

Right Mindfulness

December 25, 2007

The term “mindfulness” on its own is something neutral. It can be put to good uses or bad—because it simply means keeping something in mind. You can keep in mind the fact that you want to put an end to suffering, or you can keep in mind a decision to rob a bank. In either case, it’s mindfulness. Mindfulness becomes right or wrong depending on the task to which you put it—whether, from the point of view of putting an end to suffering, you’re keeping the right or the wrong things in mind.

So as we’re practicing, we want to make sure our mindfulness is right mindfulness. There are two spots in the Canon where the Buddha defines right mindfulness. The best-known definition is in terms of the four *satipatthanas*: the four establishings of mindfulness. In fact there are two huge discourses on the topic. But it’s also good to keep in mind that there’s another definition of right mindfulness that’s a lot simpler. It’s simply keeping in mind the fact that you want to develop the skillful qualities of the path and to abandon their antitheses. In other words, you keep in mind the fact that you want to develop right view and abandon wrong view, to develop right resolve and abandon wrong resolve, and so on down the line. What this means is that you’re not just observing without preference whatever comes up. You’re keeping in mind the fact that there are skillful qualities you want to develop and unskillful ones that you want to abandon.

When you keep that fact in mind and then apply it to what you’re doing, that’s right mindfulness combined with right effort. And it’s important to keep this context in mind. Sometimes people interpret the teachings on the establishings of mindfulness out of context, saying that right effort and right concentration are one sort of practice, whereas right mindfulness is something else entirely. But right mindfulness actually leads to right concentration, and it builds on right effort: the desire and effort to develop skillful qualities of the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. You have to keep that in mind. To keep that in mind effectively, you’ve got to establish mindfulness to give yourself a framework that will lead to right concentration.

So as we’re practicing mindfulness, remember the context. We try to develop a skillful understanding of what’s skillful in the mind and what’s not, along with the desire to develop what’s skillful, to abandon what’s not. And now we’re going to keep that in mind. The best way to remember something is to have a good solid framework or foundation, a good frame of reference, which is where the establishings of mindfulness come in.

Sometimes you see these establishings listed simply as body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. Those—when taken in and of themselves—are the frames of reference you use when establishing mindfulness, but the actual establishing of mindfulness is much more. It’s a complex process. To begin with, with the first frame of reference, you try to remain focused on body in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That whole process is the first establishing of mindfulness, and it’s the process we’re working on here as we focus on the breath. It’s a process centered on the body, and it’s

good to understand each aspect of the process.

To remain focused is termed *anupassana*. You choose something to watch and then you stick with it—in this case, *the body in and of itself*. In other words, you're not looking at the body as part of the world, or however it might be measured in the context of the world: whether it's good-looking or bad-looking, whether it's strong enough to do the jobs you need to do out in the world. You're simply with the body in and of itself on its own terms.

Ardent, alert, and mindful: Ardency is what carries the process of right effort into the practice of right mindfulness. You really want to do this skillfully, for you acutely know what can happen if you don't develop these skills. *Alert* means that you're watching what you're doing, paying close attention to what you're doing and to the results you're getting. And of course you're *mindful*, remembering to stay focused on the body.

Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: This means that any time you want to switch your frame reference back to the world, you try to remind yourself, No, you don't want anything out of the world for the time being. You're not going to let the issues of the world get you worked up. You're going to stay right here with your original frame of reference—i.e., the body in and of itself—and then try to carry that frame of reference into all of your activities. Instead of jumping to other frames of reference, you stay with this one, with the sense of the body. As you're sitting here watching the breath, when you get up, when you walk around, try to keep the body in mind all the time. And be alert to how the breath energy feels within and around the body. As for anything else that may come up, whether it's a thought, a feeling, or an interaction with someone else: Try to see how it affects the body, how it affects the breath.

This is how you strengthen your frame of reference and turn it into an object of concentration. When you're talking with someone else, notice how your body is reacting during the talking. When you're working, notice how your body is reacting, how the breath is reacting during the work. Always refer things back to the breath. That way your frame of reference becomes really established. And you start getting insights you wouldn't have seen otherwise. That's because establishing the body here as your frame of reference helps to keep the mind inside instead of flowing out. Luang Puu Dune once said that the mind flowing out to its objects is suffering. So to unlearn that habit of flowing out and causing suffering, you want to keep your awareness centered inside.

Of course, what will happen is that your awareness will keep flowing out, but maybe after a time you'll be able to see it flow out as you're not flowing along with it. It's as if one mental state is flowing out while the observer is staying right here with the body. When you don't go out with that mental state, it stops. It goes out a little ways and just falters and dies.

That's an important insight: the realization that you can observe states of mind without getting entangled with them.

That's when you can start using other frames of reference. Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you're staying with the breath, you've got all four frames of reference right there. You've got the breath, which is an aspect of the body. Then there's the feeling associated with the breath. There's the mind state that's trying to maintain concentration. And then there are the various mental qualities: either the hindrances that are interfering with your concentration or

the factors for awakening that are helping you along. You want to make use of all four frames. But the body is basic. Staying with the body helps you observe the mind, feelings, and mental qualities without getting sucked in by them.

This is why the meditation begins with the breath. This is why, when Buddha gave instructions on how to develop concentration in a way that brings to fruition all four establishings of mindfulness, he said to stay with the breath. As you stay with the breath, you focus on the breath in ways that deal with feelings, that deal with the mind, that deal with mental qualities, but you never really leave the breath. Instead, you train yourself to observe things in conjunction with the breath.

So of all the various places you can establish mindfulness, the breath is the most important, the most crucial, the one that you really want work on the most.

There's a passage in the texts where the Buddha says you can focus on the body internally or externally or both internally and externally. This fits into a pattern we often see in the teachings: that when you look at yourself, you also want to remind yourself that whatever is true about the inner workings of your body and mind, is true about everybody else's body and mind. This helps put things into perspective. When you're having trouble with your hindrances, remind yourself that you're not the only one. Other people have trouble with the hindrances as well. When you have pain in the body, remind yourself that everybody else has pains in the body, too.

This follows the pattern on the night of the Buddha's awakening. He started with knowledge about his own past, his own stories. And if you think you're carrying around a lot of stories, think about someone who could remember back many eons, all the stories he could have carried around. But he didn't carry them around. He just watched them. He observed them and came up with some questions: Does this truth, the truth of rebirth, apply only to me or to other people? What's the principle that determines how you go from one life to the next?

So in the second watch of the night he inclined his mind to the passing away and rebirth of all beings, seeing people dying and being reborn on all the many levels of the cosmos. And seeing the larger picture in this way, he saw a larger pattern: that the nature of your actions is what determines where you get reborn. Skillful actions done under the influence of right views lead to a good rebirth. Unskillful ones done under the influence of wrong views lead to a bad rebirth. That's the general principle.

Notice that the Buddha started out with himself, then moved to other beings, before he finally arriving at the third insight, which was to focus directly on the present moment in and of itself. Looking at the larger picture before focusing on the present may seem like a detour but it's needed to put things into perspective. Otherwise, as you're sitting here meditating and facing your problems, it seems like you're the only one sitting here in pain or distraction. It's helpful to remind yourself that everybody goes through this. No matter how bad the pain, there have been people who sat through worse pain and yet came out on the other side. No matter how obsessive the distraction, there have been people who disentangled themselves from even worse distractions. So these contemplations—of your body and other people's bodies, your mind and other people's minds—seem to be designed put things into perspective, as an aid in putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

All of this is designed to put the mind in a position where it's ready to settle down. The mindfulness and alertness protect the mind and provide a good foundation. The quality of ardency is what helps make it skillful. And when you reflect on the universality of suffering, it gives you the right motivation for practicing. All these qualities together get you ready to settle down and stay really solidly with the breath.

That's what right mindfulness is all about. It's not simply a matter of observing what arises and passes away, and just letting it arise and pass away. Mindfulness is not so much about allowing as it's about directing the mind in a skillful direction, toward right concentration. So when you're observing things arising and passing away—whether in body or the mind—it's not just a matter of being a passive observer. There's a purpose to your attention, so it's not bare. You want to observe these things so that you understand them. You want to understand them so you can gain some mastery over them, so that you can direct the states of mind and the issues that arise in the body in the direction of right concentration.

For instance, if there are pains in the body, what can you do, how can you relate to the pains so that they don't knock the concentration off course? How do you breathe in a way that helps spread pleasure around in the body? What attitudes can you develop toward what's going on in the body and the mind to help get you over difficult patches? These are the things you want to keep in mind.

So right mindfulness is not just a matter of having the right place to focus your attention; it's also a matter of bringing the right attitude, remembering the right attitude: the attitude that comes from right effort—the desire to do things skillfully and to let go of unskillful habits. When you have that attitude in charge, your mindfulness becomes right mindfulness, the kind of mindfulness that brings all the factors of the path together.