Joyous Discernment

January 3, 2005

Mindfulness and alertness are two different things. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. And there are times when mindfulness gets in the way of alertness, which is a sign that it’s wrong mindfulness. You focus on one particular thing and that means you miss something else that you’re doing, something else is going on around you. This is especially clear when you’re preoccupied with something and you miss things because they’re not in the radar of your particular preoccupation. This is one of the things we have to watch for as meditators. We get locked into a particular idea. This is particularly true as your powers of concentration grow. You find it easier and easier to get locked into one particular groove, a particular set of views, a particular idea of what the practice should be. And that, more than anything else, blocks insight. This is one of the reasons why we need teachers, we need somebody from the outside. Because it’s internal and external for the rising of insight, on the internal level it’s appropriate attention, learning to ask the right questions. In other words, framing your mindfulness in such a way that you don’t miss what’s going on, that you really can be alert. And on the outside, this is the voice of another person, someone who calls attention to the fact that you’re not paying attention. This can be either on an external or an internal level. I noticed when I was with Ajahn Fuang, he would often get impatient with me because I was missing things that he saw very clearly. Things on the external level, things that I was doing, things that were happening around me that I wasn’t noticing, and the purpose being to get me to notice. As meditators, we have to be very quick to see what’s going on in our minds. Because many times, a very simple question of subtle defilement can come in very quickly and you hardly notice it. You’re paying attention to something else, but there isn’t, say, an element of desire or an element of irritation that you’re missing. That plants a seed and it grows. This is why quickness is an important quality to develop as a meditator. We’ve seen many pictures of people doing mindful walking. It’s all very slow. It gives the idea that mindfulness is doing things slowly. But the mind doesn’t move slowly, even when you’re walking slowly. It can move very fast. And it’s not the movement of your feet that’s the problem; it’s the movement of your mind. So try to develop the habit of being mindful. Being quick to notice what’s going on around you, quick to notice the results of your actions. When you develop that habit on the external level, then it’s easier to see things on the internal level. Because when you’re working on the internal level, there’s no voice from somebody else to tell you what to do. Or even if there are voices that you’re hearing, they’re not necessarily voices you can necessarily trust. So try to develop the habit of being quick, alert, and not just locked into one way of looking at things. Because when you get into that one way of looking at things, locked into that particular groove, your defilements figure it out pretty quickly, and they find ways to avoid your line of sight. So the greed, anger, and delusion can still arise, even though they’re not appearing in your line of sight. They’re off to one side. But that’s the way the mind always is. When it’s going to play tricks on itself, it tends to find ways of getting out of the line of sight. This is one of the reasons why we emphasize so strongly the development of a 360-degree awareness. When you’re sitting and meditating, try to work toward a full awareness of the whole body, and then try to maintain that kind of all-around awareness. You’ll find that even in that 360-degree awareness, there’s probably 359 degrees. There’s one degree where things are still a little hidden. You’ve got to watch out for it. It’ll move. Today it’s one degree, and a few minutes later it’s going to be another degree. And if you’re not quick, you don’t catch the movements of these things in the mind. And when you don’t catch those movements, you can sit and meditate to your dying day and you won’t see anything. Everything will seem very quiet. There’s a famous Zen saying about the monk whose mind was very solid. His meditation was like a mountain. Everything was very still. Then he went to see his teacher and asked, “Is there still any ignorance left?” And the teacher said, “A whole mountain’s worth.” Because it is possible to be concentrated, to be mindful of one thing in such a way that you block out huge areas of awareness. So always be on the lookout for areas that you haven’t been noticing. And try to be quick enough to develop this habit of being quick. And John Foon used to force it by giving me a job to do and demanding that it be done well and quickly. Develop the kind of attitude that’s needed in the meditation. You do the meditation well, but you do it quickly as well. Don’t let the mind just settle down over the course of a whole hour. Say you’re giving yourself two hours to meditate. You say, “Oh, I’ve got a whole hour for it to settle down, and then once it’s settled down, I’ve got a whole hour of stillness.” Try to make it as still as possible from the very beginning. That’s one way of checking to see, “Okay, where are these little movements going to come in?” The movements are not going to destroy your meditation. You can’t have a complacent attitude towards them. Then once it’s still, do everything you can to keep it that way. Have an all-around surveillance. Because it’s inevitable. There will be little things coming to sneak in, and if there’s any blind spot, that’s where they’re going to sneak in. So work on the alertness of your meditation in addition to the alertness of the mind. The all-around alertness. That way, your concentration really does become an effective way of seeing what’s going on in the mind, rather than something that simply blankets what’s going on in the mind. If it’s a blanketing kind of concentration, all it does is keep things still and under control for a while. But it never uproots anything. It’s like the kind of blanket that they use when they moisten the blanket and they put seeds in it and they top it over with another blanket. It actually becomes a great sprouting farm. That’s not the kind of concentration you want. You want to be as alert as possible and have your alertness all around, so it’s not simply funneled in one direction. It’s the alertness that makes all the difference in giving rise to insight, especially the kind of insight that can uproot things and lead to release. Those are the insights we want, the ones that are effective. They’re the ones that teach us new things, rather than the ones that simply confirm what we’ve already heard or already know. If the meditation simply confirms what you already know, how do you know that it’s true? If you’re not learning new things in the course of the meditation, after all, the Buddha said, “This is all about realizing the as-yet-unrealized, attaining the as-yet-unattained.” In other words, there have got to be new things that you’re learning that have new effects on the mind. And that can come only through all-around alertness, quick alertness. The Buddha termed this joyous discernment. There’s one passage where he says that Sarvabhuta has quick discernment, joyous discernment. In other words, it likes exploring things, it likes learning new things. It’s not simply sitting around waiting to have its old ideas confirmed. So develop the alertness that looks more quickly and looks in areas you didn’t look before, because that’s where all the new things lie.

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