



Distraction Practice

The Dharma of Distraction

-Judy Lief

Distractions are everywhere, all the time. Little screens, middling screens, gigantic screens. Instead of Plato's cave, we each create our own little cave and live in a world of flickering images devoid of real substance. We literally screen off our actual world, with all its ruggedness and rawness, and fit whatever is happening into a virtual world of sound, pictures, and videos we carry in our pockets.

We are so easily distracted, we complain to ourselves. But what is really behind all this distractedness? It is easy to think the relentless external stimuli are the problem, but what we are surrounded by are just phenomena, nothing more. The objects of our world are just there, innocently, just being what they are. Noises are just noises, sights are just sights, objects are just objects, smartphones are just smartphones, computers are just computers, thoughts are just thoughts.

Monkey Mind

The fact is that distractions may never fully disappear. You may run away to a cave and stay there all alone, but distractions will follow you wherever you go. You can't get rid of distractions, but through meditation practice, you can change how you react to them.

Distractions pull us off course. The word "distraction" means to be pulled away. When you are distracted, it feels as if something outside of you has captured your attention. Distraction is also referred to as desultoriness, from the Latin root meaning "skipping around." So another aspect of distraction is to be scatterbrained, mentally jumpy. It's easy to think external stimuli are the problem. But noises are just noises, sights are just sights, smartphones are just smartphones.

Mindfulness meditation helps us develop a more calm and stable mind. It gives us greater focus and concentration and is an effective way of overcoming ordinary distractedness. However, in terms of the spiritual path, this pragmatic application of meditation practice is only a start.

It is important to realize that in the buddhadharma, the point of working with your distractedness or wandering mind is not just to be more focused on whatever you are doing. Although that is extremely useful, it is only the first step. Getting a better handle on your mind so you are not tossed about by distractedness is not the ultimate goal.

Basically, we tend to like spiritual practices that are not too threatening, practices that confirm what we are doing and help us do it better. Instead of looking into our fundamental being, we prefer to relate to meditation as a self-improvement exercise, like going to the gym and working out. We can enjoy becoming more mentally and physically fit. This is great, but it does not address the depths of what distraction is really about.

What really fuels our distractedness? What is behind this ongoing restlessness? Embarking on the dharmic path requires that we develop the courage to look beyond our distractedness to its source. It requires us to question the source, the arising and the cessation of distractions. On this path we need to peel away, layer by layer, every level of distraction until we reach a kind of ground zero.

Entertainment Mind

According to Buddhist psychology, distraction is classified, along with such things as laziness and inattentiveness, as one of the twenty destabilizing factors of the mind. In Sanskrit this factor is called vikshepa. It arises when the natural flow of sense perceptions is joined with and tainted by our emotions. In other words, distraction is fueled by the usual suspects: grasping, rejecting, and denial. So distraction is not just some mental tic. It is highly emotional.

Although vikshepa is often translated as "distraction" or "mental wandering," it refers more specifically to the wandering mind being drawn to objects that cause it to lose its ability to remain one-pointedly focused on virtue. So this term points to a specific kind of distraction—distraction from keeping your attention on what matters, on what is genuine and virtuous.

We don't just react to things outside us — we ourselves are continually creating distractions. We cook them up and keep them going. They are our companions, our pets.

The approach of learning how to pull our mind back when it wanders is a reactive one: we are learning how to respond to distractions. But as we get a little better at responding to external distractions, we discover an even more gigantic mountain of internal distractedness. We begin to notice how it is not just a matter of reacting to something outside us—we ourselves are continually creating distractions.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called our continual inner distractedness “subconscious gossip,” a kind of ongoing drone of thought fragments and opinions. As a corollary, he talked about what he called “entertainment mind.” This entertainment mind needs to be fed constantly. If there are no immediate distractions, it will manufacture new distractions on the spot. So we are engaged in a continuous distraction project, keeping the distractions and entertainments flowing without interruption. There is an air of desperation about both of these self-created rivers of distractedness.

Distraction is fueled by our constant struggle to secure ourselves in relationship to others and to the environment. That project in turn is fueled by our likes and dislikes, our mind is pulled this way and that. To relate to this level of distractedness, we need not only to pull back the wandering mind but also to lessen its fuel supply: the push and pull of grasping and aversion.

Wisdom Mind

Working with distractions is a long-term project. We may begin with a romantic idea of embarking on the spiritual journey. But as we stick with the practice, that romanticism fades away and we are left with a gradual wearing-down process. We find we have less and less wiggle room. It is a shock to realize that we cannot just take our good old self and improve it, but that we have to start over completely. It's like a major liquidation sale. All our distractions and delusions—everything's gotta go. When this happens, we begin to relax. Although at first the idea of abandoning our smoke screen of distractions is threatening, even terrifying, if we stay with that experience even a little, the smoke begins to clear and we can start to see in a completely new way.

Christian mystics say that you need to go through a dark night of the soul before entering into the presence of God. It is like the analogy of the light

at the end of the tunnel. No dark night, no union with God; no tunnel, no light. Trungpa Rinpoche also talked about the importance of this stage of development. He taught that when students have become completely frustrated—when their practice has brought them to the point of giving up hope and thinking of abandoning the whole path—that is precisely the point where the real journey of awakening begins. It is there that the teachings can begin to take hold, not as ego's accoutrement nor as a surface adornment but as a deep-rooted transformative energy reaching right down to our bones.

What lies behind these endless distractions is the boundless space of awakened mind.

We can learn a lot by observing how we oscillate between distraction or entertainment and boredom. Boredom has an edge to it. We feel our ground slipping away; we struggle to find some way to secure ourselves. There is too much space; we need to fill it. There is nothing happening; we need to do something. It is too quiet; something must be wrong.

Paying attention to these kinds of responses to boredom is extremely valuable. It is a great practice. And when you feel that you absolutely must do something about it, stay with the boredom a bit longer! Let yourself feel bored completely. In this way you might be able to get a glimpse of what Trungpa Rinpoche called “cool boredom,” an experience refreshingly free of grasping, pretense, and struggle. In cool boredom, you can finally let go of the burden of trying to be someone. You can have a break from the project of “I.”

Going further, we need to address an even more fundamental level of distractedness. According to the Vajrayana teachings, what we are fundamentally distracting ourselves from is awakening. We are habitually distracting ourselves from the challenge of confronting our own wisdom. We distract ourselves from the intensity of the present moment, the immediacy of the teachings, and our own genuineness. As soon as we have even a little glimpse of this potential, we panic and scramble to get away.

Throughout our practice, we are working with distractions at many levels. The very moment a distraction arises, there also arises a chance to break through to what lies behind it. And what lies behind these endless distractions is the boundless space of awakened mind.