

Mindfulness the Seamstress

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The reason we have meditation instructions is because there are certain things you should remember as you meditate. We're not just here passively watching things go by, go by, go by. We have to remember what we're doing. And that requires mindfulness, because mindfulness is what stitches different moments of attention together. Otherwise, there's just a moment of attention and it's gone, a moment and it's gone. If they're not connected, there's no understanding. You can't remember what you did. You can't follow the effects of what you've done and make the connections unless there's mindfulness that can remember what you did. So remember to try to stitch things together.

It's interesting: The Canon talks about craving as being the seamstress—the seamstress that ties different thoughts together and turns them into a state of becoming. Here we're talking about *mindfulness* as a seamstress, but that shouldn't be strange, because there *is* an element of desire in your mindfulness. You have a purpose. This is what the ardency is all about: You're trying to get the mind to settle down. And for it to settle down, you need to have mindfulness so that you can make the connections between what you're doing and what you need to do in order to get the mind to settle down—and also to develop the sense of skill. If you can remember what you did in one meditation session and got good results, it's good to try to remember that and then apply it to the next meditation session. You may not get quite the same results, because the mind is complex, and sometimes there are things you miss. But if you work at this and if you want it enough to make this a skill, then that drives the mindfulness to stitch things together.

So in this case, the craving or the desire is part of right effort. In fact, it's having the right desire that makes your efforts right, makes your mindfulness right, makes your concentration right.

So have a sense of stitching things together, and the meditation will make a lot more sense.

There's that passage where the Buddha's talking to Rahula before he teaches him breath meditation. I've quoted it before. It's where he says to try to make the mind like earth—or to “develop the meditation in tune with earth” is what he actually says. Then he goes through not just the four elements, but also the property of space as well. These are images you can hold in mind to develop not

only your mindfulness, but also your patience and endurance. You're trying to find the level of awareness in the mind that's not reactive.

This is something different from mindfulness: The non-reactivity is equanimity combined with endurance. And you want to develop these skills before you do breath meditation, because you're going to be trying to notice things. As you're developing these skills, you're getting good use of mindfulness, keeping in mind that image: either earth or water or fire or wind or space. The way the Buddha explains space—he says space isn't established anywhere. In the same way, what happens in the mind doesn't have to get established there.

So you are selective. There are some things you remember and you stitch together, and other things you decide, "I'm not going to react to that. I'm not going to let that dwell in my mind and overcome my mind." This means that you're making choices, which is one of the reasons why this should not be called choiceless awareness. You're making choices as to what kind of awareness you want to develop and how you're going to develop it. And you want to be conscious of the fact that you're holding in mind a perception: the perception of earth.

Then you engage in a little bit of analysis. If you're trying to make your mind like earth, what are the things that come up and make it unlike earth? In other words, what things do spark a response, a reaction? Can you let them go? Because what's at issue is not just events. It's also the expectations you have, the things you hold on to—thoughts you hold on to, things you identify with—that can make something either easy to bear with or hard to bear with. So if something makes it hard to bear, for the sake of the meditation you've just got to learn how to say, "Nope, I'm not going to hold on to that right now."

In this way, holding that perception in mind is an activity of discernment. You're trying to sort out which parts of your awareness can be, say, with pain or with harsh words or with other difficulties and yet not be overcome by them. You want to develop that aspect of your awareness and then bring it to the breath meditation, so that you can see the processes of fabrication going on in the breath and in the mind, and sort out which ones are skillful and which ones are not.

How are you going to know what's skillful? You look at the results. Part of this, of course, involves remembering what the Buddha had to say about what is skillful and what's not. But those are broad-brush examples or ideas. You want to see the particulars. When you hold a certain perception of the breath in mind, what does it do to the breathing? What does it do to the mind? What kind of concentration do you develop? After all, there are lots of kinds of concentration: There's concentration with mindfulness, concentration without mindfulness;

concentration where you feel so locked in that you can't even think, other kinds of concentration where you *can* think; some kinds of concentration where you're not even aware of the body at all—the outside world disappears.

When these things come up, it's good to know, "Well, what did I do before they came up?" Then remember that if you can, because they all have their uses. There are times when the mind really needs simply to rest. It's very tired, and you don't want to have to do a lot of directed thought and evaluation. You just want to settle right in and feel snugly plugged into the breath. Other times, you want a more expansive awareness. You want to be able to bring questions to what you're doing.

So how are you going to know these things? Through the mindfulness. You're stitching things together, getting a sense of cause and effect, remembering what you did, seeing how the results play out, and then getting a sense of when that particular kind of concentration is useful, and when another kind is more useful.

All of this is driven by desire, and it's implemented by mindfulness stitching things together. There will come points where you try to undo the stitches, to separate things out. But for the time being, you want to develop this ability to remember, to connect moments of attention. Make it as continuous as you can, as reliable as you can, because it's the basis for your skill.