

NEWSLETTER
August 2004
Revised December 2005
Number 11

CULTIVATING DISTRACTION

I would like to explore a couple of mental habits that seem prevalent in Western society, i.e. an aversion to boredom and a pursuit of distraction. I suspect that many of us with these habits see no problem with them, even have positive feelings toward them. There are whole industries set up to help us indulge them. Those of us who have these tendencies often actively cultivate them by deliberately, effortfully, willfully, and consistently trying to immerse ourselves in things that we find exciting, entertaining, interesting, tasty, sensual, or at least engaging. Likewise we often mentally dwell in the past or future. That is unfortunate because the aversion to boredom, and pursuit of distraction contribute to difficulties in religious training, and even are themselves causes of suffering. Whether we know it or not, we cultivate these habits rather than trying to be willing to simply sit still in the midst of whatever confronts us at the moment, and we must eventually sit still if we wish to find our way to satisfying the deepest longing of our heart.

Why are we so averse to being bored? Why do we work so hard to distract ourselves? And from what? If this applies to you, I would really like you to take a deep look at yourself to see just what is going on here. We are so wealthy and healthy compared with most of humanity—those now, or who have ever lived. Kings and queens of old would envy us. Why aren't we satisfied? Instead of enjoying what we have, many of us work (and play) harder and harder, more and more frantically. We may be more stressed than ever. Why? Most of us have enough to eat and a roof over our heads, as well as some security. That would have been the realization of the fondest dreams of most people in the history of the world. And yet for many of us, it is just not enough.

This simply shows the truth of the Buddha's Teaching. Our greeds, hates, and delusions cannot be permanently satisfied, only transcended. In fact, to try to satisfy them, even the belief that they are satisfiable, is in itself a delusion. Before I began to train, some part of me knew this, and that intuition scared me. On some level I felt that if I ever stopped, if I ever truly tried to be still—in other words, to meditate—I might discover how empty my life was. When I finally did so, I knew that I had to do something about myself.

The more we work on distracting ourselves, the more we make it a habit of behavior. We think that we are using it, when in fact it may have gotten out of our control. This habit of distraction becomes a part of us in subtler and subtler ways that, without our religious practice, we may never see. And it works to hide things from us that we never intended to ignore. It makes us unaware of much going on in our internal and external environments. The more that we push away boredom—which in itself is a kind of stillness—and the more that we embrace distraction, the more insensitive we become to what actually is there. Thus the more stimulation we require just to feel alive, just to get through the barrier that we have unwittingly built up around ourselves.

And distraction is not just some minor problem. It can literally be lethal. Try being distracted while driving. Has this ever happened to you? Once you make distraction a habit, you cease to be reliably in control of your actions. You are often unaware—simply somewhere else—and that can get you, and others, killed. If you cultivate distraction and push away boredom, and if you don't think that it is a problem for you, if you think that you are always in control when you need to be, if you think that you are always awake and aware, and couldn't possibly have a traffic accident through lack of attention, I would like to suggest a little experiment. Just try sitting down in a quiet room, by yourself, and count your breaths. Count up to 10 and then begin again. Do this for twenty minutes. How many times did you lose count?

The next time that you feel bored and wish to push boredom away, the next time you find that you are trying to distract yourself, look at what lies beneath these feelings. From what do they arise? What are you really trying to avoid? I am not saying that I know the answers to these questions. Your answers are for you to discover, and for you to use to do something about yourself. This coming to understand ourselves is part of our religious practice, part of our meditation. And the willingness to see is what allows understanding to arise. Fighting the

boredom, and clinging to distractions is simply being unwilling to see, being afraid to see. When we see that which makes us uncomfortable, that from which we want to run, then we can begin to deal with that particular aspect of our suffering, and not before. Distraction is designed to prevent ("protect") us from seeing what we fear—from seeing our greeds, hates, and delusions—and so, until we begin to deal with the distraction, we can't begin to see, and thus deal, with our suffering.

If you would like to read more on dealing with distractions, I refer you to the article **The Eightfold Path of Buddhism** by Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy, a copy of which I have given to many of you. If you don't have a copy and would like one, just let me know, or click on the link on our web-site home page on the right under **Teaching**. In particular I commend to you **Section 7. Mindfulness**. Just be aware that Rev. Master Daizui there uses the word *distraction* in an ironic sense for something that may need your attention and you are ignoring, rather than in the sense that I have been using it.

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