

Remember This

January 16, 2014

One of the really useful qualities we're developing as we stay with the breath is mindfulness. If you're going to stay with the breath, you have to keep the breath in mind. As soon as you forget the breath, you're off. This training in remembering is what plays a huge part in the practice—and it bears repeating again and again and again that mindfulness is remembering. It's your active memory. It's how you apply your memory to what you're doing right now, what you're experiencing right now —because there's a lot to remember about how to shape your experience skillfully. This makes a huge difference on the path.

Usually when a thought comes up, it's *your* thought. If an opinion comes up, it's *your* opinion. A feeling, an emotion, a mood: The first thing you think is, "This is my mood," "my feeling," or "my opinion." We don't get to look at these things carefully, in and of themselves. We just ride with them, and we end up dealing with these thoughts and opinions in very unskillful ways, because of that framework of "my."

So we need a new framework, a different framework for looking at these things, and that's what we've got to remember.

The Buddha said to look at the body in and of itself; feelings in and of themselves —"feelings" here meaning feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain; mind states, which is where moods, emotions, and opinions all come in; and then mental qualities—specific mental qualities that are skillful or unskillful and go into making up mind states. In each of these cases, the Buddha gives you a framework for looking at these things in and of themselves so that, for the time being, you can take away the "my" and "mine," and instead look at these things as events, part of a causal chain. Where do these things come from? Where do they lead?

Take feelings, for instance. There are feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. As the Buddha points out, in the abstract, there's nothing really wrong either with pleasure or pain. But there are specific pleasures that are worth cultivating and specific pleasures that are not. It's the same with pains. There are a lot of pains that are totally useless. The Buddha gives an example of all the pain that went into the huge sacrifices kings and queens used to do back in the Buddha's time. He said it's painful in the doing and painful in the result. That kind of pain doesn't accomplish anything.

And there are pleasures. There's the pleasure of concentration. There's the pleasure of being generous. Those are skillful pleasures. As he points out, some pleasures are worth developing, and other pleasures are worth dropping. We're not here just watching things arising and passing away on their own because they *don't* arise and pass away on their own. There's an element of intention in how we shape our experience.

Simply focusing on the breath, you're changing the feelings in the body. If you learn how to apply your attention to the breath in the proper way, you can create what the Buddha calls "pleasure not of the flesh." This doesn't happen on its own. There may be moments when it comes and goes, but you're not here just watching the moments. You're trying to develop the ease that comes in being with the breath, the pleasure that comes with being with the breath, to make it continuous. And that's a good pleasure. That's something worth cultivating.

As for unskillful pleasures: The Buddha says you want to stay away from them because of the impact they have on your mind—and through that, the impact they have on your actions and the way you affect other people.

So this is the framework you're trying to remember when a feeling comes. It's not so much, "It's my feeling," or "I like it." The question is, "Where does this feeling lead?" This brings your feelings and mind states into the realm of right resolve.

As the Buddha said, the first thing that really got him on the path was his ability to separate his thoughts into two types: those worth pursuing and those worth letting go. What was the distinction? Basically, the distinction was: Where do these thoughts lead? What kind of intention was motivating them? Where does the intention lead? If the thoughts had to do with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, he would drop them—beat them down, actually.

But if the thoughts were thoughts of renunciation, good will, or harmlessness, he'd allow them to roam around. He said it was like having cattle during the dry season when there's no danger of their getting into the crops. All you have to do is just be aware: Okay, they're there. Remember that they're there. That was it. But he noticed that if you continued thinking in those ways, even if they were skillful, it would eventually tire the mind. That's why he brought the mind to concentration.

The same principle applies to all the different thought patterns and mind states that can go through the mind. You have to figure out which are the ones you can allow to roam around, and which are the ones you've got to bring under control— and specifically, what kind of thinking is useful to get the mind into concentration. If your energy level is down and the mind is getting depressed, okay, what can you do to lift your spirits? When the mind is scattered all over the place with lots of energy, what can you do to calm it down? If the mind is not concentrated, what can you do to get it concentrated? If the mind isn't in an expansive state, what can you do to expand it?

These are the questions the Buddha has you ask. This is the framework you want to keep in mind. This is your frame of reference; this is where you want to establish your mindfulness.

It's the same with mental qualities. The hindrances? You want to recognize: These are hindrances. Sensual desire comes up, and all too often, we just want to run with it. Thoughts of ill will come up. We can think of all the harm that other people have done us, and we can stew in that for quite a while. The mind gets sleepy? You just tell yourself, "Ah, a sign that I'm getting drowsy. I'm getting tired. I *need* to rest." In other words, you side with the hindrances because

they're yours. The Buddha wants you to take off that little label of "me" and say, "Okay, look at this simply in terms of this framework; keep this framework in mind." If any one of these five hindrances comes up, it's something you want to deal with so you can get it out of the mind.

This is where another main aspect of mindfulness practice comes in, which is arduity. What do you do to develop the skillful states, and what do you do to get rid of the unskillful ones? You want to keep that in mind as well. Whatever lessons you've learned in the past, try them all out. And if nothing seems to work? Okay, how do you use your ingenuity to figure out what's wrong? You watch again until you can see the connection between a particular mind state and what's giving rise to it—and then, how you can cut it off at the source.

As for the factors for awakening, how do you give rise to them? How do you recognize them when they're there? Sometimes they come in just little seeds or little, tiny sprouts. How do you recognize that moment of concentration, a moment of mindfulness? How do you recognize the potential for rapture? You want to look for these things. Learn how to recognize them, and then learn how to nurture them when they're there. When you're having trouble settling down, where in the body is there a sense of calm or serenity? If you're all tied up in tension—say, in your head—okay, which part of the body is *not* tense? Focus there.

It's like that old book of drawing on the right side of the brain where, when you're drawing a face, instead of drawing the eyes, the nose, and the mouth, you draw the spaces *between* the mouth and the nose, between the eyes and the nose, between the edge of the hair and the eyebrow. In other words, you're focusing on the spaces you tend to ignore. You find that you can draw much more accurate pictures because you don't let your preconceived notions of what an eye or nose looks like get in the way. You don't have preconceived notions about the shape of forehead or the shape of the space between eyebrows and eyes. Those are the areas where you tend not to look. So by focusing on the areas where you tend not to look, you find there's a space, and you can draw the new and unfamiliar space. You get a much better picture.

It's the same with focusing on the breath energy in the body in areas where there's a lot of tension. You don't focus on those; you focus on areas where things are going well. The "going well" here may not be all that impressive to begin with, but if you give it some space, give it some time, it'll develop. And one of the advantages of the kind of mindfulness practice that encourages you to be accepting and equanimous and patient is just that: You develop powers of patience and equanimity. So when you can't figure something out, you watch. And when you've figured out something, and you know it's going to take time, well, you have the patience to stick with it.

But mindfulness practice doesn't *stop* with equanimity. Equanimity is simply one of the elements of the practice. But remember that mindfulness is the remembering and the framework you're trying to keep in mind so that you recognize, when something comes up in the mind, what you can do with it: when's the time to be equanimous, and when's not. This way, mindfulness practice fits ultimately into the four noble truths. Each truth has a duty. When

something comes up, is it part of the truth of stress? Okay, remember: What do you do with stress? You try to comprehend it. You try to see where there's the clinging—which particular aggregate you're clinging to—and then you learn how to depersonalize these things so that you can get the upper hand.

Part of you may resist, thinking, “Well, this is *me*. These are *my* feelings. This is me, mine”—whatever. But what's happened is these things have taken you over. You're enslaving yourself to these things, the things that you cling to so much. By taking possession of them, they take possession of you.

So what the Buddha's giving you is a framework for freeing yourself. It requires effort and ardency, but it's all to the good. It's in this way that mindfulness leads to right effort, to right concentration, and to all the other right elements of the path that take you to freedom.

So remember this: Mindfulness is about remembering, holding a certain framework in mind, and then using that as a guide to what needs to be done with whatever comes up.

And you're not just waiting for things to come up willy-nilly. You realize that certain things, when they come up, you have to let go. You have to get rid of them. Other things, when they come up, you want to encourage—to keep them going so that they can grow. As the Buddha says in a sutta that I hadn't read until just recently, this is what it means to have mindfulness as your governing principle, not just watching things coming and going, but realizing that some things, when they come, should be allowed to go really fast. In other words, you get rid of them. Other things, you want to encourage them to come because they're skillful. They're helpful. If they don't arise on their own, you make them arise—and you try to keep them from passing away.

So remember this, because this is the framework that helps you find freedom from all the things you used to lay claim to. But then, when you learn that you can pull off that label of “me” or “my,” you're not deprived. You're freed.