

How to Feed Mindfulness

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We sit here with a lot of potentials: potential sensations in the body, potential qualities in the mind. The practice of meditation is learning how to put aside the unskillful potentials, how to develop the skillful ones, and how to take advantage of the skillful ones—learning how to feed them, to give them strength, so that they basically take charge and help put an end to suffering and stress.

You could, if you wanted to, sit here and spend the whole hour thinking about all kinds of random, frivolous things. Or you could sit here creating a lot of pain. Psychologists studying the nervous system have discovered that there are times when you have a sensation of pain but there's really nothing, no pain signal, coming in at the end of the nerve. The monitoring stations along the nerve interpret a particular signal as a pain signal, and so that's what they send on up the line. That means that you could sit here focusing on whatever potentials for pain there are, and you could turn almost anything into a pain—but you don't. You focus on the potentials for pleasure. Notice, when the breath comes in, where it's feeling good, which part of the breath cycle feels nicest. Is it the middle of the breath, the beginning of the breath, the end of the breath? Can you notice when the breath is getting too long? Can you catch yourself squeezing the breath as it goes out? When you squeeze it, you're weakening the potential for pleasure that the breath can give.

Someplace in the middle of the in-breath there's a point of balance. You might want to focus your attention there and maximize that particular sensation, which means that the breath will get shorter and shorter, more and more subtle as it hovers around that point of balance. If that's too subtle to notice, simply be aware of when the breath is too long, when it's too short, too shallow, too deep, which parts of the body would feel better if they were given a greater role in the breathing process. Try to figure out which ways of breathing will help to develop the potentials of comfort, ease, refreshment, fullness in the body.

As you do this, you're developing good potentials in the mind as well. The two major ones are mindfulness and alertness. I recently read someone saying that mindfulness is an unfabricated phenomenon—that only your thought processes that pull you away from the present moment count as fabricated, that when you're in the pure present there's no fabrication going on at all.

But that's a major misunderstanding. Mindfulness is something you *do*. It's a fabricated activity. Alertness is something you do. It's a fabricated activity as well. And there are potentials in the mind that can either foster the mindfulness or starve it. In other words, mindfulness is something you have to feed. It's not your simple awareness. It's the ability to keep something in mind. The reason we don't understand things, the reason we don't see the connection between cause and effect, is because we forget. It's because we forget that we can't stick with our resolves. Say you decide you're going to stay here for a whole hour with the breath—and five minutes later you find yourself planning tomorrow's meal, or thinking about events far away in Iceland. What happened? You forgot. And

why did you forget? Well, there was a blanking out for a moment or two because you weren't paying proper attention to the causes for mindfulness.

The Buddha identifies two qualities that feed mindfulness and help it grow. The first is well-purified virtue. Virtue here means the intention not to harm: not to do harm to yourself, not to do harm to other living beings. If you have harmful intentions in mind, part of the mind goes along with them and part of the mind doesn't. There's a conflict. And one of the mind's tricks for going along with the harmful intention is to allow itself to forget that the intention is actually harmful. If this becomes a habit, it's hard to develop mindfulness because you're running up against these walls of forgetfulness that the mind very insistently wants to keep up. Your mindfulness runs up against them and gets deflected.

This is why people in Thailand, before they meditate, sometimes make a vow: "I'm going to observe the five precepts. I'm going to stick with them. And I'm sincere in that resolution." This is even easier when you already have been following the five precepts. You reflect on your actions, and there is nothing you regret. You don't have to go into denial. That way it's easier for mindfulness to be continuous. But the simple act of resolving to be harmless in all your activities—harmless in what you do, harmless in what you say, harmless in what you think—can begin to create the right conditions for mindfulness immediately. Make that a principle you want to hold to.

The other quality that helps feed mindfulness is views made straight—straight in the sense that they're in line with the truth: understanding that your actions will have consequences, that skillful intentions will tend to lead to pleasant results, unskillful intentions to unpleasant results. This is a principle that wasn't just made up by somebody. It's been observed by people who've developed their minds to the point where they really can see what's going on. And on the basis of that, you realize, for example, that generosity is a good thing, gratitude is a good thing, because people do have the choice to act skillfully or unskillfully. You have to be grateful for the times when they've chosen to be skillful, and grateful to yourself for the times you've chosen to be skillful, because thinking in this way helps to break down the barriers in the mind that say, "I don't want to think about the Dhamma right now. I want to think about sex, or I want to think about drugs, or I want to think about who-knows-what." If there's part of the mind that says, "Hey, you can't do that without consequences," you've got your first line of defense against those wandering, unskillful thoughts.

Then there will be part of the mind that says, "I don't want to think about that because it means I've been acting unskillfully in the past, and it just hurts too much to think about that." That's where the Buddha recommends developing the right attitude toward your past mistakes. It's not inevitable that you're going to have to suffer a lot from your past mistakes. As the Buddha said, if you can develop an attitude of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, that'll mitigate the results of your past bad actions. If you can train yourself so that the mind isn't overcome by pleasure, isn't overcome by pain—in other words, you don't let these feelings get in the way of your seeing what's actually going on—then again, the mind is immune, or at least the results of your past mistakes will be mitigated.

So the proper attitude to have toward your past bad actions is, one, realize that remorse is not going to undo them. Simply make the resolve that you're not

going to repeat those actions again. And then, two, try to develop attitudes of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

When the meditation gets dry, bring out these attitudes and work on spreading them around, realizing that other people's unhappiness isn't going to help you in any way, nor is your unhappiness going to help you in any way. So why would you wish for anybody's unhappiness? Even with people who have been cruel and unprincipled, you realize that if they suffer more, they'll probably get even more cruel, more unprincipled. So try to picture them learning to see to the error of their ways and changing their ways. In other words, you wish for them to start creating the causes for happiness. You don't feel that you have to settle old scores first before you let them be happy or wise. When you learn how to think in these ways, it helps to cut through a lot of the barriers you create in the mind, a lot of the unskillful attitudes that can get in the way of continual mindfulness.

So when you've lowered the walls, you can see back into the past and ahead into the future. You can start seeing the connections between actions and their results. When you focus the mind in a certain way, what are the results over time? If you're mindful of your actions, you can really see this for yourself. If you change the way you focus, if you change the way you breathe, what effect does that have over time? Sometimes the effects are immediate; sometimes they take a while to seep in. Only if you're really mindful can you see the long-term effects. Only if you're alert can you see the short-term effects. This is why mindfulness and alertness have to go together.

I was reading a Dhamma talk by Upasika Kee last night in which she was saying that real insight, as soon as it sees, lets go in that very moment. It's not that you see in one moment and let go in the next. You see and you let go in the seeing, right there and then. That kind of insight requires very quick alertness. But the ability to develop that kind of alertness requires solid mindfulness, long-term mindfulness, so that you can understand how you get the mind in the right place to see things clearly to begin with. All too often when people sit and meditate, the meditation either goes poorly and they have no idea why it's going poorly, or it goes well and they have no idea why it's going well. That's because they haven't been watching mindfully. They watch for a little bit and then they forget. Then they come back, and then they forget, so that they don't really see the connections.

Mindfulness is what keeps the practice in mind and allows you to remember what you did so you can understand the connection between what you did and the results you're getting. Alertness is what allows you to see what you're doing right now. When you develop the resolve to act only on skillful intentions, and the proper understanding of how your actions shape your life, those are the conditions that feed mindfulness, that allow mindfulness and alertness to grow strong.

So it's not the case that people can just walk in off the street, sit down, and develop mindfulness. It takes the ability to look at your life and make some decisions about how you're going to live, and how you understand the best way of living. That's when mindfulness has a chance.