Mindfulness, Tranquility, Insight

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There are three qualities we bring to the practice of mindfulness. And the qualities are mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. And we do that on several levels. When you start out with the breath, that’s the first thing you’re keeping in mind, that you want to remember to stay right here. But that also comes under the larger framework of the Four Noble Truths, because that’s what you’re actually remembering, is that there are Four Noble Truths that explain what suffering is and why there’s suffering and how we can put an end to it. And each of those truths has a duty. When suffering comes up, you want to comprehend it. And part of comprehending it is seeing where it’s coming from. Once you see that, then you abandon that. That’s the duty with regard to the Second Noble Truth. The duty with regard to the Third Noble Truth is to realize it. In other words, to see that when you let go of craving, which is the cause of suffering, the suffering does go away. And then finally there’s the path, the qualities that need to be developed. So now, mindfulness and concentration are qualities we’re trying to develop. You want to remember that so that if the mind starts wandering off and sniffing at the flowers and looking at the birds and wandering all over the place, you have to remember you’ve got work to do. You’ve got to come back. Because you’re trying to develop the concentration and abandon the cause of suffering. Anything that gets in the way of the concentration right now would be counted as one of the causes. Those hindrances are craving sneaking in on you. Now, together with mindfulness, there’s alertness. Which basically means watching what you’re doing right now and seeing what results you’re getting. It’s not just an overall awareness of the present moment. It’s very focused on what you’re doing. Because what you’re doing is directly related to the cause of suffering. You’re not suffering because of things going on outside. You’re suffering because of things your mind is doing. So you want to be able to watch that, to see what’s happening. And then finally, there’s ardency, the desire to do this really well. This is a factor of right effort that gets folded into right mindfulness. Whatever your duties are, you’re going to do them. And you’re going to inspire yourself or motivate yourself to want to do them. That too has an effect. There’s an aspect of discernment, realizing that simply knowing the Four Noble Truths is not enough, or simply knowing what’s going on right now is not enough. The wisdom here lies in doing what you can to make things better, to get better at comprehending suffering, better at abandoning the cause, better at developing the path. So all three of these qualities have an element of discernment in them. One of the main teachings in terms of the Buddha’s explanation of suffering is that the mind is fabricating things under the force of ignorance. You want to bring knowledge to that process. And this is how you do it, watching it, remembering what right view teaches you, and wanting to act well in line with that. You see this in the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation, the first four steps. You start out discerning the breath, discerning variations in the breath, whether it’s long or short. And that can be expanded to being heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow, with the purpose of noticing how the breath has an impact on your experience of the body, your experience of the present moment as a whole. This is called the fabrication of your experience. And the next step is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, so you see even more clearly how the breath is having an effect on the body. And then finally, as the Buddha says, you calm the bodily fabrication. In other words, you calm the effect that the breath has on the body to make things feel lighter, more at ease. Then as you learn as you go through the other steps of breath meditation, there are different perceptions that can be applied, different ways that you can approach the breath to get things to calm down. But the important lesson here is you’re learning two things at once. You’re learning insight and you’re learning tranquility. Tranquility is in the calming. Insight is learning how to see things in terms of the process of fabrication. This is how you bring those two qualities together. As the Buddha said, when you get the mind into right concentration, it’s going to involve some insight and some tranquility. And then once the mind gets into deep concentration, that gives you the basis for even more insight and more tranquility. So all these things go together. It’s not like the Buddha taught a mindfulness practice and then a vipassana practice and then a concentration practice. The concentration is the practice you do. And the qualities of calming and the qualities of insight, those are the things that come along with it. As with so many things in the Buddha’s path, these qualities help one another along. But the Buddha never taught a vipassana technique. What he taught you was a technique of developing mindfulness to bring the mind into concentration. And at the same time asking the right questions. Notice when he tells you that if you’re having trouble getting tranquility in your meditation, you go to someone who’s good at tranquility and you ask them, “How do you get the mind to settle down? How do you bring it to oneness? How can you get it so it can indulge in a sense of well-being that comes from the tranquility?” If you feel that your insight is lacking, you go to somebody and say, “How do you view fabrications?” Notice those questions. It’s the way you frame the questions. Then you actually apply that to your own practice. You’re looking at the breath and you evaluate it. “How can I get the mind to settle down with the breath?” You’re aiming there for calm. If you ask yourself, “How can I see how the breath is having an impact on my sense of the body, how it’s having an impact on the mind?” That’s when you begin to see things in terms of fabrication. So again, the two go together. It’s simply a matter of emphasis. But in the back of the mind, what you’re always remembering is that you’ve got those four noble truths and each of them has a duty. And that duty is going to determine where your ardency is going to go. The Mahasattipatthana Sutta talks about part of mindfulness practice, and the sutta is so long that many people assume that it talks about the whole practice. But the way the Buddha frames the questions around the sutta show that he’s only talking a slice of the practice. Take the formula for staying with the body as your frame of reference. He says, “You remain focused on the body, in and of itself ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” That’s the whole formula. What he explains in the Mahasattipatthana Sutta is simply, “What does it mean to keep focused on the body?” You learn how to read the Buddha’s suttas, you know that that’s a sign. He’s not explaining everything about mindfulness. He’s explaining only one part. That’s for what it means to be mindful, what it means to be alert, what it means to be ardent, and how you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. You’ve got to look elsewhere in the canon for those teachings, particularly with the ardency. Sometimes it sounds like he says, “Just simply watch passion come and watch passion go, watch aversion come and watch it go.” When you read elsewhere, he says, “When unskillful mental states come, you’ve got to get rid of them. You have to be mindful to get rid of them in the same way that if your hair were on fire, you’d be mindful and relentless in putting the fire out.” Noticing mindfulness there does not mean that you are just passively watching or not reacting or simply noting. The mindfulness there reminds you, “I’ve got to put this out, and that’s the top priority right now.” There are other images where the Buddha gives similar analogies for mindfulness. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper in a fortress on the frontier. The wise, experienced gatekeeper has to know who he can let into the fortress and who he can’t. After all, there are enemies right there on the frontier. They could come in and they could destroy things. So he has to be very watchful. He has to realize that some people are allowed in, but other people are not. In the same way, mindfulness has to be very careful to see what is unskillful in the mind, what’s skillful, so that you then know what to do with it. There’s another analogy where the Buddha says that mindfulness is like a goad. A goad is a long stick with a sharp point. In the old days, when you had a water buffalo pulling your plow, you needed to have a goad as well to make sure that the buffalo didn’t go off track. If it’s going too far to the right, you stick it with a goad on the right side so it turns left. If it’s going too far to the left, you stick it on the left side. Again, mindfulness sticks you. It reminds you, “Okay, what’s happening right now in the mind is not something just simply to sit there and watch.” If you’re heading off into something unskillful, you’ve got to do something to stop it. If you’re heading into something skillful, you’ve got to do something to maintain that. There’s still another point where the Buddha says that the duty of mindfulness is, if you see that something is unskillful in the mind, you do what you can to put an end to it. And as for things that are skillful, you do what you can to give rise to them and make sure that they don’t end. So it’s not just watching coming and going. It’s realizing that some things should be prevented from arising and other things should be made to arise. Or if unskillful things have already arisen, you’ve got to put an end to them as quickly as you can, in whatever way is effective. So if you want to do the complete practice, you have to realize there’s more to mindfulness than just keeping focused on things or keeping focused on a frame of reference. You have to bring in your memory of what the Buddha taught about what should be done with what comes up. Like right now. If you’re with the breath, that’s something to be mindful of. If you’re wandering off the breath, that’s something to be dropped. You’ve got to remember that. Otherwise, the mind is going to spend the hour wandering around Wat Mehta, wandering around California, wandering around the world, coming back every now and then for a couple of breaths and then wandering off again. So there’s work to be done here, and you’ve got to keep that in mind. And you bring these three qualities together—mindfulness, ardency, and alertness—and that keeps you on task. So you really are performing the duties of the Four Noble Truths. Because that’s what right view is all about. There’s a misunderstanding that right view is all about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Just seeing these things arising and passing away and saying, “Oh yes, there’s no self.” Well, that’s not what the Buddha taught. For one thing, the question of whether or not there is a self is one that he put aside. Instead, he taught the Four Noble Truths. That’s right view. And those carry some duties. They have four of them all together. That’s why they’re called the Four Truths, because they have different duties. The duties will begin to coalesce as the practice develops. But in the beginning, they’re very separate. They’re there to remind you that you already are fabricating your experience, but you’re doing it in ignorance and as a result, you’re suffering. But if you fabricate in line with knowledge of the Four Noble Truths and their duties, you turn everything into a path, a path that actually goes someplace. In other words, it takes you to see the as-yet-unseen to realize the as-yet-unrealized. And to do that, you have to do things you’ve never done before. But the teachings on Right View are there to give you guidance, and mindfulness is there to keep reminding you. It’s the quality of the mind that brings those teachings in and keeps them present at what you’re doing. So you really can come to comprehend what is suffering, actually. You learn how to abandon its cause. You develop the path so that you realize that there is a cessation of suffering. This is what it’s all about. It’s another dimension. The Buddha describes it as a kind of consciousness, but it’s not consciousness in the five aggregates, and it’s not consciousness in space and time. It’s nothing to do with the six senses. It can be found by following this path. Then when you reach there, you realize that there really is a cessation of suffering, and this is the path there. This is why all the work of training the mind is really worth it, because it takes you to places really good to go to. And it’s a blessing. The Buddha said that even if the path involved getting speared by 300 spears every day for a hundred years, when you actually reach the end of suffering, you’d say it was worth it. So here we’re not spearing with 300 spears. We’re simply asking you to focus on your breath and bring these qualities of mindfulness, ardency, alertness to it. And whatever work that involves is more than repaid. That’s when you come to the goal of the practice.

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