

# 2015-11-01 Distraction And Attention

Thu, 9/17 11:19PM • 40:36

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

attention, people, distracted, distraction, settled, freedom, desires, distractibility, hank aaron, mind, awareness, buddhism, happening, concentration, important, present moment, focus, jumping, love, ping

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So good morning. And can you hear me all right, everyone? Not enough. So I hope that especially those of you who needed it, got an extra hour sleep last night. I read recently that number of traffic accidents go down and turn it up a little bit. So is it off out there? Is it all just nice low? So let's see is that Yeah, I always sit and wait to hear if it's louder, but I have to talk. So better. So I read that traffic accidents go down. The Monday after the fall daylight savings change. And they go up after the spring, the Monday after the spring daylight second change because people get less less sleep than I like to tell People that America as a whole Americans need sleep more than they need meditation.

So some of you know, I track these things that one of the famous baseball players of the American baseball players died recently Yogi Berra. And there's a Yogi Berra story of it was a World Series and Yogi Berra was a catcher. And so the opposing team, Hank Aaron, was one of the greatest American batters was a pro bat. And so part of Yogi Berra, his job where he took his job was, he would try to distract the opposing batters. So he told Hank Aaron, that when he came up to swing he said, Oh, you're holding the bat wrong.

And the copyright needs to be facing you. You know, I guess, I guess the copyright or something on that. And so anyway, so the pitch came and Hank Aaron hit a home run. And so he ran around the bases and he came back to Yogi Berra. And he and Hank Aaron said to Yogi Berra, I didn't come up here to read.

So, you know, he didn't get distracted. So, it's been said many times now that we live in an age of distraction. And so part of the task if this is true for all of us is to become wise about distraction, and how distraction works. And one of the great places to study that is in meditation but distraction Both a problem. And distraction can be used wisely. It's important part of life. It's a problem when it fragments us and makes us more unsettled. It supports us when it brings us together and helps us to become settled. So if we're very stressed out, and contracted and tight, sometimes distraction actually helps. And people use that sometimes to say, the stressor, and take our attention off what we're kind of preoccupied about. And sometimes people are, you know, it's the very act of being distracted that keeps the mind kind of in a loop of tightness and anxiety and distractibility and kind of jumping around and it's kind of alienating from ourselves. And so to be able to notice the difference and know how to you how, you know, how these things work as part of the I think a wise life The You know, the word distract, in Latin means to, to draw apart. So, you know, we, our attention is drawn away from what we want to focus on perhaps. But also there's a way I think of it as if we were kind of fragmenting ourselves. One of the great challenges of our lives is having multiple concerns jumping around here

and there grabbing onto things. The monkey mind that the Buddhism likes to talk about, where you grab for the next branch before you let go, the first thing is always grabbing grabbing for something. And then what are we the cost of that is that we're not holistic, we're not whole, our attention is partial. We're not settled in our body, the awareness is not coming out of a relaxed, open, inclusive place, but rather we're kind of have blinders on and, and sometimes when there's a lot of distraction We are in a mental distraction that only certain parts of our faculties intelligence is being used. I've heard of one teacher who tells his students, I think they think these are college students that have a stat British study psychiatric journal, he says that when people are texting while they're doing something else, or checking social media while doing something else, they're intelligent drops their IQ drops by 10%. And he tells his students that because he has an issue where the students constantly and I teach graduate classes sometimes and it's quite something to see people you know, they have their little devices and you know, wonder what's going on behind this devices. I mean, that either I'm saying brilliant things and they're keeping notes or they're, you know, they're being you know, focusing on different things. The, to the cost of distraction. You know, when we talk about the cost of distraction from accidents people have you know, we get distracted by a phone call, we get distracted by a text. And so we're full focus is not on things. There's a whole science apparently called interruption science. And that has to do with the study of how people's work work habits get interrupted at work, and how people are less efficient at work when they're constantly being interrupted by things. And one of the things to be interrupted by is the ping of notifications. And it was interesting you know, I was thinking about this and so there's a ping during our sitting today and it was interesting I you know, it's kind of fine to have it I didn't mind was this sound, but it made me reflect in the for a moment. That what a difference it was somebody else's Ping versus my Ping. And what happens in my brain, when I note recognize my device notification, there's a kind of impulse to check, there's a desire, there's a movement towards, whereas that, you know, is very neutral for me this ping that arose here in the hall. And I didn't activate anything in my mind, except this reflection that I just had.

So we understand our distraction. So one of the nice things about mindfulness practice is that we're really supposed to pay more careful attention to what's going on. And one of the things that goes on is distractibility, or the act of being distracted. And so to study that, what happens to you, when you get distracted? You're focusing on one thing, and you're no longer focusing on it because your attention is drawn somewhere else. As you do this study, and look One of the interesting things to consider is the very way we talk about this stuff to being distractible because sometimes we used to very often use the passive voice. I was distracted by, you know, as if I'm not responsible. You know, you know, struggling but you know, I was just, you know, it was just a TV show. You know, I was distracted by the TV show, you know, it's, don't you have any responsibility? And what would happen if instead of using the word distraction, we say, I gave my attention to your boss comes and says, Why aren't you working? I was distracted. You get it, maybe then you have a good excuse. But if you say, Oh, I get my attention to you know, your boss probably wouldn't be very happy then because it's that seems intentional. So to what degree is your distraction intentional If there's a sudden ping, you know, and you're distracted for the moment by that, that I think is innocent enough distraction, but then it's giving them yourself over to the ping giving your attention to note to to find out what what email was that what was going on there. If you're sitting if you're driving in your car, and you decided to give, you know, I was distracted by my TV show on my phone you know, I don't think that would go over well in court. I think that the understanding that you gave your attention over to it. But so why do we give our attention over what what do we Why do we allow ourselves to be distracted by things and, and so we don't really keep a primary focus on what we're doing. And one of the things is anxiety. Some people are anxious. They're worried Worried and so, the searching and wanting of something for safety for security for some answer some solution to the anxiety anxiety is a known kind of motivator for a jumping mind is searching mind. And other is desire. There can be various, we want something, and we want it we want comfort, we

want solutions. We want entertainment we want we want sometimes we want distraction from things. And what I've noticed in my own mind, if I spent too much time, surfing the web, and moving kind of quickly through things that my mind gets in kind of a habit of searching of wanting. And I don't even you know, the rest of me doesn't want anything. I'm content, but this certain kind of energy in the mind keeps going. And it's sometimes I've noticed that it just kind of wants to go for it out of habit almost like let's keep Let's stay here and keep searching but must be more things on the web to look at. Doo doo doo doo No searching and checking. And it's not very settled, it's not very relaxed. For me, it brings all my attention up to my blood up into my brain, I feel like center of gravity is in a cognitive world, in my eyes, and there's this kind of kind of this kind of drive to search to want, that goes on. And I suspect I'm not the only one who has this experience with the web, but I'd be very happy to find out I was the only one. And then knowing that everyone's you know, safe from this tendency.

And so anxiety, desire wanting is part of it. And what happens is when we stay in active mode of constant distraction, constantly jumping around and doing things, easily pulled by things that pull our attention left and right. And is that we become kind of alienated from ourselves, we come up a part from ourselves. We don't really connect it to ourselves. And I think of distractibility or distraction as a cognitive function of what we do with our kind of our, our, our ears or eyes or our mind. And so, only part of us is kind of activated and if it's done too much work often too much in the head. And a big part of Buddhist attention. Mindfulness is to help us be settled in our whole being our whole body, and so that our awareness is holistic and whole rather than fragmented or narrow or have blinders on. So we can be settled when we do things. It's said that most people are much more creative and intelligent, when they're relaxed and settled, or be better able to problem solve, when we have settled in ourselves. If we're anxious and jumping around and easily distracted by things or distracted by our own mind, it's much harder to To be wise and what's going on. So, what I thought I would do is just talk to you a little bit about five different elements of attention, if you want to have a holistic attention. Buddhism holds forth five different parts of this what attention is or what contributes to holistic attention. And to have any one of these in isolation kind of leads to certain kind of imbalance. So, the, these five are those of you know the Pali words. It's, well, I'll give you the English so it's mindfulness, concentration, clear comprehension, wisdom, and letting go. Those are five elements that are very important part of knowing how to pay attention well. And so the first mindful This is the way these things are talked about by people sometimes get, you know, in different books or different teachers, they all kind of get mixed up or they kind of overlap each other. So it's Monday. So this is my way of presenting today. So mindfulness is the basic capacity to have present moment attention, for the awareness to be available for the present moment. Settled awareness, open awareness to what's going on. And so that takes quite some doing for people whose mind are not in the present moment, if we spend a lot of time thinking about the future thinking about the past. And it's also quite a bit ideal if the attention is not settled. If people are jumping around a lot with attention, even though they're in their present moment. You know, the monkey mind is operating and scanning and wanting and doing a lot. So the ability to have settled awareness, I think of this awareness as being something that arises out of the body more than something that arises out of the brain. And certainly has a cognitive side and probably the, the brain, in fact, is a huge component part of what it all entails. But all our nerve endings ending so we have throughout the body, or you know, the antennas for awareness to pick things up. And so to be settled and relaxed and have the sense of awareness or perception or arise out of the body, rather than now the mind is, I think, makes awareness much more holistic and much easier to be relaxed. When I first started practicing, many years ago, if someone had asked me where awareness resides, I would have pointed to my head, the top of my head. After 20 years of practice, maybe I don't know how long someone asked me st where Awareness resides, I would have pointed pointed to my torso. And that's kind of where the center was. And now if someone asks me, you asked me, I would just spread my arm arms really wide and just say here. It's almost like it's not localized, but it's all inclusive of everything

here. And so when for me, if my awareness goes too much in the head, then it actually feels like my world has got the smaller and as awareness opens up, that world tends to be much more open or spacious or I become bigger and more open or something.

So to cultivate present moment awareness, but that's not enough. That's not all that we attention is. And the second thing that is important in Buddhism is focused awareness or what's called sometimes concentration. And this is the ability to choose something useful to pay attention to and maintain The focus there. And as some people know, in ordinary life, that one of the great joys of life is to be absorbed in an activity. And to really give ourselves over and become one, my wife is telling me stories today, this weekend about her reading his book, The boys in the boat. And some of you may be writers about this person who one was in a crew of crew on a rowing boat in 1930s Olympics. And so she's reading about how these, that this, they, they fall into this zone with these eight, nine crew members, they have to be very strong, and they have to be very motivated, self motivated people, and they have to row exactly in sync and says pay very careful attention to what's going on, and they can't pay too much attention to the race. Because that's the job of the what's the person who's attending In the back, the color the color, Coxon. Yeah. And when they really get into the groove of really focus, it brings a certain kind of high and in many situations that you have fully giving yourself over to an activity and really being able to focus on it is kind of play and I think of so I think of the word concentration for me and Buddhism evokes the connotations of play. It doesn't some people it arises connotations of work. But for me, it's more like play so it's more like you enter into this absorption this video, we'll focus to give yourself over to something fully to what you're doing and just settle on that. So, that ability to stay focused and keep your attention there for sometimes for some time. The you know as as technology stuff becomes bigger and bigger in our society There are people who now are discovering that they have to actually take time, like an hour or something at work, where they turn off all their devices except maybe their work on their computer. So they can have uninterrupted work for an hour, something different happens to the mind, body to our creativity, or engagement when we when our work is uninterrupted. So concentration has resources, quality, being uninterrupted focus on particular thing. And so that's one aspect of attention, concentration. And in Buddhist practice, it's strongly emphasized the cultivation development that that capacity. There are some educators and psychologists now who are concerned that as people grow up now in the modern climate, that the neural connections needed for concentration are not being developed. Because of this technology, being on the web, being on the computer and Facebook and all these things that people are Social media that their mind is jumping around a lot. And they're not staying long enough with one thing is crucial time in the teenage years where these neural connections can be made. So they can develop greater capacity of control. So they can stay focused and concentrated in what they're doing. And one of the reasons why this is important is I don't know much about this field of the brain research. But this what I've read is that they say that the places where we're in the brain where we can choose to have our attention to focus our attention, is the same part of the brain that have to do with emotional regulation. So when we when there's strong emotional experiences, the ability to handle those and to be wise for those and not be caught by them. There's a lot to do with our ability to be strong attentional capacity and concentration is important part of this ability to get concentrated.

The next part of attention is comprehension. And that is gathering information from what we are aware of. So not just being aware and letting sense data and experience just kind of come randomly and not really let it register. But let things register so we clearly comprehend what it is. So if you feel an itch, you recognize it's an itch. If you hear a sound you recognize that's a dog barking perhaps. Or if you feel tight in your shoulders, you recognize it as tightness. So there's a clear so this clear comprehension is a very important part of Buddhism, you clearly understand clearly see clearly cognize recognize what it is that's happening in the present moment. And there's a lot of information in the present moment. And

so you have to also become wise about what information you're gathering. At a certain point in Buddhist practice. Teachers have actually encouraged people to gather particular kinds of data and their experience. So for example, pay, Gather, Gather together information. If you're breathing and you're and attentions of your body gathered together, you know that the starts start noticing how things are changing the changing nature of things. To have clear comprehension of change is a little bit different than just be aware of things. Oh, things are, there's a constant flux and change in my experience in what's going on clear comprehension of intention. So knowing not just you know that what's happening in the moment, but our intention, what's what we're towards what's happening, our relationship to what's happening. So to have understanding this level of clear comprehension in the tradition is meant to be very rudimentary, very simple, that just see it for what it is. It's more like field notes. That was what it is. It's the it's the function of the next attentional element, wisdom that begins to have more understanding of what's there. So analysis, perhaps occasionally understand the context, understanding the consequences that process the cause and effect relationship of things. is the function of wisdom to understand better, what aspect of the present moment experience we pay attention to? What? What is it that's useful to do? It's a function of wisdom to understand. Do we need more mindfulness here? Do we need more concentration here? Do we need more clear comprehension here? Is this a time to contemplate and to reflect a little bit more deeply about what is going on here? To consider what's happening here and what's useful here. My leg fell asleep during the city. It doesn't happen that often to me, but I think I was sitting a little bit funny when my Christian so it fell asleep. So I decided that the right thing to do was to the wise thing to do was to reflect and contemplate on this. What's the nature of this falling asleep in this pain? Is this something I should be concerned about? Or is this something that's maybe just fine to have, and it'll pass as soon as the city over and, and, you know, where am I pinching a nerve or what's going on here? So I spent a minute or two kind of really paying attention to that. And I decided, I think it's okay. And it's uncomfortable and I could change but maybe this is a nice opportunity for me to learn to be mindful and focused on discomfort. You know, it's a nice thing. And so I didn't move until this you know, just sitting was over. So, wisdom is an important part and, but the wisdom part is can be sometimes contemplative analytical. And some people spend too much time analyzing too much time thinking about things and they think that attention is thinking about things. But thinking is thinking and analysis is only one component part of the overall kind of mandala of retention and the last that have the attentional element Important thing that's that's yoked or connected to attention in Buddhism is letting go. So learning to let go, of, of unuseful places for our attention to go learn to let go of desires and impulses, their intellect go aversions and doubt doubts that we might have learning to have some power over the tendencies of the mind. So we're in control rather than the mind is under control.

Rather than having our distractions manage us, we wouldn't be able to manage our distractions. And so, if what the point is to focus on a particular task, and the mind keeps wanting to come somewhere else, and learn to let go of that, other things so we can stay focused here, develops the capacity to have more freedom develops a capacity to be able to let go and this whole world of letting go learning to let go is a hugely important topic in Buddhist practice. And to give you one little sense of how it might be important is that you know, we've you know, it's popularly said that all these devices people have or keep people distracted keep people in a different world. But if you look at your you come to you're walking down the street and you come to red light, you need to cross the street, but it's red, right? just turned red smear red for 30 seconds or a minute. I mean, that's a long time and your precious life. And so, you know, so you have greater control over your own life, greater power over your own life. If you don't just sit there as a victim of having to wait to light the light to turn green mean What a drag. You know, if someone had someone else some city planners in charge of your life You just sit there and and, you know, it's your life's pretty limited then. And so a way of kind of, you know, being empowered and autonomous and kind of to take care of yourself is you pull out your smartphone you know, and just



you know, and it brings a certain pleasure and certain delights are thinking of taking care of business in your life. It's a great great moment those 30 seconds and you check your check your phone. So, there's, you know, if we analyze, why do we do things like that? Why do we allow ourselves to get distracted or have attention jump around? might be some really good arguments in your brain of why you Why, why, why you think it's so important, but what's lost in the process? And what would happen if we let go of the impulse to check the smartphone standing there? Is there something gained Is there something gained by staying In the present moment, your experiences here now is it is the opportunity to stand there in the street corner waiting for the light to change and opportunity to get settled into your body to kind of relax and keep attention.

Keep develop is open capacity for awareness, relaxed awareness, rather than awareness which is taken hijacked by our desires or wants of all we have to do. So, as I like to say, in America, there's a very strong emphasis on freedom. And one of the forms of freedom that we emphasize is the freedom to do something. So the freedom to vote tomorrow, Tuesday, the freedom to, to, to religion, the freedom to assembly, the freedom to bear arms, important for some people a lot of freedoms to do something and you know, it's not And not enshrined in the Constitution, but an ideal would be the freedom to shop. You know, for people have a lot of desires for things that you know, if you were given an unlimited credit card, someone said here it's a gift, this unlimited amount of money on this credit card you can use whatever way you want to wear for the rest of your life. That'd be wouldn't be great. You know, all your every desire, you'd be the freedom to act on every desire that required money, or what a freedom right? The Buddhist analysis says, the freedom to act and our desires as important as it is not to be sometimes limited. But the freedom to access your desires is a very different freedom than the freedom to not act on our desires. Because if your desires are compulsive, there is no freedom. If you have compulsive desires, and your act and you have free ability to act them, it can feel good. It feels like you know, there's no limits, you feel this expansivity and it's all good. But it's not real freedom in Buddhism actually says you're enslaved then by those desires if you're acting or compulsions, even if you have a free access to it, but to have the freedom from desire, where the desires arise, but you let go of them, where there's no tendency to pick them up, preserves, and more likely can preserve an ease of mind or can help you find a subtleness of mind or being at home here. A deep contentment. Here now, that can't be found, if we're shopping all the time. I've, I've heard of college students who are listening to lectures in college, and this is why maybe some of my students are doing spidered but I don't check and they're shopping. They're on Amazon. You know, it seems like you know it's uh you know, it's what's been what's what's driving that.

So an undecided undistracted attention to learn how to cultivate non distractibility doesn't mean that our attention doesn't pick up what's going on in our environment tension doesn't move around to different things. It means we don't get lost in those things, that we maintain a freedom. We're in the middle of our attention. There's a sense of freedom and attention, freedom, how we use attention, a clear understanding of what's happening to our attention, that we are the masters of our attention. That attention our capacity for attention is one of the most precious treasures that we that we have. Buddhism calls it a wealth and if you really They want to be well, they cultivate a strong capacity of attention. And so you might if you kind of as you go about your life and practice, you might take at some time to study. On one hand, study what happens when you get distracted? What are the forces inside of you? What's happening inside of you when, when you get distracted? What are the conditions that are present in your mind your heart, when you're easily distracted? how useful it is, is it for you? How about it? How much do you benefit from being distracted and having your tension jump around? Is there something isn't an alternative, and that one alternative that Buddhism champions is the alternative of having settled, liberated attention. And if what you want is to discover a settled liberated attention, and these five elements of attention are worth paying attention To mindfulness, concentration,

comprehension, wisdom, and letting go. And how those five work together in harmony is part of the task of Buddhist meditator to have them all working in harmony. So those are my thoughts this morning. We have about six minutes. If you'd like to ask any questions or if you'd like to distract me with some other topic.

All the way in the back. Is there a mic there, the back there, we can pass back there.

Thank you for this topic this morning. I just want to mention that I read an article and there is new software called freedom, which you can put on your computer that will completely block Any sites you want to block or block the internet completely, so that you can work with that distraction. Nice.

Freedom.

Nice. Look up here in the front is there.

Thank you. Hello. Thank you very much for the talk. And so I have an app called forest where you can grow trees instead of looking at looking at other websites. But the question I had was, I've been watching

hindrances I think they are.

And so a question that came up for me was, how do I believe or why should I believe love more than I? Well, like these strong things that come up, some of them are very unpleasant. So that easy to disbelieve. Yeah. But there are some things that come up that are very pleasant.

So in the realm of ill will, no. The question is, why should I believe love more than it will? Yeah

So it's a great question. I guess I said something recently like that, right? He sort of you you're, you're holding me accountable? If, but, but, you know, can I turn it back on you? since, since it's an important question for you to ask? Why would a person believe ill will more than love maybe to do with their experience, please.

So that there's some confusion because if the experiences is more of one than the other, than which is real

See, unless the cultivation issue I think, which do I kill? I wish to cultivate more love, but I've, if I'm feeling a lot of do I believe it?

Yeah, so some people grew up with a lot of ill will around them and they just think that's where that's real. That's what's supposed to be that's that's how you make yourself safe. That's how you make connections with people. That's just how it's how it's done. And so there's a lot of positive reinforcement for the value of it. Some people find themselves in situations of danger, and the expression of ill will of anger for example, the hostility of a strong enough protects them. And so it's very, very effect can be very effective in the short term to protect one or get get what you want. You can intimidate people and it's can be very rewarding to intimidate people because you get what you want, maybe. And so that's it's reinforced through that way. So that's one of the reasons why but The the, My belief is that we so we have to learn how to take care of ourselves well, and an ill will implies hostility. There can be ferocious saying no, there can be ferocity, you know, of, you know, protecting yourself that doesn't have to involve any kind of hostility. And the, but why love? Why should we believe love more than ill will? I think in the

bigger picture for us love wisely, we become safer. If you lose my wife wisely, we're more deeply connected to ourselves. I think that hostility the will is kind of a very narrowing and tightening of our being. So that only part of us is settled. We're kind of disconnected from the wholeness of who we are. I can I associate Love with being home and connected, love that's healthier comes out of a relaxed, open, contented kind of feeling and presence, or at least and moves us in that direction more and more. And that in the long term, if we can act from love, we create more safety for ourselves and the world around us, rather than the short term benefits of ill will and hostility. So I'll give you one example of that. When I used, I didn't think I was using ill will, when my kids were young. I saw very occasionally used my strong voice. Sometimes I'd say, you know, I, you know, I'll have to once I said to my son, can you continue doing this I'm going to get angry. And I just said that, you know, I said my, you know, I try to say an ordinary tone of voice and he looked at me cocked his head and looked at me and said, Dad, you're already angry. But, but what I occasionally use a strong voice base, basically strong voice was to say, No, you can't do that, because the acting out the difficult challenge was so hard. And then one day I I heard my older son used that tone of voice on his younger brother. And I said, Oh, yeah, oh my god, what have I created? What have I done? I thought I was just taking care of an issue in the moment. But he learned how to behave from that. And I was horrified when I you know what happened. So, so, you know that the short term benefits of ill will are on the long term problems of ill will, or it's a short term benefits will are a lot less than long term harm that it causes. The short term challenges of learning how to Love is compensated by the long term benefits that can happen. I think it's just much better to love than to have hostility and they say it's better for your health. Great. So thank you for coming today and sitting here and I hope that this first day of our new time zone is nice for you. Thank you