

A Meditator's Vocabulary

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When you meditate, it's good to have a precise vocabulary for what you're doing. It helps to direct your attention to where it should go, helps you to notice things you should notice, and to put aside the things that are really of no importance.

In the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness, he talks of keeping track of the body in and of itself. *Anupassana* is the word here. It means watching something continuously, seeing what happens to it. For instance, you stay focused on the body in and of itself—in other words, not in terms of how it functions in the world, whether it's good looking or not, whether it's strong enough to do the jobs you have got to do or not, but simply what it's like to have a body in and of itself: what it's like to breathe, what it's like to experience the elements in the body, the parts that it's made of, what it's like to move, what's going to happen to the body as it dies. Just those things in and of themselves: Those are the topics of the meditation. In fact, the Buddha says they're not only the topics of mindfulness, they're also the topics or themes—*nimitta*—of concentration practice.

Then he tells you to apply three qualities of mind to your anupassana: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, just that. A lot of times mindfulness is confused with awareness. But the Buddha is very specific. He says mindfulness means the ability to call something to mind, the ability to remember. He illustrates it with the practice of the four *satipatthanas*: foundations of mindfulness or establishings of mindfulness. In other words, you remember the body in and of itself. When you're keeping track of the body, you've got to keep reminding yourself that this is where you want to stay. It's like tuning into a radio station. There are other frequencies out there, but you want to tune into this one and then stay here, not fiddling with the dial. You're going to stay with the body even though other things come up, feelings come up, mind states come up, mental qualities come up. You're aware of them, but you remember to keep viewing them in reference to how they relate to the body, how they relate to the breath.

If anger arises, watch how the anger affects the breath. If pleasure arises, watch how the breath and the pleasure are related. Don't leave the breath to gobble down the pleasure. Notice that it's there, then try to see the connection, but don't let go of your basic frame of reference which, for the time being, is the

body in and of itself. Just keep reminding yourself to stay there. That's what mindfulness is about, that mental note that keeps you with your topic, keeps you with your frame of reference.

The actual noticing of what is going on is the duty of alertness. But alertness is very specific. In the canon it's defined in two ways. One is knowing what the body is doing, how it's moving; the other is noticing how things are moving in the mind, how feelings and perceptions, thought constructs and consciousness are moving in the mind. That's where you focus. It's not your duty to be aware of everything that's happening in the present moment, because that would leave you very scattered, and the meditation would lose direction. The important thing happening right now is what you're doing, through the movement of the breath or the movements of the mind. That's what alertness is concerned with.

Finally, there's ardency, which is defined as right effort. You generate the desire to do this practice well. You're intent on putting forth effort and energy to look for what you're doing that's skillful and what you're doing that's not, to encourage what's skillful and discourage what's not.

When you apply this ardency to the alertness, that means that you look for the movements of the mind that are skillful and the movements of the mind that are not. This is the beginning of insight, the beginning of discernment: noticing not only what you're doing but also the effect of what you're doing. When you focus on the breath, how are you focusing? What are the results of how you're focusing? If they're not satisfactory, what can you do to change? If they *are* satisfactory, what can you do to maintain that state?

So the emphasis here is on noticing what you're doing, noticing the results of your actions. As for other things that are going on in the present moment right now, you can leave those alone. You don't want to notice too many things, because if you do, your attention gets scattered, you lose focus, and you miss what's really important about the present moment, which is how you're shaping the present moment.

This question of what you're doing right now is the basic question in the meditation: Do you really know what you're doing? A lot of the movements of the mind are subconscious. A lot of the movements of the mind are done in ignorance. Those are the ones that cause suffering. After all, that's the cause of suffering: the things that come out of the mind through ignorance. So when you're told to be alert to what's going on in the present moment, this is where you're supposed to focus, for this is what we're fighting: this ignorance of our own actions.

This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because the breath is very close to our intentions. In the factors of dependent co-arising, the breath is right there, right next to ignorance. *Avijja paccaya sankhara*: Fabrications are

conditioned by ignorance. The breath is the bodily fabrication. Directed thoughts and evaluation are verbal fabrication. But if you want to see directed thought and evaluation in action, it's good to focus on the thoughts and evaluations related to the way you breathe. That way you bring bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication together. Then there's mental fabrication, which comes down to two things: feelings and perceptions. So you've got the feelings that are related to the breath, and then your perceptions of what the breath is doing in the body, how you label the breathing, which sensation you label as breath, which sensations you label as other sensations in the body. You begin to notice how the way you label sensations in the body can have an effect on how you breathe. When you begin to see the breath as permeating the whole body, when you label the breath in terms of these subtle levels of breath energy, there's a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of well-being. And in the course of doing this you're noticing cause and effect—what you are doing and the results of what you are doing—right here, right now.

So try to keep these terms straightened out. When they're straightened out, they help sharpen your focus in the meditation. They give you a sense of what you're here for, what you're trying to do, what you're looking for, what you want to encourage, what you want to put aside. Being properly focused like this really helps you gain insight into the movements of the mind, especially the movements that cause suffering and the ones that help alleviate suffering. Those are the big issues, the focal points of what the Buddha taught: suffering and the end of suffering.

And you've got your laboratory to test those teachings right here. These different types of fabrication—the breath, directed thought and evaluation, which grow out of mindfulness and alertness together with ardency, and then perception and feeling: They're all right here, so you can observe how you're fabricating your experience, and can learn to do it skillfully.

This is another point that's often missed: Meditation is a skill. It's not a process of simply being open to whatever comes. It means noticing that your actions really do have an impact on shaping your present experience, and you can learn from watching your actions, watching their results, learning to refine how you approach the present moment, so that there's less and less ignorance in what you are doing. That way the meditation leads to the happiness, to the well-being you really want.