

The Governing Principle

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In the passage where the Buddha describes the different functions of the qualities you want to bring to the path, he describes mindfulness as the governing principle. In another passage, he explains what that means. Essentially, when you see that there's a good quality that hasn't arisen within you yet, you're mindful to give rise to it. Once you've given rise to it, you try to maintain it. That's what mindfulness does, so keep that in mind.

This is the exact opposite of what you often hear: that mindfulness simply watches things arising and passing away without interfering. But here its duty is to remind you: You've got to give rise to skillful qualities in the mind. And once you've got something skillful, you want to maintain it, to try to make sure that it doesn't pass away.

So always keep this in mind as you're practicing, because the teachings that tell you otherwise are all over the place. When we were trying to find a good translation for "mindfulness" in French, one of the words that was proposed for keeping the breath in mind was objected to by a French scholar saying, "That's saying things could actually last, that you could actually conserve them and keep them, whereas everything arises and passes away momentarily." That statement is a real misuse of the teaching on inconstancy.

Your duty with regard to the four noble truths is to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path. To develop means that you give rise to it; and once it's there, you keep it going. That's the function of desire and right effort as well: the desire to abandon unskillful qualities, to develop qualities that are skillful, and once you've got them there, to keep them going and to keep developing them so that they get better and better. This may seem to be fighting against inconstancy, stress, and not self—and that's precisely what it is. We're trying to create a state of mind that lasts, that's easeful, and that's under your control—to see how far you can go in that

direction. This requires a special set of skills. You want to maintain the good things you've got, and that means recognizing them for what they are.

In the very beginning, concentration comes in little tiny pieces—moments of stillness, moments of clarity, moments of ease. You want to learn how to recognize them, even as you're just working with each in-and-out breath. Where in the breath is it comfortable? Where is it not? Can you smooth out the uncomfortable parts and maintain the comfortable ones, and learn how to appreciate them?

That's one of the functions of the teaching on emptiness: When you realize that your mind has settled down to a certain extent, you realize that it's empty of a lot of the burdens and troubles that it had before. The Buddha makes a comparison with leaving a village and going into the wilderness. You sit down in the wilderness and you realize all the hustle and bustle of life in the village is not there: The concerns about people, the concerns about your belongings, are not there. There's just the lesser disturbance that comes from being in the wilderness and perceiving it as wilderness.

Then you learn how to drop that perception because, after all, the perception of wilderness contains perceptions of dangers. So you drop the perception of wilderness and just think about earth. Everything that's there is just earth—the earth in your body, the earth in trees around you, the land around you. Even if there were an animal that would come out and eat you, that would be earth too—just earth eating earth. When you think in those terms, there's a lot less to get concerned about, because, after all, it's not eating you, it's eating the body. But you don't even think about those details; you just think about the earth-ness of everything. That's an even more refined state.

The Buddha recommends that before you try to move on from that, you first learn to appreciate it. Notice that there's a lessening of the burden of stress. There's a greater sense of openness, and he says to indulge in that, to delight in that, because this is what gives energy to your path.

So as you're focusing on the breath here, keep the same principle in mind. Whatever ease there is, appreciate that,

cupping it in your hands, protecting it. It may just be one spot in the body to begin with, but think of it as like a small fire that you try to light in the midst of a windy plain. You've got to cup whatever little fire you've got in your hands to protect it from the wind. There will come a point when the fire is strong enough so that you don't have to cup it quite so closely. You can pull back a bit, but you still have to do what you can to protect it, because the wind is blowing. It's an open plain. So you put up a piece of metal or a piece of wood or something to shelter the flame. You keep looking after it. This principle of maintaining is very important because it's only when you maintain concentration that it can really develop into a strength. So you always try to keep this in mind: Take that sense of well-being and do what you can to keep it going.

This is where Ajahn Lee recommends that, when you're evaluating the breath, you not only look at where's it's comfortable and adjust it to make it comfortable; but then also when it is comfortable, you try and get some use out of it, because that amplifies the sense of well-being, at the same time making it more solid. Think of your awareness filling the whole body. The breath energy fills the whole body. You might ask yourself—holding the perception in mind that there should be breath energy filling the body—to notice where it's strongest, where the breath energy feels most healthy. Then notice where it's weak. Can you think of good breath spreading from the healthiest spots to go into the weaker ones? Is there any blockage? Do the energy channels feel like they've been squeezed out? Then think that you can open, open, open them up and protect that sense of energy. Once you realize that it's there, hold onto it. Again, holding onto it is not like grabbing hold of it, it's more like protecting it, cupping it in your hands. Protect it from the winds out there, because there are winds coming from all directions.

For example, dealing with other people, you suddenly run into their energies. Or you go to certain places, and there are certain strange energies there. You don't want them to invade your space, so you try to protect yourself, because the breath, as it flows through the body, is like an electric

current. It creates a magnetic field around the body that can act as a protection against negative energies coming in from outside, so that even though you're dealing with difficult people, you don't have to inhale their difficulty, you don't have to absorb their difficulty, you don't have to let it come and occupy parts of your body. You were there first. You've got this protective shield.

It's when you sense this that you realize the value of maintaining. This gives the mind a good, safe place to stay. You become more and more sensitive to what's been invading your space all along and now you don't have to suffer from that. You've got something to help you battle against those negative energies, both within and without, so once things settle down and they feel good, try to maintain that.

Now, there are times when you hit something really good and you get so excited that you drop it. It's not so much that the desire to keep it going is a bad thing. After all, that's part of right effort. The trick lies learning how to make that desire skillful, remembering that to keep it going requires certain causes that you're trying to learn; and that getting the mind in place and keeping it in place are two different things. The keeping requires a little bit less energy. It's a more consistent, looking-after kind of energy, a hovering-around kind of energy. But it's something you've got to do continuously for it to really get the best results. So you focus the desire on looking for the causes and maintaining what causes you can.

Try to be gentle with the concentration. Learn to appreciate it. Learn to treat it with care, because when you look after it, it'll do a lot of good things for you as well. It's like that story of the lion and the mouse. The lion catches the mouse and the mouse pleads with him, "Let me go and someday maybe I'll help you." The lion is so amused by the mouse's idea that he lets it go. And, of course, later on the lion is caught in the large hunter's net and the mouse is able to come along and chew the net and free the lion. So this little bit of concentration, this little spot of being centered

here in the body - if you look after it, maybe someday it'll be able to let you free.