Mindfulness as a Goad

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To get the mind into concentration, we have to develop our mindfulness. Sometimes you hear mindfulness being defined as simply being aware of whatever is happening, but that’s not the Buddha’s definition. His definition was that it’s the faculty of the memory, your ability to call things to mind and keep them in mind. For instance, when you’re working with the breath, you want to keep the breath in mind, because it’s so easy to be sitting here. Things get comfortable, things get smooth, and you just drift right off. You forget where you are, and you find yourself other places. So you want to be able to keep the breath in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. And you want to call to mind all the different lessons you’ve learned from your past meditations, the lessons you’ve learned from reading, the lessons you’ve learned from listening to people talk, the lessons that are really appropriate and relevant right now. For instance, when things are uncomfortable inside, what are you going to do? The Buddha says you want to be able to breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to rapture, gives rise to pleasure. So what potentials do you have? You can change the way you breathe. You can change your mental image of the breath. If you think of the breath as simply the air coming in and out through the nose, that gives a very restricted area where you can feel pleasure. But if you think about it as the energy that goes coursing throughout the body each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that creates a much larger field in which you can find some pleasure. So there are things you can change here, things you can develop. That’s what we’re looking for, the potentials we have here. As the Buddha said, if everything we experienced right now were totally dependent on past actions or somebody else’s design for the world, there’d be no way to put an end to suffering. But the fact that we’re putting our experience together here right now means we can change that, and there is a path to the end of suffering. So as you’re designing the present moment, as you’re putting it together, it’s good to be able to keep certain things in mind, that these possibilities are here. So explore them, and make sure you stay with the breath. You can think of the breath coming in and out through all the pores. You can think of the breath coursing along the nerves. You can think of the breath starting inside, because after all it is energy, and the energy is here in the body. Where in the body does it start when you breathe in? And if you think of it starting at different places, what effect does that have? What you’re learning here is that you’re going to learn through asking questions, trying new things, experimenting to see what gets results. This is in line with the Buddhist principle that the Dhamma is nourished through commitment and reflection. And one of the qualities you want to have as a good meditator is your ingenuity, your ability to think up new questions, try out new ideas. Because as the Buddha said, the way you’re acting right now is causing suffering. So you’ve got to change the way you act. He gives you some ideas, where to look, what questions to ask, and then you want to take his ideas and run with them. It’s not the case that if something doesn’t appear in the Pali Canon, it’s not Dhamma. As all the Ajahns in the five force traditions say, if it works, it’s Dhamma. So try to see what works for you. And then try to remember what lessons you’ve learned. If you don’t remember the lessons you’ve learned from your past meditations, you say that there’s an advantage to having a beginner’s mind. Well, the beginner’s mind is the one that’s willing to try new things. But once you’ve tried something new and it actually works, you don’t want to forget. So this is where mindfulness keeps reminding you. You’ve learned these lessons before. You don’t have to learn them again. Just put them to use. You get better at them. This is in line with one of the images the Buddha gives for mindfulness, which is that it’s a code. And for a lot of us, we don’t live on farms anymore and we haven’t had any experience with using an animal to plow. But that’s the image that the Buddha has in mind. You have a water buffalo or an ox pulling your plow. The buffalo might go off to the right, it might go off to the left. You want it to go straight. So you have a goat. It’s basically a long stick with a point at the end. And if the buffalo is going too far to the right, you poke it in the right to make it want to go left. If it’s going too far to the left, you poke it on the left to make it go right. In other words, the goat is what keeps the animal on track. In the same way, mindfulness keeps you on the path. Keeps reminding you that there’s work to be done here. You can’t just sit here and wallow in the pleasure of the breath, wallow in the pleasure of concentration. There’s work to be done. If part of that work is getting better at your concentration, then it’s going to remind you, well, don’t wander off. Stay focused right here. Because this is where important things are happening. The problem is that sometimes they’re very subtle and they happen in a way that we don’t really notice. That means we have to get our concentration deeper. The more stillness you have in the mind, the more you’ll be able to pick up. It’s like walking into your house and seeing that there are signs that there are mice. The question is, where are the mice? You want to be able to hear the scratching, the noises they make on the wall. And to do that, you have to turn off every appliance in the house. Anything that’s making a hum, anything that’s making a noise. You’ve got to turn it off, turn it off, turn it off. It’s only then that the very subtle sounds in the wall will be detectable. In the same way, the movements of the mind are very subtle. If you want to detect them, you have to make the mind really, really still. Get the breath energies in the body really still. You don’t make them still by forcing yourself not to breathe. You just connect everything else in the body. All the energy channels in the body get connected really well. Everything flows easily throughout the body. And then the need you feel to pull the breath in, push the breath out, gets less and less and less. Things get more and more quiet and you begin to see what your mind is doing. When it applies a perception to something, you see precisely the moment when the perception gets applied. When you start thinking about something, talking to yourself about something, you begin to realize how many different voices there are in there. Because you’ve gotten very quiet, but alert at the same time. And the mindfulness is what tries to keep you alert. So think of it as a goat. It’s a little sharp stick and pokes you whenever you’re getting lazy, whenever you’re getting distracted, whenever you’re getting blurred out. You need something like this to remind you. You’re right here, you’re doing good work. Work that’s good, but you may not be doing it well, but the work is good. So get back to work. Stay on task. When your mindfulness is reminding you to be heedful like this, then you’ve got the foundation for something really good inside the mind.

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