

Understanding the Distracted Mind - Class 1 review

When we come to meditation, we see clearly how fractured, divided and easily distracted the mind is. And, we cannot seem to 'fix' it. Even after years of practice, we still find distraction a central experience in practice – and in life. It seems random and out of our control.

However, there is nothing random about distraction – it serves a definite purpose. Instead of fighting distraction, when we begin to notice it with interest and curiosity, a door opens in understanding and insight.

A recap of Sunday's talk:

First, a map of the direction of practice. We come to a practice identifying ourselves at the content level of our lives: our families, jobs, circumstances, health, beliefs, and so forth. That's a stressful way to live, as our content rarely meets our expectations of what we think we need to be happy. The purpose of practice is to realize we are not the content of our lives, we are the awareness which experiences it. The beginning stage of that awareness, which we call the observer or the witness, can see objects arise without becoming lost or identified with them. But distraction pulls us from the observer back into content.

Some distractions, those which trigger from deeply held pain or belief patterns, can feel overwhelming. We went through a few tools in the toolbox helpful for painful arising, when we feel unable to hold them in practice. These include scaffolded practices, such as holding and polishing and tonglen (giving and receiving). We also look at balance in the rest of our lives, recognizing that our lives 'off the cushion' determine what comes up 'on the cushion'.

Thirdly, the ego identified mind or psyche looks at distraction as a problem, an obstacle in the way of what we want. To the ego, it needs to be fixed.

Think of a parent with a fussing baby. The baby is crying, the parent tries to be patient and understanding, but eventually reaches frustration and cannot stop the baby from crying. Then the parent notices the cause of the fuss: a splinter is lodged in the baby's foot. Aha. The attitude releases instantly, now the parent can get to the cause. The parent now realizes that the crying, far from being an obstacle, was exactly the information needed to alert the parent that something needed attending to. So with distraction and pain.

When we stop fighting and see it as something we do not need to fix, like the parent, our attitude shifts. We look at the 'noise' as something that is a

messenger from the beyond. Each distraction is a mercy and an invitation to awaken.

There is a straightforward place to start to unpack this: the voice in our heads.

It's almost like you have a twin inside you, talking away unbidden much of the day. Sometimes it feels light, just narrating our experience for us. (Look, there's a blue sports car. I used to have a blue car...wow, the autumn leaves are really pretty...ouch, that hurt. I hope it's not too bad....)

Other times, when there's an emotional drive or trauma triggering it, can be obsessive and feels like we are being eaten alive, cannot find the off switch.

That's when we tend to notice it as a problem.

It's actually that light narrative we carry around with us is more vital to see and understand. That narrative, a walking commentary on things already obvious, constructs a wall between us and the direct experience of life. It enmeshes us in an illusion of our separate ego identified selves. More on that later, as unpacking the narrative is key to experiencing life directly and fully.

But first, we need to appreciate how much we are trapped inside this voice, how much energy it costs us, and how much it has us by the nape of our necks. Appreciating the suffering of the situation we are in is what gives us the energy and will to do the work of freeing ourselves.

The fact is that we hardly notice it most of the time. It's just something we take as naturally present, seems a part of us. It's mostly invisible, and thus its function is unconscious to us.

So the first step is to see it as fully as possible. The initial work is to bring it from under the radar to on the radar screen.

In class, I asked each person to say three things the voice commented on in the last five minutes. It took a little work to come up with three, and some were pretty involved for a few minutes' time span! It actually likely said dozens of things in a few minutes time. The difficulty of being able to recall tells us how unconscious we are to it.

Our first task is to become more fully conscious of it. We do this not to fix it, but to appreciate this as the exact spot where the root of all suffering originates. Life only presents us with situations. The voice that comments, judges and wants things to be different is the agent for the delusion and stress. For example, the other day I got in my car and it would not start. The battery was dead. That's a

situation. It was the voice that made it stressful (Oh no! What am I gonna do? I need to be somewhere!).

As outlined in Sunday's talk, meditation sets up the ideal circumstances for us to hear the voice. It removes most of the usual objects of focus and leaves us hanging. It gives anything that is unfelt or undigested room to show up. While this may feel difficult, it is exactly what we need to become aware of - for the possibility of becoming free from.

We are did a meditation exercise. We sat for 15 minutes. Using pencil and paper, writing down everything the voice said during the sitting.

It happens so fast, sometimes it's hard to see. This is why beginning instructions commonly include the practice of noting. The noting helps us get a handle on a fast and slippery process.

When I first started going to basketball games, I mostly missed seeing the shots and the fouls. It all happened so fast! Only after seeing enough games, and going over game tapes, did patterns of play begin to emerge. Once the understanding of how plays and strategies developed, I knew where the play was going to be and 'saw' much more of the game. And it made watching basketball much deeper and more satisfying.

Likewise, things that seem lightning fast (holy cow, he gave me that 'look' and suddenly I am so upset!) have to be investigated, so to see the patterns.

Start looking for the voice. As you do, ask yourself these questions:

- 1) When does it start up? What triggers it?
- 2) What does it say? Is it true? Do you identify with it all equally, or some things more than others? How solid does it feel?
- 3) What is its relationship being in the present moment?

HOMEWORK

Goal:

We begin by seeing the situation we are in more clearly. The voice in our head is 100% about how any life situation can turn into suffering. Seeing generates the will to do the work of waking up.

The fact is that we hardly notice our inner voice most of the time. It's just something we take as naturally present, seeming to be a part of us. It's mostly invisible, and thus its function is unconscious, and the energy cost of it is unappreciated.

There are two levels of this voice. One is the constant narrative of life (wow, that tree is really beautiful...) **The second, for this week of homework, is when something triggers us emotionally and the voice becomes a persistent visitor that is hard to turn off.**

IMPORTANT: DON'T FIX! The impulse to fix will come up.

FIXING MIGHT INCLUDE:

- trying to stop the voice, or repress it.
- trying to follow its suggestions, to do what it says to do, such as a task list or other actions it suggests. If you do, notice a new task list springs up. Remind yourself that any things you need to attend to will come up again when needed. Trust yourself.

Why not just do what it wants?

One of the reasons the voice is there is and seems unstoppable is because you think it is true, it is important, and without it your life would fall apart.

We are going to start to examine that in the next class.

Listening to it dispassionately, not fixing, takes much of the power and the juice out of it.

ON THE CUSHION

Keep a meditation journal over the next two weeks.

After your sitting is over, reflect on any loud or persistent inner talking that may have been present. Write enough of it down so you can recall it later. Be prepared to bring your journal to class.

OFF THE CUSHION

Everyone was given a small notebook. Keep the notebook close to you during the day; in your back pocket, in your purse. When you notice the voice, jot it down in the notebook. No need to go into a long theme, just write down enough that you'll be able to recall it later.

Don't worry about the lighter narration, concentrate on emotionally triggered objects when the voice becomes noticeable.

Here are a few of my own examples:

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- I'm trying to do maintenance on the hot tub the repair man assured me was a no brainer and break the part I'm maintaining. Tub leaking, water pouring everywhere. VOICE: OMG! This is terrible! I shouldn't have listened to him. The instructions were completely different than what he showed me. This is not worth it. They are terrible at returning calls.

- we have made an offer on an office condo. The message back from the sellers asks us to bargain more without a counteroffer in place.
VOICE: I feel toyed with, are they stringing us along? Perhaps they are waiting for a better offer. What if this doesn't work out. I want this to work out.
- Late at night, wake up realizing I forgot to let the neighbor's dog out to pee. Put jacket on, go to neighbor's house and let dog out. Mind is surprisingly quiet.
VOICE: wow, you did this one really well! Amazing how much your practice has made your life better. Life is so good!
- a friend cancels a lunch appointment the day before.
VOICE: this is not atypical of them. Why to do they this so much?
- walking in bird hills park. Realize I am disoriented not quite sure where I am.
VOICE: where the heck am I? How long will it take for me to get back, thank goodness I don't have an appointment of some kind, I could be late.

Pull out those notebooks and start jotting down. If you forget, reflect back later in term day and remember and write down. Putting pen to paper adds a lot of energy to this process.

Every couple of days, please email back a story or two to this email address. There will be email reminders every other day to do so. I will anonymously compile them and share them with our class circle to keep us all inspired!