Mindfulness - The Governing Principle

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One of the basic principles in meditation is set out in the first verse of the Dhammapada. All phenomena, all things you can experience, are directed by the mind. In other words, the mind is not just a passive recipient of things and then reacting to them. It actually shapes its experience. It’s the intention that you bring to an experience. It’s the perceptions, ideas, values that you bring to an experience that are going to influence what you see, what you hear, what you receive by all the senses. And then based on that, you shape things again. There’s hardly anything that’s unshaped by the mind. The only thing that’s really unshaped would be nirvana. So as long as we’re here in the world, we’re shaping things. And this is why we have to meditate, is to turn around and look at the mind to see what principles it’s using to shape things, what intentions it’s bringing to any experience. Because those intentions are going to determine whether you create suffering or turn things into a path to the end of suffering. Like right now, you’re sitting with your eyes closed, and basically you’re going to be here for an hour in pretty much the same position. And you could make this a really bad experience. Years back, we had a woman bring a friend of hers to a meditation session. And the woman, who was brought as a friend at the end of the session, said she had never seen so much in her life. So that is a possibility. You could be sitting here and suffering more than you ever did in your life. Or you could be taking what you’re experiencing in the body and the mind and turning it into a path to the end of suffering. That’s your choice. So look carefully at what your mind is doing and what intentions it’s bringing. We’re here practicing mindfulness, but it’s not just being open to whatever’s coming up. Mindfulness is basically keeping something in mind. It’s paired with alertness, which is noticing what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. And then there’s a third quality, ardency. You want to do it well, because you realize that if you don’t do it well, there’s going to be suffering. So those are the three qualities you want to bring here. The mindfulness that the Buddha said really governs things. It’s mindfulness. It’s what you’re remembering to bring. You’re sitting here with a breath, but you’ve got other things going on as well. You’ve got your perceptions of where your awareness is and what it means to focus your awareness. And how do you know that you’re focused with a breath? And you’ve got your perceptions of what a breath is, perception here being the mental image you have. And then you’ve got your memories of all the past meditation sessions you’ve had. You don’t want to be trying to run through these things all the time, because otherwise you’ll never be with a breath. But you do want to have these things at your fingertips, because they’re going to determine how you deal with a breath, how you relate to the breath, how you gauge what’s going on, and how you make improvements. Because we are here with that intention. We’re trying to turn things into a path. There is a goal that we’re aiming at, and that’s a big goal, which means we’re going to take some time. It’s going to require some time for us to reach it. So we have to deal with our attitudes that we’re bringing, how much we want to push things, how much we find pushing things helps, and to what extent pushing things doesn’t help, how much effort is too much effort, how much effort is not enough. These are things you want to learn how to read in your actions. That’s what alertness is for. The mindfulness is going to govern things. There’s a sutra where the Buddha says, “All things are rooted in desire, and they’re governed by mindfulness.” In other words, there has to be a desire to be here. Otherwise, if you didn’t have the desire to meditate, you’d be off someplace else. So you want to be clear about what your desire is. You’re here to deal with whatever suffering comes up and to try to detect ways you’re causing suffering that you haven’t seen before so that you can let go of them. You focus on the breath because it keeps you anchored in the present moment and gives you a sense of well-being while you’re here. Try to think of the breath not so much as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as energy flowing through the body. And it can flow anywhere—the head, the torso, the arms, the hands, hips, legs, feet. Notice where you find it most prominent. Let your attention settle there. And don’t try to control things too much or clamp down too much. Because if you do, it’ll make the blood flow unnaturally and the energy flow will be cramped. Allow things to flow easily, and you’re just there watching over things. Try to keep that in mind. That’s the beginning of right mindfulness. Because mindfulness, what you’re remembering, the memories, the active memories that you’re bringing to bear on any situation, those really govern what’s going to happen in that situation. If you’re sitting here with the desire for entertainment, there’s not going to be much entertainment, and then you get frustrated. If you’re here with the desire just to relax, you might find some relaxation, but then things begin to blur out. If you’re here with the desire, “Can we just get through this as fast as possible?” Again, you find the mind going into a space where it basically anesthetizes itself. It’s something called delusion concentration. It’s one of the reasons why we don’t have very long meditation sessions here as a group. When I was staying in Thailand, the monastery where I was ordained, we’d sit for an hour and a half, sometimes more, every night. And I noticed some of the people beginning to nod. That’s one of the signs that they were in delusion concentration. It’s a very nice, pleasant state. You’re not feeling any pain at all, but you’re not really clearly focused. And time passes really fast. And people who just want to get through a meditation session find it very easy to get into that state. So if you’re here just for comfort or relaxation, watch out. You’ll get the comfort or relaxation, but you won’t get much else. The right motivation is to be here with the desire to figure out what’s going on. First, that means getting the mind still. So you have to figure out how to get the mind still. Once it’s still, you want to make sure it doesn’t blur out. So how do you keep it awake? How do you keep it alert? These are some of the questions you bring to bear on this. So your mindfulness, which is already shaping your experiences throughout the day, becomes right mindfulness. It shapes in the direction you want to go. In other words, if there’s some quality of the mind that you know is good and you don’t have it, or it’s weak in your mind, you remember you want to strengthen it. Once it’s there, you remember you want to maintain it. Mindfulness is not just watching things arise and pass away. You realize there’s something you want to have arise, and once they’re there, they’re good, you want to make sure they don’t pass away. This is how mindfulness directs your effort. As for the various techniques and tricks of the trade, some of them you’ve learned from reading or listening. The fact that mindfulness, in the sense of memory, is such an important part of the meditation, this is why we have meditation instructions. You want to remember the instructions just enough so you can help the mind to settle down. And if it’s not settling down, you can sort through your techniques of the past, what’s worked, what hasn’t worked, and give it a try. If you find something that works, then you can put everything else aside and just stay with that for as long as it works. But you have to remember, you have to notice what’s going on, learn how to read things. This is an important part of the skill. You’ve heard things, you’ve read things. To what extent have you really understood them? To what extent do you know how to apply them? Well, it’s through trial and error. And trial and error requires that you remember to check. I’m trying something, and is it an error or not? Or am I trying it and getting good results? And how do you know? Well, you have to keep coming back again and again. So you recognize what good results are. You may have some preconceived notions, and it’s often wise to put those aside for the time being. But at some point you’ve got to figure out, okay, what is a good meditation session? What does it mean for things to work, to come together? That intuitive sense takes time, but it’s a question you want to ask yourself. You want to keep it in mind. Once you’ve got something good, what do you do to maintain it? How do you maintain that sense of balance without getting excited about the fact, “Wow, I’ve finally got something to work here? It’ll probably happen the first time.” But after a while you have to remember, once the mind gets settled in, how do you stay there and get very, very balanced, very precise? So these are some of the questions you want to keep in mind. The Buddha says that mindfulness is one of the factors that surrounds every other factor of the path. This is what he’s talking about. It’s his faculty of memory. You remember what right view and right resolve and all the other rights are, and then you remember what the wrong version says. And you remember that you want to give rise to the right version and abandon the wrong. If you’re sitting here and have no idea what you’re doing, just ask yourself, okay, what would be the right thing to focus on next? Stay with the body in and of itself, right here. Stay with the breath. Is the breath comfortable? If it’s not, what can you do to get it comfortable? When it is comfortable, how do you maintain it? The mind is constantly active in shaping its experience, so you want to remember how you do it well. And when you learn something new, you remember that, too. Not everything is going to be there in your memory. We’re here to explore. So as long as mindfulness is the governing factor, it’s going to be there. Do your best to make it right mindfulness. And the more you try to make it right mindfulness, if you’re observant, the more you understand what right mindfulness is. Then you’ll have a better and better governing factor here in your meditation as time passes, and as you get more experienced. Mind is better than the expert’s mind. It’s not always true. Sometimes the beginner’s mind shakes things out, gets rid of some old, musty ideas. But the expert mind is really an expert mind. It knows what to look for. It knows how to adjust things. It has an intuitive sense that the beginner just doesn’t have. So there’s a lot to be said for gaining experience. And bringing that experience to bear, to make it the governing principle as you sit here with the breath.

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