Removal of Distracting Thoughts - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 41:39

Tonight's talk is based on the Sutta entitled The Removal of Distracting Thoughts, which, I'm sure you'll agree, sounds like a very attractive proposition.

Last night's Sutta on the different ways of dealing with skilful and unskilful thoughts is particularly suited to practice in everyday life and to wise reflection, where we can examine our thoughts on certain matters. Tonight's talk relates to distractions that occur during deep meditation. It offers a broad range of suggestions which include metta, wise reflection, calming and investigation. It also includes suppression, which might be a surprise given the very open-minded, non-judgmental stance we associate with Vipassana. Obviously there is a time for everything.

Here are the Buddha's opening words: "When a bhikkhu is pursuing the higher mind, from time to time he should give attention to five signs."

Note that these instructions are only to be followed from time to time. Normally we should follow the standard Vipassana instructions we receive from the Satipatthana Sutta. Only from time to time are we to use the alternative discussed tonight. The Buddha doesn't outline which circumstances warrant the new approach.

While writing this talk, I used this alternative when my mind became too unbalanced for Vipassana, and I offer my efforts to follow this teaching as an example. After a tantalizing glimpse of a very still mind that simply knew experience, I made the mistake of thinking, "This is the real me." The Buddhist word for this is vanity, which means that we've succumbed to the delusion of self. We cling to what we like in our experience, believing this is the real me.

When I fall prey to vanity, I get overly energetic, striving, delighted with my role as the observer who knows experience and investigates the Dhamma. Ironically, this means that I've lost all objectivity. Energetically, it felt as though my head was trying to lift off my body, shooting skywards like a rocket towards a very enticing brightness. I recognised this as vanity, but the attachment was so deep that I couldn't get any objectivity on the experience, and I felt stuck.

This is where the advice given in this Sutta was extremely useful. Gradually, the skyrocketing, deluded mind was drawn back down to earth. In cases where your mind has become focused but you keep getting stuck in some experience, unable to remain objective, this may be the right time to try out the instructions

from this sutta.

The Buddha then says, "When a Bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign," and goes on to give us advice. But first, what kind of signs is he talking about? The Pali word is nimitta, and is used mainly in connection with Samatha meditation, which calms the mind. The nimitta are signs that we have a good level of concentration. The mind becomes riveted by present experience and often you notice something unusual. Though it can appear at any of the sense doors, the most common nimitta are tactile or visual. You might feel a stream of tingling sensations, for example, or see a pattern of light.

The trouble comes when we become sure there must be some deep message in this strange light or tickling feeling. Instead of being just another unsatisfactory phenomenon that comes and goes, we start to believe that it signals some exalted state of mind or supreme wisdom that we can achieve. That was what was happening when my mind got locked into vanity, as described earlier, believing I'd somehow found the real me, the perfect, clear-minded, objective observer.

Before going on to look at the Buddha's advice, I want to draw attention to another phrase in this opening sentence: "When a Bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion."

The sign, remember, signifies a concentrated mind. So the Buddha is saying that evil, unwholesome thoughts can arise because of the sign that we've achieved a concentrated mind. At first sight this seems strange. Surely we concentrate our minds as part of the effort to let go of evil, unwholesome thought. Why on earth undertake a practice that actually causes these to arise?

As our minds become still and focused, underlying troubles show up. We learn the Dhamma as we navigate through these painful states which get covered over by busyness, sense pleasure and other distractions in daily life. This is the path of purification. We easily forget this and believe we're not practicing correctly when negativity shows up while we meditate. It's comforting to reflect that the Buddha expects such negativity to emerge as a natural consequence of good concentration. We can take it as a signal that we're moving deeper within.

How are we to work with this deeper layer of negativity? Let's look at the Buddha's advice: "When a bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should give attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome."

Normally in Vipassana, when we notice we've been distracted by a thought, we simply note this and center attention on the emotions and feelings associated with that thought. Our approach is non-judgmental. It doesn't matter whether the thought is skillful or unskillful. However, this Sutta offers five alternatives to the standard approach, and judgment plays a role right from the start.

In my state of deluded vanity, I was having thoughts like, "This is it, I've got it now," or "Oh no, it's gone

again." Although I found it hard to consider these thoughts as evil, because I wasn't actually wishing anyone harm, I knew from long and painful experience how much suffering there is for me in this state of delusion. I am identifying with a mind state that is experienced as beautiful and trying to hang on to it. This only brings suffering and deepens delusion, so it is definitely unwholesome.

What are the wholesome signs to which I should attend in these circumstances? In the commentary on this Sutta by Buddhaghosa, he suggests that metta may be used as the alternative focus when we have been caught by hatred, while the unattractive aspect of the body is the appropriate focus when we've been caught by lust.

In the case of delusion, which was my concern, he recommends such things as living with a teacher, reading Dhamma books, and asking questions about the Dhamma. However, these suggestions don't fit easily into a meditation session, so I used a simple alternative: I imagined myself bowing to the Buddha, to Bhante, and to any teacher who came to mind. At times, I imagined myself reading a Dhamma book. All these imaginings had the effect of quelling vanity to some extent, helping me come to terms with the fact that I cannot own all the goodness and wisdom in the world.

Do you remember the Sutta on the raft and the need to sink the raft once we reach the far shore? This is essentially what I was doing. The objective observer had become my raft, steadying my mind in Vipassana, helping me through many emotional ups and downs. Now it was time to let go of that raft, to experience the truth of anatta at a deeper level, where sensations and feelings are known but there is no sense of a person watching them.

When I'm going through a bout of vanity, I'm identifying as the person who watches experience. This showed me my attachment to the fifth khandha: consciousness. I want to be the conscious person that detects experience. Bowing helps me surrender my hold on consciousness. Not that I go unconscious—sensations and feelings arise, slip by, and pass away gracefully. The body continues to function as normal, but the mind's usual habit of clinging disappears. And when that goes, I lose the sense of a "me" who is at the centre of experience, receiving it all. There are only sensations and feelings.

To my surprise, I find that the absence of central headquarters makes absolutely no difference. In fact, everything runs much more smoothly. With each imaginary bow, I got a few seconds where the mind let go of vanity and slipped into the beauty of anatta. In the Buddha's words: "With the abandoning of these thoughts connected to desire, hatred and delusion, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

As an analogy for what we're doing, the Buddha paints the picture of a skilled carpenter knocking out a coarse peg by means of a fine one. The coarse peg represents our unwholesome thoughts. To drive these out, we insert the appropriate wholesome thought, which in my case was the thought of bowing to some greater wisdom.

However, after several imaginary bows, my mind refused to cooperate, reattaching itself stubbornly to vanity, determined to experience life within its normal, me-centred map. So I moved on to the second of the Buddha's suggestions:

"If, while he is giving attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome, there still arise in him thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should examine the danger in these thoughts thus: These thoughts are unwholesome, they are reprehensible, they result in suffering."

This is similar to the advice given in last night's Sutta, though the wording here is less nuanced and more severe. Instead of "affliction" we have "unwholesome" and "reprehensible." Likewise, the analogy the Buddha uses is dark:

"Just as a man or woman, young, youthful and fond of ornaments, would be horrified, humiliated and disgusted if the carcass of a snake or dog or a human being were hung around his or her neck, so too, when a bhikkhu examines the danger in those thoughts, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

We are to develop horror for unwholesome thoughts of the kind we would feel if a rotting carcass were slung around our necks. This is a far cry from the non-judgmental approach we adopt in standard Vipassana. Obviously there is a time to be open-minded and a time to be judicious, even severe. In standard Vipassana we maintain objectivity so thoughts of hatred, greed, and delusion can do us no harm. But in the kind of situations the Buddha is addressing here, we're getting caught up in our emotions, no longer objective. This is when we put our judgmental nature to good use. We give it full throttle to drive out the desire, hatred, and delusion that are showing up as we meditate.

However, this is not an exercise in self-hatred. What we're condemning are thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion—comparing them to a carcass being hung around our necks. We're not condemning ourselves. In fact, we're protecting ourselves against these thoughts. So it's an exercise in self-care.

When I thought about my delusive thoughts of being the one who knows all, with this image of a carcass hanging around my neck, it brought on shame for the thoughts and a determination not to keep getting caught up in them. My attention was still riveted on the bright light and that very still, concentrated mind state that I find so attractive. But with the image of a carcass around my neck as a protector, the meditation proceeded in a more balanced way. Whenever desire sprang up, it was quelled by shame as the carcass loomed large in my imagination. Thus I could remain objective.

In this precarious balance, I could feel the grief of not being able to fully know and possess that beautiful state. I could also sense the grief as healing, undermining attachment to the very enticing prospect of being the objective observer of my life. Thus I could see the wisdom of the Buddha's harsh, judgmental words and image. These are needed to balance the very strong desires, aversions, and delusions that emerge when we delve deeply into our experience. When we can't maintain the balance needed to

acknowledge these and let them burn out using the standard approach, we can throw an imaginary carcass around our necks as extra ballast.

But after some time, the image of the carcass began to wane and I felt myself slipping back into vanity. I then tried the next of the Buddha's suggestions, which is to simply forget the unwholesome thoughts and give them no attention. He gives the analogy of someone with good eyesight who, not wanting to see a disturbing sight, either shuts his eyes or looks away. One way we can put this suggestion into practice is by placing attention on calming parts of the body, such as the hands and feet. These don't store emotion the way the trunk and face often do. What we're doing is diverting our attention from whatever is causing disturbance.

In the commentaries, Buddhaghosa suggests placing attention on very mundane things, such as going through the contents of a mending box, picking up the needle and saying, "this is the needle," then picking up the thread and saying, "this is the thread," and so on. A variation on this which Bhante suggested to me a few years ago, and which is more practical during a meditation session, is to open the eyes and deliberately look at objects in the room, saying, "this is the window, this is the plant, this is the Buddha rupa," and so on. I keep looking at any one of these for as long as they hold attention, naming them again and again.

It sounds foolish to be staring at objects like this, reminding ourselves what is a plant and what is a window, as if we were in kindergarten. But the mind can get, in some senses, blown apart when we go deep into experience in vipassana. We're learning a completely new way of looking at the world without the delusion of a central control mechanism at its core. This is deeply disturbing to our psyche, and so these very strong urges towards desire, hatred, and delusion can be generated as a defense mechanism. In such a condition we have to take extraordinary care of ourselves. Recognizing and naming mundane objects is simply another way of caring for and soothing an inflamed mind.

When we're coming to terms with our misunderstanding about the world at its deepest level, it is very comforting to remember that we can still recognize familiar things. So don't resist the notion of being back in kindergarten. It's a good place for a confused or overexcited toddler, which is sometimes the level to which our minds descend in the challenge of vipassana.

We've gone through three suggestions so far. First, we use wholesome thoughts like metta to combat hatred, unattractiveness to combat lust, or bowing as an antidote to delusion. If that doesn't still the mind, we up the ante by strongly condemning the unwholesome thoughts and conjuring an image of a carcass being slung around our necks. If the mind is still veering towards desire, hatred, or delusion, we try to forget our thoughts by diverting our attention. This could mean focusing on calming parts of the body or finding external objects at which to look while we name them mentally.

After giving each suggestion, the Buddha then repeats the hoped-for outcome: his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. However, we still have two more options if

we're still too unbalanced for vipassana.

The Buddha continues: "If, while he is trying to forget these thoughts and is not giving attention to them, there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then he should give attention to stilling the thought formation of those thoughts."

He gives this analogy. Just as a man walking fast might consider, "Why am I walking fast? What if I walk slowly?" And he would walk slowly. Then he might consider, "Why am I walking slowly? What if I stand still?" And he would stand still. Then he might consider, "Why am I standing? What if I sit?" And he would sit down. Then he might consider, "Why am I sitting? What if I lie down?" And he would lie down.

Note the phrasing of the first part of the question as "why." In vipassana, we investigate using "what"—for example, what is it that I'm actually experiencing? What happens if I relax? We don't ask why, as that gets the mind spinning, trying to think our way out of suffering. But in this variation of the usual guidance, we are allowing the cognitive mind some room for maneuver. We're looking for the thought formations, meaning the underlying thought or belief prompting desire, hatred, and delusion.

The Buddha's "why" question is coupled with the suggestion to relax; there's an attempt to soothe the mind. So the "why" could perhaps be interpreted as "why am I bothering?" Although we're listening to our story, we're also trying to talk ourselves out of the frenzy it is spinning us into.

Buddhaghosa gives another analogy which helps us see how to still our thought formations. A hare is sleeping beneath a tree when a large piece of fruit falls out of the tree and hits the ground beside his head. The hare hears the loud thump, feels the vibration, and concludes that the earth is being destroyed. In a blind panic, he starts running. When other animals see the hare bolting, they also start running away in a panic. And so the commotion grows until the Bodhisatta—meaning the Buddha in one of his previous lives, this time as a lion—sees all the animals running across the plains.

Instead of joining them, he decides to get to the bottom of the matter. So he asks each of the animals in turn why they are running. He starts with the largest animal, the elephant, and gradually works his way back to the hare, who tells him of the noise and vibration that woke him from sleep. The lion then asks the hare to take him back to his resting spot under the tree. The lion sees the piece of fallen fruit and realizes that this is what had caused all the commotion. Thus the Bodhisatta was able to comfort the hare and all the animals and tell them there is nothing to fear.

Both analogies paint a picture of a very patient process. The lion had to question several animals before he got to the bottom of the hullabaloo.

Similarly, the man described by the Buddha slows himself down in several stages. So too, we need to be very patient with ourselves as we talk ourselves out of whatever rut the mind is steering us into. My mind can suggest all kinds of reasons why it needs to continue along its dead end, and each one seems like an absolute truth at the time. When I eventually see through the delusion, it feels like a major breakthrough,

and I'll never be the same person again. But afterwards, I can rarely remember any details.

It's like an argument with our nearest and dearest. We get stuck fast to our point of view, appalled that they could dare to think otherwise. But when it's all over, we can hardly remember what the row was about.

I persuaded myself to relax for long enough to get my mind around the Buddha's advice. What emerged was the question: Why try to grasp? Why not let go? This quieted my mind for a while as it contemplated the suggestion. But then an underlying fear showed up. I discovered I was very afraid of what would become of me if I lost that lofty glimpse of purity.

Having acknowledged this, another question was framed: Why be afraid? Why not trust? Again, the mind relaxed, considering the suggestion. This had the effect of bringing me more in contact with the fear. As my body sensed all the unpleasant sensations, my mind saw a horrid image of myself as completely worthless—the polar opposite of the ideal state I had been trying to catch hold of. Although I was ninety percent identified with this state of worthlessness, I was just about able to remember that this was a trance, a free-floating experience, not my real self.

When I could relax to the degree needed to frame another question, what emerged was a reiteration of the previous one: Why be afraid? Why not trust? After a few moments' consideration, the mind relaxed more deeply into the unwanted state, and shame became the predominant emotion. Acknowledging shame brought a degree of relief, and with that I could also sense the caring nature of the investigating strand in my mind. After a while it felt okay to ask: Why be ashamed? Why not let it go?

After some time pondering this, my mind confessed the kernel of its fear: because I don't know what will happen next.

This, I believe, was the thought formation at the basis of all the commotion. This is a big dilemma for our self, that delusion of being a separate unit from the rest of the world. It needs to be in control, to be able to predict what's coming down the line. It's the foreman in the factory, the headmaster in the school. As far as the boss is concerned, he or she is running the show.

But in this situation, the boss is in a fix. All the conveyor belts have jammed, the workers are threatening to walk out, the pupils are causing a riot. The situation has got totally out of control, and the boss hasn't a clue what to do.

Through practising with this, I've learned that I can happily embrace the don't-know state. In fact, it can be a great joy because it relieves responsibility. I can step down from my role as the boss, join the rebellious workers in riotous freedom. Though in practice, the riot stops the instant the boss steps down. Everything changes once I stop pretending to be in control.

Though these memories help, I still get stuck to the pedestal, fooled into believing that everything will

disintegrate if I don't maintain order. Getting through that barrier of fear, climbing down from the boss's pedestal—this requires lots of patience. As best I can, I bear witness to the fear, feeling its texture in my body, trusting that things will somehow work out.

Eventually, I slipped off the pedestal into a joyful freedom from responsibility. I could also sense the danger of identifying with that carefree state. But of course, this is just another dead end. Identifying with any state of mind, even the most joyous, brings suffering when the state breaks up, as it's bound to do eventually.

Knowing this, I made an effort to tread the middle path between carefree joy and the attempt to identify as the boss and control matters. The desire to plunge into identification was very strong. I really wanted to define myself either as the one who is joyful or the control freak. Either identification felt preferable, more stable than the precarious middle ground. I no longer had the balance of mind needed to frame any questions for inquiry. So at that stage I moved on to the last of the Buddha's suggestions for dealing with distractions.

Before going on to that, I want to emphasize how gentle we need to be with our questions. The process is like psychotherapy, where the therapist needs to be very respectful of the client and not rush them along. The therapist strand in my mind needs constant restraining.

The client needs a lot of reassurance. Using Buddhaghosa's analogy, the lion needs to be reminded not to eat the animals he is questioning, and they need considerable reassurance that his motives are benign. This becomes especially important as the lion approaches the smaller animals—as we go deeper into our fears.

The hare, in Buddhaghosa's story, at first refuses to take the lion to his resting place. The lion slowly talks him into this disclosure, speaking sometimes gently, sometimes firmly. And when the lion works out the cause of the problem, he doesn't crow in triumph but takes time to reassure the animals that there's nothing to fear. This paints a picture of the tenderness and respect with which we care for the fearful strand in our minds as we try to get to the bottom of the disturbance.

Going on to the final suggestion: "If, while he is giving attention to stilling the thought formations, there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then, with teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind."

By comparison to the gentle language of the previous example, the Buddha uses very forceful words here. He gives an equally stark analogy of a strong man seizing a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beating him down, constraining him, and crushing him.

What are we to make of this? Elsewhere in the scriptures the Buddha praises qualities like patience, care, and kindness. But here he is asking us to beat someone up, at least in our imagination. It would appear

that there is a time for everything, and this is the time for our aggressive tendencies to be put to good use.

In my case, as I attempted to find a middle way between heedless irresponsibility and absolute control, I used suppression as a means of forcing myself back towards the middle ground. At times I felt the strong urge towards that sense of absolute control, becoming the boss. To combat this, I put all my energy into saying "No."

Very strong tensions ran through the body to combat desire in this way. My jaw set like iron, my breath stopped. Body and mind were completely locked in combat between "I want" and "no." Eventually a truce was called, the breath started flowing, the tension eased up a little, and I felt a trickle of energy flowing through the most jammed-up section of the body. The ending of the battle didn't feel like victory or defeat—more like moving on, with the sense of something within having been freed up, although I couldn't name what had changed.

The sensations that flowed through the previously jammed-up area released a trickle of joy and even bliss in their wake. But after a few moments, the desire to identify locked hard onto some new outlet—at times the trickle of joy, at other times the grief at not being able to control this and call it mine. Again my body and mind stiffened as I resisted this new identity with all my might.

On and on it went until desire burnt out somewhat and I could feel myself relaxing, no longer overwhelmed by the need to identify with experience. At that point I returned to the standard vipassanā technique, knowing experience objectively without interfering.

Although I was feeling battle-weary, I sensed that some deeper wisdom had been gained. I found myself reflecting on the meaning of anattā and saying, "So I really am not this body and mind." Although there was still some fear and grief at the words, these emotions were balanced by acceptance and wonder. The obvious next question—what on earth am I then?—was not forming, which was a blessed relief. There was a degree of ease with being unable to understand the mystery of what I am.

The phrase "peace beyond understanding" came to mind and started to make sense. At some level I'd broken free from the tyrant within me who demands to know and understand what life is all about. Though I knew this was just a temporary break, I was deeply grateful for the relief.

To close the sutta, the Buddha repeats his five suggestions for dealing with distractions which come up when we get deeply concentrated. First, we give attention to the alternative wholesome thought, such as mettā. If that doesn't work, we reflect on the danger posed by the unwholesome thoughts—which is basically the same as in last night's sutta, though in this case the language is more strongly condemnatory, and we sling a carcass around our necks to drive the point home. Thirdly, we forget about the disturbing thoughts and distract our attention elsewhere, such as to the periphery of the body or objects in the room. Fourthly, we undertake the process of inquiring into the underlying thought formations with the aim of bringing them to stillness. Finally, there is the advice to suppress the disturbance by force majeure.

After each suggestion, the Buddha reiterates the hoped-for outcome: "With the abandoning of the unwholesome thoughts, the mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated." Note that there is no judgment if any of these steps fail. We don't have to think of ourselves as bad meditators if we have to go to the last step and suppress the disturbance. Instead, we can think of this as a step of deep purification.

The Buddha concludes by saying that using this practice, the meditator becomes a master of thought: "He will think whatever thought he wishes to think, and he will not think any thought he does not wish to think."

Wouldn't it be wonderful never to think thoughts we don't want to think? Never again to worry or obsess over details? Never to harbour resentment or jealousy? Never to think ourselves into a panic?

And imagine always being able to think those thoughts we want to think—always able to think well of ourselves and others, to wish ourselves well in all circumstances, to find some positive, optimistic thought even when we feel depressed or when the situation seems desperate. Even if bandits were sawing us apart limb by limb, as the Buddha describes in another sutta, we could think compassionately of our poor body and of the bandits who are making such bad kamma for themselves.

The Buddha's final words on the matter are that having become a master of thought, the meditator "has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with the complete penetration of conceit, he has made an end to suffering."

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