Ardent, Alert, & Mindful

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We focus on the breath because the breath keeps us grounded. We want to stay in the present moment and the breath is proof that we’re there. There’s no past breath you can watch, no future breath you can watch. And you can ask yourself, where do you feel the breath in the body as you breathe in? Is it the air coming in and out through the nose? It’s the feeling of energy that flows through the body, that allows the air to come in and allows the air to go out. So where do you feel that? Focus your attention there and then stay there. Now the mind has a tendency to wander, so you have to watch out for that. To counteract that tendency, you need three qualities. The first is mindfulness. We’re sometimes told that mindfulness means just being with whatever comes up in the present moment without passing judgment. But the Buddha never taught it that way. We will be passing judgment in the meditation because there are thoughts that would pull you away from the breath and you have to judge them as not worth your attention right now. To do that properly you need those three qualities. First is mindfulness, which the Buddha defines as the ability to remember. Like you’ve made up your mind you’re going to stay here. Well you try to remember that each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Then there’s alertness, knowing what you’re doing, why you’re doing it. In this case it means noticing how the breath feels right now each time it comes in and noticing if your mind is with the breath or if it’s getting ready to leave or if it’s already left. If you see that it’s left, we come back. If it’s about to leave, you’re trying to make the breath more comfortable so that you’d be willing to stay. That involves the third quality, which is ardency. You’re trying to do this well. So if you notice you’ve wandered off, you come right back. If you’re with the breath, you try to become more sensitive to it. You’re going to make a survey of the body, from the top of the head down to the tips of your toes, all around, inside. As you breathe in, are there any parts of the body where it feels uncomfortable, where it feels tight or tense? Can you relax that tension? Can you allow the breath energy to flow freely throughout the whole body? When it feels good and you can spread your awareness throughout the body like this, you’re creating a state that the Buddha calls concentration. The Pali word is samadhi. There is some controversy about how the best way would be to translate that word. It means you’re focused, but the range of your awareness is broad, filling the whole body. Wherever the breath feels good, think of that good breath then spreading out to other parts of the body. And just try to stay there. As for any other thoughts, what the Buddha calls greed and distress with reference to the world, you put them aside. All those things you would like about the world or things you don’t like about the world, you can put those down for the time being. You’ve got work to do inside. Be more sensitive to where your attention goes and what happens as a result. Here’s what the Buddha taught about how to get past suffering. One of the first things you have to learn how to do is see what suffering is and what’s causing it. So you’re looking for cause and effect. And the causes, he said, are in your own mind, things you’re doing. It’s the activity of craving. Craving wants to think about sensual pleasures or simply wants to think about taking on an identity. What’s called becoming. You take on an identity in a particular world or experience, focused around a desire. You see this clearly when you fall asleep and you’re watching your own mind. You see how it goes into a dream. It loosens its frame of reference here in the present moment. And then suddenly something that interests it will appear. And there’s a world around that and then there’s you going into that world. That’s your first dream. That’s how becoming works. It actually doesn’t happen only when you’re falling asleep. As we go through the day we think about things we want and very quickly the mind will create a world around that and then the question is do you want to go into that world? Sometimes you go, sometimes you don’t. Then you create another world and another world based on your different desires. And this is how we engage with our desires. It’s a pattern that we all take on. Nobody has to teach us. We do this on our own. It’s kind of like beavers. They’ve taken beavers that had to be raised in captivity because their parents were killed. And even though there was no one to teach them, when the baby beavers were finally old enough to be released into the wild, they started building dams and building lodges. It’s built into their approach to the world. That’s their solution to any problem. Go build a dam. And this is our solution to our problems, our desires. If you want something, what do you do? You have to figure out what world it’s in and what role you can play in that world. And these are desires that we pursue with our hopes of happiness. And here the Buddha is telling us that that desire to take on these identities and these worlds of experience, the craving for that is going to cause you suffering. That’s very counterintuitive. But you’re not going to see the truth of that until you get to see your mind in action and see what it’s doing, what it’s creating through its actions. And finally, the third kind of craving is craving for a non-becoming. In other words, you’ve taken on an identity in a world of experience and you don’t like it. You want to destroy it. That too causes suffering. So you want to be able to see this. So you have to be mindful to see the connections between what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. Sometimes the results come very quickly. Sometimes they take time. This is why you have to be here continually and not just hop around. The other Buddha’s definition of the causes of suffering creates a dilemma. If you want becoming, you’re going to suffer. If you want to destroy your becomeings, you’re going to suffer. What do you do? We let the becomeings you have run out on their own. You can try to get deeper into the mind to see what leads to those becomeings before you’ve taken on an identity, before you’ve created that world. What happens in the mind before that? To see this, the mind has to be very quiet. And again, continually alert, continually mindful. And really interested in doing this well. Interested in trying to figure out how the mind, even though it wants to find happiness, ends up creating suffering, pain, stress. Nobody wants to create suffering, but we end up making ourselves suffer. And because we don’t see the connection between the suffering and what we’re doing, we just keep on doing it over and over again. So here we’re trying to see connections. Which is why it’s important that we’re not just alert to what’s going on, but we’re also mindful to remember what we did in the past that’s leading to the results we’re getting now. So try to be continually here, be continually mindful. So the mind begins to wander off to something else. You can get in the way and say, “No.” Again, you’re passing judgment. You want to stay here. You don’t want to go there. Now, there will be part of the mind that wants to go. Your mind is like a committee, a very political committee, when the different members have lots of different ways of lying to one another and hiding things from one another. So you’ve got to strengthen the good members of the committee that say, “I want to find a happiness that lasts, that’s not going to disappoint, and doesn’t harm anybody.” Because after all, if your happiness harms other people, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy it. So you want a lasting and harmless happiness. Whichever members of the committee want that, you side with them. And use them to create the sense of being still and centered here in the present moment. And that’s right. And the other members, you don’t have to identify with them. They may have been you in the past, but you can say, “Not anymore.” This is another function of mindfulness. You’ve seen the old ways you acted, and you realized that they were causing suffering. And you can remember that, so you don’t want to take on those old ways again. So you are passing judgment. You are trying to create good states in the mind. You’re not just watching things coming and going. If good states haven’t come yet, you try to give rise to them. Once they’re there, you try to keep them from going away. And mindfulness is what directs the work. Alertness is what makes sure that it’s staying on course. And ardency makes sure that your mindfulness and alertness are getting good results. Of the Three Qualities, John Lee, Master of the Forest, pointed out that the ardency is the real wisdom faculty there. Because you can be mindful, you can remember anything. You can be alert to doing anything at all. But when you’re determined to do it well, that’s what turns mindfulness into right mindfulness. Mindfulness is part of the path. So do your best to stay here. Do your best to remember that this is where you want to be. And do your best to see that you actually are doing what you intended to do to begin with. And do your best to stay on course.

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