

Study & Practice

September 26, 2011

A while back, I was asked to speak at a meditation group where most of the people didn't consider themselves Buddhist. They just liked the meditation, liked to practice mindfulness.

They asked me to explain how necessary it was to read other teachings and the Canon to augment the meditation. And it struck me the main issue was understanding what mindfulness is. If you see it simply as a matter of accepting, accepting, accepting whatever comes up, being nonreactive, being nonjudgmental, then the Buddha wouldn't have had to say very much, just, "Accept more. Accept more thoroughly."

But that's not what mindfulness is. It means "keeping something in mind." And one of the things you have to keep in mind is the extent to which you *are* shaping your experience. So you want to shape it well: by the attitudes you bring and by your ideas of what you actually can do to shape your experience.

This is where reading is useful. It suggests possibilities you might not have thought of otherwise. And it gives you some good strategies to try. One is to notice that when the Buddha teaches mindfulness—i.e., this ability to keep something in mind—he gives you some frames of reference along with some recommendations as to the qualities you want to bring to them.

The frames of reference are the body in and of itself, like we're doing right now focusing on the breath; feelings in and of themselves, i.e., feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain; mind-states in and of themselves, noticing, say, whether the mind is overcome by passion or is free of passion, overcome by aversion or free of aversion or delusion, and then noticing, as you get into the meditation, ever more refined distinctions in the mind; and then mental qualities, specific qualities that come up in the mind. If you think of the mind as a committee, mind-states are like the whole committee agreeing on something. Mental qualities are the different members, which sometimes are with you and sometimes are against you if you want to meditate. Again, you look at these things in and of themselves, as events happening: That's your frame of reference.

The "in and of themselves" is important. After all, it's very easy when you think of a feeling of pleasure, say, to associate all the things that would give rise to that pleasure, and then the mind slips off in their direction. If there's a feeling of pain, the mind's going to run and try to find something that will give it pleasure, instead of looking at the pain in and of itself as an event, as something that comes and goes, and around which a lot of mental qualities can gather.

These various frames of reference are all right here together. It's very easy to move from one to the next—or away from them entirely. But when you've got them here together, as when you're focusing on the breath, with the feelings associated with the breath, the mind-states that help you stay here, the mental qualities that are either getting in the way or helping you, then you've got everything you need to see all right here. If you move from one set to another consciously, it's perfectly okay. So you want to be able to keep these things in mind and not slip off to another frame of reference without knowing what you're doing.

Like that science-fiction story I read years ago, which featured a spacecraft that didn't have to use fuel because it moved simply by changing its frame of reference. If its frame of reference was the Earth, it would stay with the Earth and wouldn't move. If its frame of reference was the Sun, it would move away from the Earth at the same speed that the Earth is moving around the Sun, going in the opposite direction. If its frame of reference was the center of the galaxy, it would be way out there.

And the mind is like that. It shifts its frame of reference very quickly. And you can very quickly find yourself in a totally foreign space from where you thought you were.

So you want to be able to keep this frame of reference in mind—keep reminding yourself, for instance, that you're going to stay with the breath. And you're going to look at everything in the body in terms of the breath. There are levels of breath energy that you can sense, getting into the details or getting a large sense of the background energy in the body and learning how to stay balanced right there. Those are some of the things you keep in mind.

Then you want to bring in two other qualities besides the mindfulness. One of them is alertness, watching what you're doing, checking on the mind, checking on the body, i.e., checking on your object and also checking on the state of the mind to see whether it's going to stay here or not, being quick to notice when it's beginning to slip off.

The third quality is ardency. This is where things get complex, because ardency means basically right effort, and right effort involves a lot of sub-factors. There can be the effort to comprehend something, there can be the effort to abandon something, there can be the effort to develop. If you know that the mind has unskillful tendencies and you're going into a situation where your buttons tend to get pushed, prepare yourself so that you can prevent those unskillful tendencies from coming up or taking over. You know they're probably going to come up when the button gets pushed, but you don't have to let them out in your words or your actions. You don't want them to take over the mind.

There are some things to tolerate, other things that you don't want to

tolerate. You have to learn how to tolerate painful sensations when you can't avoid them and painful words that other people speak, because, after all, they have their right to use their mouths. But you don't want to tolerate unskillful qualities that are going to threaten to take over the mind.

So you have to learn how to make these distinctions and, from them, to figure out what needs to be done right now. This is where it's useful to read what the Buddha has to say about how you might comprehend suffering, say, or how you might abandon its cause. Look at the way he defines suffering so that you can get a sense of what in your life really is suffering. Because sometimes there are things that he classes as suffering that we actually like, we go for. Some things that he classifies as the path to the end of suffering go against the grain.

So it's useful not only to know what these things are, but also to learn useful strategies for getting yourself to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not—inspiring yourself, motivating yourself. That's when it's useful to read what he has to say and then to keep it in mind.

That's another function of mindfulness. It's not just keeping the body in mind, but remembering that things are going to come up and you yourself are in the process of shaping a lot of the stuff to begin with. So what can you do to shape it skillfully? Because one of the things you really do have to accept is the extent to which you are responsible for the amount of suffering you're undergoing. Other people may be doing horrible things, but the question of whether you're going to suffer from that or not: That's your responsibility. And learning how not to suffer requires a lot of skill.

So when you find yourself running out of strategies, it's useful to look and see what the Buddha had to say, what the ajans had to say.

You find as you practice that you go through rhythms. There'll be times when you're exploring inside, developing skill, and you don't want any books to get in the way. At other times, you run out of what you know and you need to get some more inspiration or to widen your sense of what the possibilities are. That's when you go back to read some more.

But everything ultimately gets tested right here, as you're trying to stay with the breath and to deal skillfully with the breath itself and with everything else that comes up, whether it's in terms of the body or your feelings or mind-states or individual mental qualities. There's a lot to be done here. And they're all good things.

As the Buddha said, there are three factors of the path that specifically work together. There's right view as to what's skillful and what's not. Right mindfulness helps you remember that you want to abandon what's unskillful and develop what's skillful. And then there's the actual right effort to carry through with what right view tells you and right mindfulness remembers.

Notice that the effort here is not so much physical effort, requiring that you drive and drive and drive yourself into the ground: That's not what the Buddha's talking about. It's the effort to watch what the mind is doing and what needs to be done about what the mind is doing. It's an internal effort. So these three qualities—right view, right mindfulness, right effort—circle around every factor of the path.

And where do we get our right views? We get some of them from listening and reading. We get some by thinking through what we've listened to and read. And we get some of them from just watching, looking at what we're doing right now and seeing where it's causing stress—and trying to detect when that stress is unnecessary.

As the Buddha said, there are two ways that awakening comes. One is through listening to the voice of another person teaching the Dhamma. The other is through your own appropriate attention, i.e., looking at your actions and figuring out what's working, what's not. But even if the inspiration comes from the voice of another, the voice of another can't do the work for you. You take what you learn and you apply it, accepting the fact—and this where the acceptance is really important—that you *are* shaping things, so you might as well learn how to shape them well.

The path is something you fabricate, you put it together. And so try to develop an artisan's sense of pride in your work. That's what you want to keep in mind.