

How to Work with the Four Distractions to Meditation

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A message to you from Jerome Stone

Hi. Thanks for downloading this ebook. I hope that you are able to gain insights from the discussions in this book and experience from the exercises as support for your meditation practice. It is my pleasure to offer you this text as a tool to work with your mind and to gain stability and ease in mindfulness and meditation practices.

If there are other topics that you would like me to write about or that you need additional information on, please contact me at: jerome@mindingthebedside.com

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Introduction:

I think that it's fair to say that many people experience difficulties and challenges when first starting to meditate, especially if the technique or method that is being used is based on observing and working with thoughts, feelings and/or sensations.

As meditation practitioners, we need to know that there's nothing wrong with us if we find ourselves wanting to get up from our meditation practice and run away, get a cup of coffee, watch the TV...basically, do anything but meditate, because difficulties and challenges are common.

What may come as some relief is to know that difficulties and challenges can be a sign that our practice is working! Encountering distractions and experiencing challenges are signs that we're paying attention to what is going on and that our habitual habit of tuning out what's going on is beginning to change.

Non·er'y adj.
dis·tor·tive (dī-stôr'tiv) adj. S
distortive peaks in the recorded mus
distortive vibration.
distr. abbr. 1. Distribution. 2. D
dis·tract (dī-strâkt') tr.v. -trac·
cause to turn away from the original
divert. 2. To pull in conflicting e
[Middle English *distracten*, from
pull away : *dis-*, apart; see *DIS-*
tract/ing·ly adv. —**dis·trac'tive**
dis·tract·ed (dī-strâk'tid) adj.
verted. 2. Suffering conflicting
tract'ed·ly adv.
dis·tract·er also **dis·trac·tor** (dī-strâk'tər)
correct answers presented as a cho
dis·trac·tion (dī-strâk'shən) n.
the condition of being distracted.
amusement, that distracts. 3. Ext
turbance; obsession: *loved the pup*
dis·trac·tor (dī-strâk'tər) n. V

What are the biggest challenges in learning to meditate and what are solutions to these challenges? While the title of this work is *How to Work with the Four Challenges to Meditation*, I am not implying that there are just four challenges, or even that these challenges apply to everyone who meditates. In this ebook, we'll address the main challenges that many people encounter while learning to meditate. While there are other potential challenges and obstacles, the four that we'll be discussing here come up repeatedly for those who are learning to meditate and *even for those who have been meditating for a while!*



What's problematic with writing about "challenges" in meditation is that in a very real way, even the concept or notion of there being a "challenge" is by its nature no more real than is a thought that arises briefly within the mind and then fades away. In fact, when we work with our mind through meditation, we soon discover that thoughts are almost "ornaments" or phenomena of the mind and in the same way, once a perceived challenge has arisen, it can easily pass away if it is just "left to be." We'll discuss this in the next pages.

What I have been repeatedly reminded of in my long process of trying to come to some understanding or realization of what meditation is, is that I am not so much trying to overcome some “thing” as I am trying to gain an understanding that this “thing” or challenge is temporary and in most cases, flimsily non-existent! Where are my thoughts? Why does sleepiness feel so solid? We’ll discuss these and other questions in this ebook.



In writing about distractions that arise, I’ve addressed the four most common things that I, and others whom I’ve spoken with, have encountered when engaged in the practice of meditation. While these four distractions: thoughts, sensation, emotions, and sleepiness can feel like real challenges, when dealt with from the basis of a mindful and aware approach, they – like clouds in the bright sky– can easily dissipate, leaving us to rest in a truer nature of our being.

Read this ebook and then see how and if what I’ve shared with you helps you in any way. As in all of the materials that I present, if something really works, or *doesn’t work*, please [let me know](#).



Challenge Number One: Thoughts!

Because we're not used to working with our mind, our first experience (or even our experience after years of meditating!) may be that as soon as we sit down to meditate, we encounter a torrential cascade of thoughts, one after another, seemingly without end. Our first impulse may be to feel hopeless in our attempts to learn meditation and we may decide that we are special in how busy our mind is, feeling hopelessly unsuccessful.

What is happening to us during these times is *completely normal, completely natural*. The nature of our mind is to create thoughts and that's probably no surprise to us. What may surprise us is that our mind can create *so many thoughts*, endlessly, without our even trying to create them!

While this may seem to be a problem, it's not! When practicing meditation, if your thoughts seem to run rampant each time that you begin your practice, relax and know that you're in good company.

Thoughts, like all mental phenomena, arise for a moment and then fade away. Haven't you noticed that you can be thinking of something very important and then, all of a sudden, you've become distracted by something else?!! How did this happen? If what you were thinking about was permanent, wouldn't it have stayed in your mind? And, why did something new arise? This happens because the nature of thoughts is to arise and then to disappear, like clouds in the sky or waves in the ocean.



Solution:

Those who have practiced meditation for a while begin to notice that thoughts are fairly flimsy and impermanent, they come and go within our mind, independently of whether we try to generate them or not, and that given some space, without grasping onto them, they dissipate and disappear.

The problem for most of us is that we are so used to running after each thought, believing it to have some special meaning or existence, that we have no experience of just being with whatever arises, not focusing on our thoughts, not grasping onto a particular thought and then making it into a story.

For instance, if while sitting in a coffee shop, someone who I have great difficulty with walks in and sits at a table nearby, there are a number of things that I can do. My immediate reaction may be to go over in my mind all of the things that I don't like about that person. This will undoubtedly lead me into more negative thinking and will prevent any sort of peace from existing within my mind.

Another thing that I could do would be to attempt to ignore the thoughts that I have about that person, working diligently to keep all of my negative thoughts out of my mind. Having tried this approach on many occasions, I know well that it never works. My mind inevitably ends up back on the negative thinking.

A more effective solution, and one that we work with in our meditation, is to see the thoughts that are arising as mere phenomena, occurring against the background of our awareness. What this means is that although the thoughts are arising, we observe them as mere waves arising within the mind, having no more power or significance than a wave arising on the ocean. Easier said than done...

To solve our obsession with getting distracted or swept away by our thoughts, we begin by using our breath as an anchor of our attention and return to it whenever our thoughts have run away with our mind, whenever we've lost our mind...fullness!

Right now, as you're reading these words, you're breathing, naturally. Without having to think about it, we breathe, and because we're always breathing, we can use our breath *anytime and anywhere* as an object of focus, bringing ourselves into the present moment, and calming the distracted mind.

To begin working with our breath, we use exercises that help us to bring our attention back to our breathing as the object of our focus and do so repeatedly until we've established some stability in our mindfulness.

After we become stable in returning our attention to the breath, we slowly realize that the phenomenon of thoughts, that had previously so captivated our attention, begins to loosen its grasp on our attention. When this happens, we find ourselves more at home and more at peace within our mind, and less troubled by the variety of thoughts that permeate our developing awareness of the mind.

Gradually, we come to see the thoughts that arise within our mind as no more important or permanent than waves that arise out of the ocean, rising for a moment, and then falling back into the vast expanse from which they came. That vast expanse is our mind!

In the first ebook, [*Can Meditation Change the Way that You View Your World?*](#), I provided a number of exercises. Additionally, on the website, [Minding the Bedside](#), there are a number of downloadable exercises and audio tracks to assist you to work with your meditation practice.

The following brief exercise is one that uses the breath to work with thoughts. If you'd like a longer exercise, please visit the website and download the resources available there.

Sitting on a straight-backed chair or couch or on a cushion on the floor, allow your body to become still. The back is straight without being stiff; the posture is relaxed, awake, and dignified. The hands can rest gently on the knees or in the lap. Settling into this moment, begin watching the breath.

Become aware of the fact that you're breathing. Become aware of the movement of the breath as it flows into and out of the body. Feel the breath as it comes into the body and as it leaves the body. Simply remain aware of the breath flowing in and flowing out, not manipulating the breathing in any way. Simply being aware of it and noticing how it feels.

Allow yourself to be with this flow of breath, coming in and going out. Notice the feeling of the breath as the lungs fill with air on the in-breath and deflate as you breathe out, the chest expanding and collapsing. Perhaps feeling the breath in the abdomen, rising as you breathe in and flattening and sinking as you breathe out.

Allow your attention to gently ride on the sensation of each breath, not thinking about breathing, without the need to comment. Simply watching your breathing.

As before, you'll probably notice that your mind wanders off to thoughts of the past, fantasies, memories, or regrets. Or it may move to anticipation of the future, planning, wishing, and judging. You may find yourself thinking about what you'll do after this exercise, what you have to do at work, things that you have to do.

This time, become aware of thoughts passing through the mind, noticing them but not engaging with them, allowing thoughts to be like clouds, drifting through a vast, spacious sky.

If you find yourself carried away by a stream of thoughts or you notice that you are no longer observing right here, right now, in this moment, return to the breath, anchor yourself in the awareness of the breath, coming now to this breath.

When you feel steady in the present, you can return again to witnessing the thoughts in the mind, allowing whatever is there to be there. Thoughts of fantasies, desires, likes, dislikes, memories, judgments, pressures of obligations.

Aware perhaps of feelings or emotions: sadness, fear, joy, peace. Allowing all of your thoughts to simply emerge, as they are. Witnessing. Observing. Thoughts coming. Thoughts going. Not being drawn into analysis of those thoughts. Not pursuing them. Not rejecting or engaging the thoughts but seeing them as clouds in the vast, still sky of the mind.

Don't think about thinking. Watch the thoughts as an old man watches children at play—observing without being involved.

And now, drop all methods. Drop all thoughts. Just...relax.

Once you've gained some familiarity with the practice of working with the breath, please feel free to check out posts on this ebook's website, [Minding the Bedside](#), which address how to work with the breath and with thoughts.

Here are two links to posts that address using the breath to work with emotions and working with thoughts. Enjoy!

[Anchoring the Awareness of Emotions in the Breath](#)

[Using Thoughts During Meditation as the Object of Meditation](#)

Try using these techniques and the information that's provided in the posts, and see if you can practice *daily*, even for a few minutes. Once you've gained some stability, see if it makes any difference in how often you get distracted by thoughts. Let me know how this works for you. Is there anything else that you need to know or that would be helpful? Are there other ebooks that would be helpful? If so, please [contact me](#).



Challenge Number Two: Sensations!

In the previous chapter, we looked at *how to work with our thoughts* when learning to meditate. This topic was identified as one of the four major challenges in learning to meditate.

In this chapter, we'll move the discussion to *how to work with the sensations that arise when we're meditating.*

As we discussed previously, many people experience difficulties and challenges when first starting to meditate. Especially if the technique or method that is being used is based on observing the mind and its characteristics.

Many (or most?!) of our thoughts are based on what our “sense organs” (eyes, ears, bodily sensation) are perceiving.

When I first began to meditate, *even the slightest sensation would completely distract me*, so that instead of focusing on my breath as the object of my meditation, I would end up focusing on the ticking of the clock (how annoying), the sunshine coming through the window (how inviting), or the ache in my back (how aggravating).

Bodily sensations can be some of the most difficult sensations to deal with because they are the most difficult to ignore. If you've ever suffered from a chronic pain condition, you know how all-encompassing the sensation of pain can become. While we may block out something that we see or hear, a terrible ache or pain in our body can get its grip on our attention, making it very hard to disregard.

And, even if we're not in pain, how about that car...**woman**...**man**...new computer...**music**...**sky**..(fill in the blank!) There are so many visual and auditory stimuli that can take our mind out of the present and off of what or who we are engaged with.

Solution:

Working with our sensations is not about disregarding or ignoring whatever is arising at the moment. It's not about trying to block or even to remove whatever the sensation is. Working with our sensations is about learning to reel in our mind from the torrent of thoughts that arises after a sensation is perceived.

Because we have no experience in working with our sensations, this process can seem a bit difficult at first. To work with our sensations we need to start with stabilizing our mindfulness and meditative awareness by watching our breath as we've done in the last chapter.

Once we've [anchored our attention in the breath](#), we begin with one of our senses.

Let's start by working with our hearing.

Begin to be aware of the sound of the breath if that's possible for you. Notice the subtle shift of the sound of the in-breath and the sound of the out-breath.

Allow the attention to receive the sound and, expanding the field of attention now, include other sounds in the body, sounds in the room, and sounds outside the room, not reaching out for sounds, but receiving sounds as they occur in each moment, aware too of the silence as it occurs between the sounds.

Notice any tendency to judge sounds, and returning to simply be with hearing, expanding awareness to embrace sounds, as they occur, moment to moment.

As you sit, just listen to all of the sounds that are around you. Notice them come into your awareness, *without following them*. This means that you simply observe them as you would the clouds.

Don't focus on sounds, simply allow your mind to recognize them without following them, without saying, "Oh, that's a bird...car...vacuum cleaner...etc." Just leave all that you hear in the realm of hearing, without following it or making more thoughts about it.

When (if?!) you become distracted, come back to the breath as your anchor, and practice watching your breath, without following your thoughts.

Next, try working with what you see. To begin with, you can sit at home, someplace neutral, where a lot of visual distractions won't be present.

Just get used to sitting, mind at ease, observing whatever you're seeing, without commenting, thinking, or analyzing what you see.

Allow all that you see to come into your awareness but without any commentary, without any judgment.

Don't focus on any one thing that is in your visual field, simply and lightly rest your gaze on all that is within your vision.

When you become distracted, come back to the breath as your anchor, and practice watching your breath, without following your thoughts. Then go back to the exercise.

After you get used to this, you may want to push the envelope. Try going to a public place, where people are coming and going.

Try to people-watch, and sit without thinking about who or what you're seeing. (This can be really fun!)

Just watch as people and objects come into your line of sight and, without commenting, thinking, analyzing – just see all that is, as it is.

Like clouds passing in the sky, just leave all that you see within the realm of seeing, without making more thoughts about it.



Challenge Number Three: Emotions!

In the previous two chapters, we've discussed how to work with our thoughts and with our senses while practicing meditation.

Once we've gained some stability in working with our mind and with the thoughts and sensations that arise, we'll notice that they can come and go rapidly, and that given some space and distance, they'll disappear back into the landscape of the mind.

But, what about emotions? Strong emotions can feel like tidal waves, washing over us, knocking us from any sense of stability that we may have around our meditation practice.

I know that when I feel strong anger or fear, all of the meditation practice that I've ever done can be challenged, and one moment's instant of strong emotions can leave me doubtful in its wake, feeling like all that I've worked to accomplish has come to ruin (which, by the way, is still only a thought, however real it feels!)

Emotions are the hard-wiring, feeling-based connection that we keep with the rest of the world. They're what tells us when we need to flee or fight. They're what we use to survive. That's kind of why they're there; they're evolutionary. It's our emotions that tell us that there's danger, "Oh, saber tooth tiger...run!!"

The problem is, we no longer encounter saber-tooth tigers but our survival response is still hard at work, although in the present case, it's more like, "Oh, fight with spouse (or partner)...run!" Or, "fight!" Or, whatever.

Do we want to extinguish our emotional responses? Can't that leave us open to dangers and threats to our integrity?

Solution:

For most of us, actual threats to our body are very, very rare. Yet, we still go about our lives in ways that appear as though we are protecting our very lives when we encounter threats. These “threats” can be criticism of our work, judgement about our parenting, or even someone taking the parking spot that we thought was “ours.”

Even if our very life is in danger, *our emotional response, without using logic and reasoning, can lead us into the very danger that we are hoping to avoid.* In fact, presence of mind during an emergency can be learned through meditation, helping us to rid ourselves of reactive patterns which may be detrimental to the situation.

Okay, so how do we work with our emotions?

Before we decide to jump into the deep end, it makes sense to practice in an environment where there are fewer “dangers” in the event that we can’t work with a particular emotion.

Try working with the following exercise, bearing in mind that working with emotions can *feel like* the most difficult challenges to meditation. As this experience of challenge arises, be kind with yourself, and remember that even the unkindness that we experience when we realize that we’ve strayed from our practice is temporary and will change.

As in all of our previous practices, find a comfortable position to be in, even for a few minutes, where you can be undistracted and as relaxed as possible. Start by briefly attending to your breath, bringing your attention back to the breath when you become distracted.

The following exercise may stir up some uncomfortable emotions; it's meant to. Just be with whatever arises, as you have learned to be with the different thoughts that arise within your mind.

After finding some stability within your mind using the breath as an anchor, think back to a time when you felt strong sadness, jealousy, or anger. Do this in a gentle manner at first, letting the feeling arise slowly. You may find that anger or sadness are the easiest emotions and feelings to invoke. If it becomes too much at any time, let it go and come back to the breath.

Take some time to remember an incident or time when strong emotions were present and when you felt swept away or affected by them.

Now, as vividly as possible, open up more and let this memory flood your body and your mind. Feel the feelings; let the physiology of the moment enter you to a level that feels like you can be with it and deal with it. Feel what it felt like when you were angry, jealous, or sad.

Be with the feelings. Be with the emotions. Remember, become keenly aware that all of this is happening in your mind, nowhere else. In a way, really “get into” this exercise by drawing the emotions that you felt into the present and seeing how dramatically you can affect your present state of mind and body *without getting lost in the thoughts and emotions!*

Remain with this exercise for as long as you are comfortable doing so. Return to the breath if you become distracted. Return to the remembrance of your compassionate nature if you get stuck in the emotions. Return to a realization that everything is transient, temporary, almost illusory and that anything that you may be feeling at present is without substance.

Stay with the exercise for a few minutes.

And then, just relax in the vividness of this moment, dropping all methods, allowing the thoughts to move through your mind without grasping after or following them.

KEY POINT TO REMEMBER: Even the thoughts that arise when you're experiencing a strong emotion can be material to work with!!

Once you've gained some confidence in being able to work with your emotions, see how well you can work with them when they arise in different situations. Even if you can't control your emotions, even if you still respond in your habitual ways, see if you can remember that you're wrapped up in your emotions. The fact that you're aware of your emotions is a great start!

For working with the breath, you can download: [Riding the Breath With the Mind](#)

As always, feel free to [contact me directly](#) if you have any questions, need clarification on the methods presented here, or would like to see other topics presented.

Challenge Number Four: Sleepiness!



Oh my gosh, do I need to sleep!

Why am I so sleepy?

Was I meditating or sleeping?

I don't know how many times I've said any or all of these things to myself while trying to meditate. I've started my session doing everything that I needed to; gotten myself a glass of water, made sure that the phone was out of reach, opened up some space in my calendar. Perfect! I sit down to start practicing, and the next thing I know, instead of realizing some great depth of my mind, I'm nodding off...or even dreaming!?

When we feel sleepy during meditation, there are many possibilities of what may be going on. First off, we may just be exhausted from our endless number of things that we're attempting to do...all at once. Or, the sleepiness that we experience may be our mind and our habits rebelling against our sudden interest in working to change them.

In a very real sense, the experience of sleepiness can be our ingrained resistance to looking at what's really going on in our mind, to "waking up." We've discussed in previous posts how [thoughts](#), [sensations](#), or [emotions](#) can catch our attention when we're trying to meditate. In fact, as we often find out, *our thoughts may become even more pronounced*, appearing to be more numerous than before, once we turn our attention towards them.

When we encounter sleepiness during our meditation practice, we may attempt to resist it. But when we do, we find that the sleepiness that once arose as a wave now becomes a flood. Sensing our impending doom, we succumb to the natural impulse to sleep, and promptly nod out, sitting up, with our head "bobbing for apples," giving us minor whiplash each time our chin heads towards the floor.

Solution:

While this may sound strange, the sleepiness that we encounter during our meditation is no more real or substantial than our thoughts are. With thoughts, if we allow them to simply rise without grasping onto them, they'll simply fade away, back into our mind. In the same way, *assuming that we aren't sleep deprived and sometimes even if we are*, when sleepiness occurs during meditation, if we simply allow it to "be," without fighting it, returning our attention to our breath or an object of focus, the sleepiness can fade away as quickly as it came.

What we do is to simply notice that there's sleepiness and return our attention to the object of our meditation, perhaps the breath or an image. Giving no more weight to our sleepiness than to a passing cloud in the sky, we resist the temptation to focus on it, and allow it to pass as a mere arising of the mind.

I know that this works! I've tested it many times because I've fallen asleep while meditating, even while receiving teachings on meditation and the mind, and I know how hard I've worked to not fall asleep at these times. What I've found repeatedly is that if I'm not just genuinely over-the-top exhausted, I can regain my meditative awareness – sometimes very quickly – if I don't resist the feeling of sleepiness.

Just like working with our thoughts, sensations and emotions, working with sleepiness may take time. Try it. Practice it. See what works. See what doesn't work.

Summing it All Up:



What do we do next?

Once we've begun to use our knowledge of meditation and techniques and methods which promote our practice, the only thing left to do it to...practice (of course!) But, what does "practice" mean? Does it mean sitting for hours a day, isolated from the world, working with our mind? Does it mean lighting incense and reciting mantras? Does it mean ignoring our family and spending all of our time on the cushion, couch, floor...

We begin practice by *creating time for ourselves*, away from our daily routine, to work with our mind. But, this doesn't have to take hours; it can take minutes!

What is most important is that when we practice, we treat it as something that we're doing to benefit ourselves as well as those who we interact with, our spouse or partner, children or parents, peers, boss, employees...anyone. That's because, as we are more able to deal with and be present with whatever arises, we're also more likely to be present with those who we interact with. We're more likely to show up fully present, and to be able to deal with any challenges with others.

Most important: practice, practice, practice.

One we've gained some stability in our practice, then our lives become the foundation for our practice. We do many, short sessions – one or two minutes – throughout our day, taking any free time that we find ourselves with to strengthen our meditation.

As a support, I encourage you to download the scripts for watching the breath and thoughts from my website. You can also download audio files of these scripts to listen to. Then, please drop me a line or comment and let me know how this works for you. Is it easier than you'd thought it would be? Do you get stuck in certain thoughts?

May this short ebook bring you some benefit and may it help you along your path. May any good that comes from you having read these words ripple to others within your life and those you come in contact with and may that good spread.

Links

- [Anchoring the Awareness of Emotions in the Breath](#)
- [*Can Meditation Change the Way that You View Your World?*](#)
- [Anchoring the Awareness of Emotions in the Breath](#)
- [Using Thoughts During Meditation as the Object of Meditation](#)
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