

Why Mindfulness

August 13, 2010

You may have noticed that there are many definitions of what mindfulness means: acceptance, non-reactive awareness, a wide-open awareness. In fact, the definitions are so many that one writer has said that mindfulness is a very mysterious quality, one quality that perform so many different functions for the mind.

But it wasn't the nature of the Buddha to deal in mysteries. And for him the definition of mindfulness was very simple: the ability to keep something in mind, to hold something in your memory. And the question is: Why is it important to develop that quality? Why do you need to develop this ability to keep something in mind?

The answer is suggested by someone who actually had a different definition of mindfulness. This one teacher defined mindfulness as bare awareness of the present moment, and went on to say that mindfulness isn't hard, it's remembering to be mindful that's hard. And that's the point right there: We tend to forget what we're doing as we're meditating.

We're here to train the mind, to understand how the mind creates suffering for itself, and how it can learn not to create suffering. And all of a sudden we find ourselves running restaurant reviews through the mind, planning for tomorrow. Memories of childhood come through and you say, "Boy, I haven't thought of that in a long time, let's look into that." And five minutes later you wonder, "Wait a minute, I'm supposed to be here meditating. What am I doing?"

The ability to step back and watch the mind in action is central to the path. And that's what we keep forgetting to do. We tend to plunge into our thoughts. The Buddha said that he got on the right path to practice when he realized that his thoughts were of two types: thoughts that lead to suffering and thoughts that lead away from suffering—in other words, thoughts that were unskillful and thoughts that were more skillful. So he decided to divide his thoughts into those two types, which meant that he had to step back and look at them to see what quality of mind was motivating the thought. If there was sensual desire, ill will, or a thought of cruelty, he knew that that kind of thinking was going to be unskillful, and he'd have to hold it in check. If the thoughts were devoid of those qualities, then they were okay, and he could allow the mind to think in those directions.

So what we have to remember to do is to step back so that we can see: "Where is this particular thought coming from? Where is it leading? Is it something I

want to jump into? Or is it something I have to hold in check?" This means that you can't really jump into any of your thoughts. You have to watch them as a cause-and-effect process, so that you can see how they're skillful, how they're not, where they're coming from, where they're going. If you're in the thought, you can't see these things. Or if you're reacting to a thought in a way that says, "I don't like this thinking," "I'm ashamed of myself to be thinking this," "I'm going to put it into denial, I'm not really thinking this thought," or "Maybe it's not so bad after all," then you've left the training. xx

After all, we are in training here. And even though there may be a pleasure in following some of the thoughts, you have to remind yourself that it's a pleasure you have to forgo for the time being because you really want to understand why the mind causes suffering. If you don't step back and look at the mind's thinking processes, you're never going to solve this problem. So in the same way that an athlete has to forgo certain pleasures while he or she is in training, we have to forgo the pleasure of plunging into our thoughts and riding them off into who knows where.

Notice also, though, when the Buddha said he was able to look at his thought processes, he didn't just leave them there. If a thought was going to be unskillful, he had to hold it in check.

This is where right effort comes into the practice. I read recently where someone was saying that right effort and right mindfulness are two radically different practices. But then the question is, well, why did the Buddha put them together in one path? And how did he say that right effort led to right mindfulness, and that right mindfulness helped right effort? They're supposed to work together. Remember the Buddha's image of mindfulness as a gatekeeper for a large fortress. He has to be very careful who he is letting in and who he's not letting him in. The gatekeeper has to be able to recognize who are the enemies, who are the friends, to keep out the enemies and let in the friends. If any enemies get past the gatekeeper, the soldiers have to deal with them and get rid of them.

In the same way, once you recognize that a particular line of thinking is unskillful, you've got to remember how to undercut it, to go back through the causal process and find where is it in the mind that you can actually cut off that kind of thinking and not get pulled into it. You have to understand: Where is the gratification in that thinking? What are you getting out of it as you think it? When you can develop a sense of dispassion for that gratification, that's when you will be able to let go of it.

There's a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going to go abroad to one of the outlying districts in India. Before they go, they say goodbye to Ven.

Sariputta. And Sariputta says, “There are going to be intelligent people there. They’re going to ask you, ‘What does your teacher teach?’ How are you going to answer them?” So the monks ask Sariputta, well, what would be a good answer? And Sariputta’s answer is interesting: “Our teacher teaches the abandoning of passion and desire.” And the follow-up question is: “Passion and desire for what?” For the five aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and sensory consciousness. There’s another follow-up question: “What danger does your teacher see in having desire and passion for those things?” The answer: When you have desire and passion for those things, you do things that cause suffering. And if you abandon that passion and desire, you put an end to suffering.

So notice that Sariputta’s answers here all have to do with activities, the actions you do. The Buddha recommends doing something. He didn’t say: “Our teacher teaches four noble truths,” or “Our teacher teaches emptiness, or not-self.” Instead, he says, “Our teacher teaches how to undo these activities that cause suffering, how to abandon them.”

So that’s what we’re working on. The mind is constantly active. It’s shaping its experiences. It’s not a blank slate that’s simply receiving impressions from outside. It’s actually trying to make sense of things, trying to figure out some way of manipulating experiences, so that you can get pleasure, happiness out of them. So you want to look at the ways it’s doing this that are actually leading in the other direction, that are actually causing suffering.

All this means that you have to learn how to watch the mind. Step back from it. The reason we develop concentration is that it gives the mind a good place to stand and stay so that we can watch these things. You stay with the breath because it gets you out of your thought-worlds and into the physical sense of breathing. Not only that, you can work with the breath so that it becomes a good, comfortable place to stay. It gives you a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, so that you don’t have to go for the gratification that comes from pursuing your thought worlds. You’re not hungry all the time.

We work with the breath to create a pleasant place for the mind to stay, and at the same time, in working with the breath, we begin to get an insight into how we’re shaping our experience, and how to do it well. We develop our sensitivities, our powers of judgment, so that we can become more clearly aware of where we’re causing suffering, why we’re doing it, and how we can learn not to do it.

So to stay with this training, you have to develop your powers of mindfulness, the ability to keep reminding yourself that you’re here to learn about the mind, this producer of happiness and pain, to see why every time it does something, it wants happiness out of its actions, but many times it gets the opposite result. Why

is this happening? What does it not understand? If you forget yourself, forget why you're here, you suddenly find yourself going back into your old habits. And you miss the opportunity to get some really good training.

It's often the case that the mind has the ability to block things out from itself, when it's about to do something that part of it knows is unskillful but another part of it wants to do. We set up these walls in the mind, these walls of forgetfulness, and they're precisely what we're trying to bore through so that we can see the connection between an action and its result, and the connection between the thought and the motivation for the thought. As we step back onto our foundation of the breath, we can develop the dispassion that enables us to let go of all the different causes of stress and suffering in the mind.

So this is why we need to develop mindfulness and why this quality of keeping something in mind is such an important part of the path. If you find yourself tempted to go jumping into your plans for tomorrow, remind yourself: You've planned many, many tomorrows without really noticing what you're doing. Isn't it time you stepped back and gained a sense of what's going on? What is this process? It's only when you step back that, as the Buddha said, you begin to see things that you never saw before, realize things you've never realized before, and taste a freedom you've never tasted before. That's the potential of the practice—and that, too, is something you want to keep in mind.