May 31, 2024

Mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind, is an important quality to bring to any task. Even simple things like sweeping, cleaning up a place. You have to keep in mind what you’ve done, what you haven’t yet done. And what your purpose is, and what you’re doing. Otherwise you could sweep here, sweep here, and then get distracted by something, drop your broom, and forget totally that you intended to clean up the room or clean up, say, the area around the sala. So it’s important to keep in mind what you’ve done. When we meditate, it’s important that we bring mindfulness to what we’re doing as well, to remind yourself why you’re here. But it’s also important to remember that we’re not simply practicing mindfulness. We’re trying to practice right mindfulness. And that’s more than just keeping something in mind. It’s keeping some very specific things in mind and bringing other qualities to the practice as well. As the Buddha said, you try to be focused on the body in and of itself. You remain focused. In other words, you’re trying to stay with one object. That’s one of the things you remind yourself of. You’re going to stay here with a breath. You’re going to stay here with a body. And you’re trying to bring certain mental qualities as well, in addition to the mindfulness, alertness and hardness. What’s the breath like? Is the breath comfortable? Is it not comfortable? You want to be alert to this. It’s a quality of listening to what the body needs. It’s a quality of ardency, which is essentially right effort, remembering that there are skillful qualities and unskillful qualities, and you want to develop the skillful ones. There’s the desire here. It’s not simply just watching whatever arises and noting it and letting it pass away. If unskillful qualities come, you want to do what you can to get rid of them skillfully. And then you try to give rise to skillful qualities in their place. Mindfulness is important, because a lot of people misunderstand it. I think mindfulness is simply watching things. Whatever comes up, you just sit with it. But this quality of ardency means that you try to foster skillful qualities in the mind and try to get rid of unskillful ones. There’s an active side to the meditation. For instance, with anger. Anger comes up. You realize this is an unskillful quality, but you want to learn how to deal with it. You don’t want to throw yourself away, because it is possible that anger can come up, and you try to suppress it, and it just goes underground. In other words, you try to put an end to it without understanding it. So the skillful approach is to try to understand the anger. This means being willing to sit with it for a while, not simply because you’re going to learn how to be equanimous about the anger, but you want to watch it. You want to observe it. When it comes, why does it come? How does it come? Does it come in response to events outside, or do you go out looking for something to be angry about? Sometimes we get bored. We actually look for objects to be greedy about, objects to be angry about. You can’t blame the events outside. You were looking for trouble to begin with. That’s sometimes the way it is. Sometimes it is simply in response to something that happens. Quickly, unexpectedly, you’re not looking for anything to be angry about, but something arises that you really don’t like, and the anger flares up. As the Buddha said, if you want to understand something, you watch it arise, you watch it pass away. That means watching it to see why it arises, and when it passes away, why did it pass away? You have to watch these things over and over again. Then you look for the drawbacks. When the anger comes, exactly what does it do? What harm does it cause? Usually the harm is to yourself. There’s an image that you hear a lot. Anger is like picking up a hot burning coal to throw it at somebody. The minute you’ve picked it up, you’ve burned your hand. So you’ve got to look for the drawbacks. There’s a passage where the Buddha says to remind yourself that when you’re angry and you give in to the anger, you tend to do things that an enemy would like to see happen to you. You look ugly when anger distorts your features. You say stupid things thinking they’re smart. You destroy your reputation. Sometimes you destroy your possessions. You start throwing things. You may end up doing something that the law is going to hunt you down. All these things which would be very pleasing to your enemy. But simply looking at the drawbacks is not enough. You also have to look at the allure. Anger has a certain allure. Many people feel they’re really alive when they’re angry. They’re very restrained in their actions. All of a sudden, all the restraints are off. There’s a sense of energy that flows through them. There may be a sense of righteousness, a sense of superiority. As anger comes and goes, you want to see why the mind would want to get involved in the anger, to see what pleasure it takes out of it. Because if you don’t understand the pleasure, there’s no way you’re going to be able to get rid of the desire for anger. It’s the psychology that makes you like to go for anger. It’s only then that you can get to the fifth task, which is to see the escape, i.e., how to develop dispassion for the anger. Realize that you don’t really want to go there, that the drawbacks are really serious, and that the pleasure you get out of it is not worth the drawbacks. It’s a miserable pleasure. All of this comes under the quality of ardency. Ardency contains an element of discernment as well. Discerning what’s skillful and what’s unskillful, and what techniques might be used to foster skillful qualities in the mind and to get rid of unskillful ones. For instance, with concentration, it’s a similar sort of thing. You want to notice when it comes and when it goes. What kind of breathing helps the mind to settle down? If the breath can’t get the mind to settle down, what other topics will get it to settle down? You want to observe the mind, see what works and see what doesn’t work. What can you do to make the concentration more alluring? In other words, to get how to derive a sense of pleasure from it. Ultimately, you’re going to look for the drawbacks and the escape from concentration, too. But first, you’ve got to work on really getting attached to it. If you’re not attached to it, it doesn’t grow. As John Foong used to say, “If you’re not crazy about the meditation, it’s not going to develop.” It has to be the sort of thing that you want to do in every spare moment. As soon as you get a chance, you want to get back to the breath. See what new things you can learn about it. How to create a sense of ease in the body by the way you breathe. How to make sure the breath doesn’t get too long so that you destroy that sense of ease, or it’s not too short so that you don’t feel comfortable with the breath. Where to focus on the breath, how to observe it. All these things you have to experiment. You’re going to become more and more of an allure, so that you have this to overcome the allure of anger and greed and passion and lust and all the other unskillful qualities that have held an allure from the mind for so long. Right mindfulness includes all these qualities, not just the mindfulness ability to keep your meditation in mind or keep your overall purpose in mind. But also the alertness to watch what’s going on, when things arise, when things pass away, what it is you like about the anger when it comes, what the drawbacks of the anger are. You want to be alert to all these things, and you want to be ardent, in other words, develop the effort to be skillful, to have the desire to overcome unskillful qualities, not to give in to them, and to develop an affinity for skillful qualities in place. This is what makes the mindfulness right. And right mindfulness also has this quality of concentration, staying with one object continually as possible, so that right concentration does shade into right, excuse me, right mindfulness does shade into right concentration. So it all becomes one path. When they divide up the factors of the path into virtue, concentration, and discernment, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration are all what we call the concentration aggregate. They’re meant to work together. But it’s also important that they’re right, not just any old effort. Or any old mindfulness, or any old concentration. You’ve got to put them together in a way that makes them lead to a stronger right view, lead to more discernment, so that they really work in helping to unburden the mind. Because that’s what makes them right. That they really do work. So keep this in mind as you’re meditating, that you’re not just to watch whatever comes and goes. You’re watching what comes and goes with a purpose. Develop skillful qualities to the culmination of their development. See how far you can take them. So always keep that fact in mind.

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