desire and aversion, we turn the attention around to really be there in the present moment in our body with the restlessness or regret. And feel in the body what it is like. And breathe. Just breathe with it.

The last hindrance is having doubt. To be caught in the grip of doubt may be about oneself or what one is doing, or doubt about meditation. Doubt about the value of being present for whatever you're doing is one of the powerful forces that keep people from being present. So we turn the attention around and really look at doubt right in the eye. Really see and feel what it is like.

The idea is not to take anything as a problem in meditation, but to take it as something new to meditate with, to be mindful of, to turn toward and really see. The hope is that when you turn toward something and really see it clearly for what it is, you are beginning to discover how the act of seeing, the act of clear knowing, is a place to be free and peaceful.