Mindfulness & Discernment

March 21, 2024

If you ask most people what mindfulness means, they’d say it means an open, accepting state of mind that watches things arise and pass away without encouraging them, without discouraging them. If you were to ask the Buddha, you’d get a different answer. For him, mindfulness was a faculty of the memory. You keep something in mind. Like right now, you’re focused on the breath. You try to keep that in mind. This is where you want to stay. As he would say, this involves two activities. One is keeping track of the breath as it comes in, as it goes out, on its own terms. And the second is to put aside any thoughts of the world. That’s one of the first things you’ll notice as you try to get the mind to stay with one thing. It has a lot of other things it wants to think about. And for the time being, you have to say, “No, this is time to develop other qualities of the mind beyond the ability to think things through or to deal with whatever it is.” You’re trying to focus on the mind in and of itself as it’s here with the breath in and of itself. This is going to require three qualities. One, mindfulness, the ability to keep this in mind. Two, alertness, you really watch what you’re doing. And then three, ardency, you try to do this well. The Buddha’s image for mindfulness is of a gatekeeper at a fortress. The fortress is at a frontier, and there are enemies that could possibly want to come in. So the gatekeeper has to know who to let in and who not to let in. He has to remember, “This person is an enemy, this person is a friend.” So for the time being, any thoughts that would pull you away from the breath are not wanted. That’s where things arise. Arising and passing away in the mind. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that mindfulness as a governing principle means that if there’s something skillful that’s not there yet, you remember to try to give rise to it. If something skillful is already there, you remember to try to keep it going. So you’re not just letting things arise and pass away. There are certain things you try to make arise and prevent from passing away. In this way, the mind can begin to settle down. But there’s that constant issue of watching out for thoughts that would pull you away. So it’s as if you have one eye on the breath and another eye gazing around, making sure that nothing else comes in. Or if it does come in, that you’re not going to latch onto it. Or if you have latched onto it, you’re going to let it go. So you’re drawing a line here. Inside the line is where you want to stay. Outside the line, anything outside the line, you don’t want it to invade your territory. And you don’t want to go wandering out from your territory. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about the story of a quail. The quail is out feeding one day, and a hawk comes along, swoops down, catches the quail, carries it off. And the quail bemoans its fate. “The hawk would have been no match for me if I had been in my territory.” Well, the hawk hears that, and what does this little pipsqueak of a quail think it is? So he says, “Well, where is your territory?” And the quail says, “A field that’s been newly plowed, but the stones turned up.” So the hawk lets him go. He says, “Okay, go back to your territory, but you won’t escape me there.” So he plodders down and lands on a stone and starts taunting the hawk, “Come get me, you hawk! Come get me, you hawk!” And the hawk folds its wings and swoops down. And as the quail sees that it’s coming full speed, it hides behind the stone. The hawk can’t stop in time, so it smashes against the stone and dies. The meaning is that your territory here is the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself, as it’s sitting here right now. Anything outside of that—thoughts about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—that’s the outside of your territory. That’s where the hawk can get you, where your greed, aversion, and delusion can get you. You want to stay here inside. So what this involves is talking to yourself as you sit here focused on the breath. As I said, you have to think about getting settled down and evaluate what’s going on if you really want the mind to settle down well. Thinking can involve all kinds of things. One, thinking about what kind of breath would be really good to focus on. You don’t want it to be too soft or too gentle because sometimes it’s hard to follow. But you want a way of breathing that feels good inside. You actually encourage that. And you explore what kind of breathing would feel good right now. And you try out different ways. In long, out long, in short, out short, in short, out long, in long, out short, deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. There’s lots to explore. Once the breath gets comfortable, then the next question is, “How do you keep it comfortable?” When you can keep it comfortable, the next question is, “How do you let that sense of comfort spread around through the body?” We’re working toward a mind state where you feel a sense of ease and pleasure throughout the whole body. So how do you let it spread? John Lee talks about thinking of breath energies flowing through the body, down the nerves, down the blood vessels. All around the body. So think of things opening up. Wherever there’s a sense of tension, allow it to relax. Because the tension blocks things. You can make a survey from the head down through the torso, down through the legs, down the shoulders, down the arms. Think of the whole body breathing. That’s directed through the body. Then there’s direct thought and evaluation focused on the topic of the meditation. Then there’s directed thought and evaluation focused on thoughts that will pull you away. There are some thoughts where all you have to do is notice, “This is not what I’m here for,” and you can drop it and come right back. Other thoughts keep coming back to the mind. This is where you have to stop and look at them. Ask yourself, “Why would I want to go with that thought?” Learn how to be skeptical. This is one of the most important skills you’re going to have to develop in training the mind. You don’t believe everything you think, and you don’t even want to find it interesting. There are times when you will need to think, and it should be interesting. But not right now. You want to be interested in how to get the mind to settle down. So take a skeptical attitude toward your thoughts. They’ll pull you away, and they’re insistent on pulling you away. Ask yourself, “What’s the allure, what’s the attractiveness of that thought?” If it were a movie, would you pay to watch it? A lot of these insistent thoughts are not all that well-acted, well-scripted. So why bother with them, especially if you know they’re getting in the way of developing a new skill? Maybe you can compare the allure of the thoughts with the drawbacks. You can see that these thoughts lead nowhere. Many times, they’re thoughts you’ve thought many times before, with slight variations. You don’t need to complete the thought. You can just let it go. Leave the ends down. Angle it. Come back to the breath. In this way, you’re using some understanding. There are two qualities of the mind we’re developing here. Mindfulness with all of its attendant factors, and then discernment. The Ajahns in Thailand like to put those two words together, mindfulness and discernment, satipañña, because it’s through mindfulness that you can check yourself. You realize, “Okay, this thought that I’m thinking right now is not where I want to be.” And then there’s discernment that understands why you would want to think it anyhow and why it’s not a good reason. And now you can learn how to let go. This is an important training for your inner conversation, because the way you talk to yourself as you meditate often reflects the way you talk to yourself in daily life and vice versa. So you want to train the mind in useful ways of talking. There are a lot of people who complain about their inner critic. But having a good inner critic is an important part of training the mind. Otherwise, how are you going to know when you’re doing things well and when you’re not? You’ve got to train the critic. And you have to let the critic train you. If the critic points out that you’re doing something wrong but you say, “I don’t care,” that’s when the critic starts getting harsher and harsher and harsher. If the critic is pointing out something wrong, you can ask, “Well, what would be a good way to avoid doing that wrong? Give me some help there.” One of the ways is precisely that point I made just now about looking for the allure. It’s something you know is going to be harmful, but there’s something in the mind that likes it. Well, what is that? And is that a part of you that you really want to continue identifying with? We hear the Buddhist teachings on not-self. Sometimes it sounds like he’s saying you have no self at all, which would not be a very useful teaching at all. There’d be nobody inside to make decisions, nobody inside to be responsible. What he’s basically saying is you have many ways of identifying yourself, and not all of them are skillful. You don’t have to keep on identifying with them. The reason you do identify with them is that they do have some attractiveness. There’s something about them you like. You have to figure out what that is. Sometimes if it’s something unskillful, we tend to hide it from ourselves. This is one of the reasons why we try to get the mind settled in with a good sense of comfortable breathing, so you feel comfortable in your own skin. Then you’re in a better position to question those voices. So we have lots of different conversations going on inside. Meditation is one of the ways of learning how to establish some rules for the conversation. What topics, what ways of talking are going to be allowed, which ways of talking are not helpful, and then learning which voices to listen to. The voices in your mind have been trained by all kinds of people. They’re often working across purposes. So part of the meditation, part of the training of the mind, is when you decide you really do want to be more in control of your thinking for the purpose of finding a happiness that’s really lasting, a happiness that’s harmless. Then you keep reminding yourself that that’s a really good goal. So as you develop your mindfulness, you can keep that goal in mind. Then you can use your ingenuity in making it attractive, so that you have something to fight the allure of your more unskillful voices. And you develop the confidence that, yes, you can say no. But you can do more than just say no. You can do it with understanding. Because it’s through understanding that you see where these things come from and why you would fall for them, and why you really don’t want to, and why you don’t have to. You can see there are alternatives. This is a large problem when you’re addicted to a particular type of behavior, a particular type of thinking. You can’t imagine alternatives. Or you can’t imagine that any alternative would be attractive. This is where you really do have to use your imagination. There’s a Pali word, patipana, which you don’t hear too much in the context of Buddhist meditation. But the Buddha himself said it was a really important part of learning how to look at yourself and see what potentials you have. And try to expand your mind as to your potentials. In the old news, there was somebody in the past who found a way to put it into suffering. And he did it through his own efforts, and he taught that other people could do it, too. Let that expand your mind. It wasn’t just for princes in India to do this. Everybody was earnest in not wanting to suffer, not wanting to cause suffering. You’ve got to learn how to master this skill. So we start with a good goal, and then we try to remind ourselves of why it’s good. It’s not just good in the sense of goody-two-shoes, but it really is satisfying. It’s like those classics of world literature. They look like a monument, but some of them are pretty thick. It’s supposed to be great, and you say, “Well, I guess because it’s a classic, I should read it.” And then as you start reading it, you find that it’s really enjoyable, which is one of the reasons why it’s a classic. Well, meditation is a classic in that sense. It’s good and it’s enjoyable, and it trains you in all sorts of important skills for managing the conversation in your mind, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, focused on the breath, but as you actually do go out and engage with the world again. So it takes some time to master these skills. The Dhamma that the Buddha taught is not the sort of thing where you can simply just listen to it, understand it, discuss it. I think you’ve gotten the most use out of it. It’s directions on how to do things well, how to breathe well, how to talk to yourself well, how to think well. Because it’s a skill, it’s going to take time. But it’s time well spent.

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