

# *Right Mindfulness*

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The term mindfulness on its own is something neutral. It can be put to good uses or bad. All it means is simply 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 depending on the task to which you put it, it becomes wrong depending on the task to which you put it. There is such a thing as wrong mindfulness and keeping the wrong things in mind.

So as we're practicing here we want to make sure that our mindfulness is right mindfulness. There are two spots in the Canon where the Buddha defines it. The best known definition is in terms of the four *satipatthanas*, the four establishings of mindfulness. In fact there are two whole huge discourses on the topic. But it's also good to keep in mind there's another definition of right mindfulness, a lot more simple. 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 want to keep in mind the fact that you want to develop right view and abandon wrong view, develop right resolve, abandon wrong resolve, and so through the right and wrong factors of the path. In other words, you're not simply observing without preference whatever comes up. You're keeping in mind the fact that there are skillful qualities you want to develop and unskillful qualities that you want to abandon. You keep that fact in mind and apply it to what you are doing. That's right mindfulness.

It's important to keep this context in mind. Sometimes you see people interpreting the teachings on the establishings of mindfulness out of context. Right mindfulness builds on right effort, the effort to develop skillful things, the desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. You just keep that in mind. Now, to keep that in mind effectively you've got to give yourself a framework that will lead to right concentration. So as we're practicing mindfulness, remember that that's the context. You 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. That's what we're going to keep in mind.

The best way to remember something is to have a good solid framework, a good solid foundation, a good frame of reference, which is where the establishings of mindfulness come in. Sometimes you see these listed simply as body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. But actually the establishing of mindfulness is a process. To begin with, you try to 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 process we're working on here as we focus on the breath. It's the first of the establishings. To remain focused is called *anupassana*. It means you choose something to watch and then you stick with it. In this case, what you watch is the body in and of itself. In other words, not the body as a part of the world or how 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 out in the world or not. Just simply the body in and of itself on its own terms.

In doing this, you're ardent, alert and mindful. *Ardent* is what carries the process of right effort into the practice: You really want to do this skillfully. *Alert* means you're watching what you are doing, paying close attention to what you're doing and the results you're getting. And then of course *mindful*, keeping the body in mind. *Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world* means that any time you might switch your frame of reference back to the world, you try to remind yourself, No, you don't want anything out of that and you're not going to let 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.

In other words instead of jumping around to other frames of reference, stay with this one, stay with the sense of the body as you're sitting here watching the breath, as you get up, as you walk around. Try to keep the body in mind all the time and be alert to how the breath energy feels. As for anything else that may come up—whether it's a thought, a feeling, or an interaction—try to see how it relates to the body. 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 working. Always refer things back to the breath. That way your frame of reference becomes really established and you start gaining 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 the mind that flows out to its objects is suffering. So you want to keep it inside. Of course what will happen is that occasionally it *will* flow out, and maybe after a time you'll be able to see it flow out as you're not flowing out along with it. In other words, one mental state is flowing out but the observer is staying right here with the body. When you don't go out with that flowing state, it stops. It goes out a little ways and then just falters and dies away. That's an important insight, the realization that you can observe states of mind without getting entangled with them. That's the point where you can start using other frames of reference.

Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you stay with the breath you've got all frames of reference right there. There's the feeling associated with the breath, there's the mind state trying to maintain concentration, and then there are the various mental qualities: either the hindrances that are coming in to interfere with your concentration or the factors for awakening that are helping it along. You want to be able to make use of all four. Staying with the body helps you to observe the mind, helps you observe feelings and mental qualities without getting sucked in by them.

This is why the meditation begins with the breath. This is why when the Buddha gave instructions in how you could develop concentration in a way that brings to fruition all four establishments 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. You simply 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 you really want to work on the most.

There's a passage in the text where the Buddha says you can focus on the body internally, externally, or both internally and externally. This fits into a pattern that we see many times in the teachings: that when you look at yourself you want to also remind yourself that whatever is true about the inner workings of your mind and body 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 everybody else has pain in the body as well.

This follows the pattern of the night of the Buddha's awakening. He first started with knowledge about his own past, his own stories. And if you think you're carrying around a lot of stories, well, 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. His next question was, "Does this truth apply only to me or also 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 knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of all beings. He saw that this happens to everybody: People die and are reborn on all different kinds of levels of the cosmos. What's essential to know, though, is that the nature of your actions is what determines where you get born. Skillful actions done under the influence of right view lead to good rebirths. Unskillful ones done under the influence of wrong view lead to bad rebirths as a general principle. Notice that the Buddha started with himself and then moved to other beings.

Only then did he get to the third insight, which was to focus directly on the present moment in and of itself. It may seem like a detour but it's important to put things into perspective before you start watching the present. Otherwise you're sitting here meditating, facing your problems, and it seems like you're the only one sitting here in pain or the only one sitting here with distraction. It's good to remind yourself that everybody goes through these things. No matter how bad the pain, there have been people who have sat through worse pain and yet come out on the other side. So the idea of keeping in mind not only your body, but also the bodies of others, seems to be designed to put things into perspective as an aid to 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 really settle down. The mindfulness and the alertness protect the mind, 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 about observing what arises and what passes away and just letting it arise and letting it pass away. It's not so much about allowing, as about directing the mind in a skillful direction toward right concentration. When you're observing things arising and

passing away, whether in the body or the mind, it's not just a matter of being a passive observer. You want to observe them so you can understand them, and you want to understand them so that you can learn to have some mastery over them—so that you can direct the states of mind, you can direct issues that arise in the body in the direction of right concentration. If there are pains in the body, what can you do? How can you relate to the pains in such a way that they don't knock your concentration off course? How do you breathe in a way that helps spread some pleasure around in the body? What attitudes do you develop toward what's going on in the body and the mind to help get you over any difficult patches? That's what you want to keep in mind.

So right mindfulness is not only 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 motivates right effort, the desire to do things skillfully and let go of unskillful habits. When you have that attitude in charge, your mindfulness does become right mindfulness, the kind of mindfulness that helps bring all the factors of the path together.