Mindful All Day Long

February 26, 2025

The basic position when you get started in meditation is to sit with your eyes closed because you want to give all your attention to what’s going on in the mind and don’t want to have any distractions. It’s like learning how to play the piano. You go off into a quiet room where you’re by yourself. Nobody else is listening. You don’t have any distractions from outside. So you can focus entirely on what you’re doing, what you’re learning how to do. But you don’t practice just to practice. You practice so that you can perform. In the same way when you meditate, you don’t practice only when you are sitting with your eyes closed. You want to be able to carry that ability to get the mind concentrated, to stay mindful as you go through the day. This works best, of course, when you’re having some success as you sit and meditate. You find that you can be quiet with the mind, quiet with the breath. You tell the mind to stay with the breath, and it stays, at least for reasonable amounts of time. When you get a sense of what it means to feel the breath energy in the body, and to know when it’s blocked, to know how to unblock it, let’s basically make a scan of the body. If you notice there’s tension or tightness in any part of the body, that’s a sign that the breath is not flowing. So relax the tension. If you have a tendency to get tense in your arms, relax your arms, relax your hands, relax your fingers. Try to keep them relaxed. All the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. And then you try that with other parts of the body as well. So when you get a sense of this, then the next step is to carry it outside. Most of us, though, when we get up for meditation, if we had something in our laps, it would break. And that’s what it is for most of us. Our mindfulness is like a glass object that you keep in your lap, and as soon as you get up, it falls on the ground, it breaks into little pieces. You want to be able to carry it into the day, because that’s where a lot of the work needs to be done. Otherwise, you’re like a person who goes down to the gym, lifts weights, then comes back home and refuses to lift a finger to help around the house. You’re learning to gain strength in your mind. You want to put that strength to good use. As John Foreman talks about, trying to make the day timeless. Most of us, we start out with a time to get up, time to wash our face, time to brush our teeth, get ready for the day. Time to eat, time to go to work. The day gets divided up into times. And we’re trying to find something that’s timeless. So we have to make our practice timeless. Ironically though, when he talks about making the practice timeless, the hints that he gives are to cut it up into little tiny times. Like when you’re doing walking meditation, you don’t just pace back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You start at one end of your path, and you make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath all the way along as you walk down the path to the other end. That’s it, just getting to the other end without having dropped your mind to mindfulness. Then you get to the other end, you stop, turn around, check the mind, make sure that you’re still with the breath. If you’re not, then you bring it back. Then you make up your mind, at least for now until the other end of the path, I’m going to stay with the breath. And staying with the breath doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re going to be watching it coming in and going out. But you want to have a sense in the body of where the breath feels like it’s flowing well, where it’s not flowing well, and if you allow any tension to come in, as soon as you realize that it’s there, relax it. So you’re aware of the field of breath energy more than anything else. And by relaxing it as your knee-jerk reaction, as soon as you come back, you make it pleasant to come back. One of the worst things you can do is bring the mind back and strangle it, so you’re going to stay here or else I’m going to kill you. It’s not going to want to stay. So you give it a good reason to stay, as soon as you notice that the breath energy has gotten tight, you relax. Or you’ve forgotten the breath energy, you come back, you relax. It feels good to come back, that’s what you want. And then from one length of the walking path, you can soak in now two lengths, I’m going to stay with the breath. Make it longer, longer, longer. As you approach the day, again, don’t just tell yourself I’m going to stay with the breath all day long. It’s too long a time to maintain that kind of intention. Just tell yourself, while I’m eating my meal, I’m going to stay with the breath. When the meal is done, while I’m washing the dishes, I’m going to stay with the breath. Give yourself shorter times to accomplish what you want. And over time you’ll be able to handle longer times. But start now by dividing things into times. And now it gets easier and easier to stay. And you’re not sending yourself out for failure. The most important thing, though, is that you realize that you’re not just adding one more thing to jungle as you go through the day. We already have so many balls in the air, trying to deal with work, trying to deal with other people at work, trying to deal with people at home, whatever specific tasks we have. Now you’re going to keep the breath in mind as well. It sounds like one more ball to throw in the air. Think of it more as the ground on which you stand. As you juggle. Wherever you go, you’re standing on the ground. And it’s supporting you. Because that’s the important part of this practice. It supports you. Once you learn to rely on it, once you learn to keep in touch with it, it’s there to support you. That’s the irony. The breath is always there. Your sense of the body is always there. Your mind has an ability to ignore it. Especially when you have other work to do. You give all your attention to the other work. And it’s almost like your mind is floating in midair, trying to ground things. And if the work does involve 100% of your mental energy, take breaks every now and then. Just get in touch with how the breath energy feels. And then if you’re going to be focusing on the job, well, really focus on the job. I don’t know how many people say, “Well, when I’m working I have to give 100% of my time to the work at hand.” But then they find that their mind is going to give you other things in the background as well. Well, put the breath there in the background. And then for whatever tasks you have to do, try to be really focused on them. And focused on doing them well. This is one of the basic principles of the training in the forest tradition. That’s why the Chan Fung learned how to wash spittoons. I learned how to place things so they didn’t make noise. I learned how to put things in order. I learned how to watch him as he put things in order. Because often he would not tell me what the order was. But I could observe. In other words, be intent on what you’re doing. And try to do it well. There are lots of very simple tasks that we just brush off and go through as quickly as possible. But there’s a skill to doing every task in the course of the day. Every time. It’s good to try to think about that. Otherwise, if your work is really demanding, tell yourself, “I’m going to give 100% attention to my work while I’m doing it.” And try to do my very best. Because the habits you build up that way then get carried back into the meditation. In this way, the meditation supports your day. The work of the day supports your meditation. If you tend to be earnest in what you’re doing in the course of the day, you’ll be earnest in your meditation. If you’re sloppy in the course of the day, you’ll tend to be sloppy in the meditation. Let thoughts come into the mind and say, “Well, give the mind a little time to roam around before it gets back to work.” Well, that tendency to roam around is then going to come and infect your meditation when you’re sitting with your eyes closed. So you once said the day helps the meditation, the meditation helps the day. And it’s in that way that your practice develops momentum. Because it’s not start and stop, start and stop. It’s just going, going, going.

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