

Memory & Motivation

September 24, 2013

When you focus on the breath, you're trying to stay in the present moment. But the present moment is not an isolated thing. It's connected with the past, connected with the future. So even though your primary interest is right here, still there are times when it's useful to think about the past, think about the future. This is to make sure that your ardency here in the present moment is going in the right direction.

Alertness is what keeps you in touch with the present. Mindfulness is what keeps you in touch with the past, remembering lessons from the past that might be useful for right now.

Mindfulness is also a matter of remembering the basic framework we're trying to bring here. Those four noble truths we chanted just now: They're always relevant. They're connected with the question: What's skillful to do right now? —“skillful” being defined as what doesn't lead to harm or suffering and actually leads away from suffering or stress.

Some skillful things you've learned from others and some you've learned from your own experience. Not everything that looks good in the present moment is going to have good results. We're not here just to grok the present moment to intuit immediately with one hundred percent trust that we'll know what's the right thing to do. This is not the *I Ching*, where each moment is unique and distinct.

We live in a causal framework that has a common pattern over time. Even though the pattern may be complex, still it's regular enough that you can learn from past mistakes and past right choices.

That's why mindfulness is so important and why it's so important that mindfulness is a faculty of memory. You're not sitting here trying to remember these things all the time, but if something comes up in the meditation that you're not sure about to do, you might think back: What have you done in the past that worked? What have you done in the past that hasn't worked? See if those lessons can give you some guidance.

As for the future, that deals with our motivation. We're here shaping the present moment. What shape do you want to put it in? What shape is going to be good for your life and the life of the people around you down the line?

So if you're feeling lazy right now, how do you motivate yourself to really do the practice? Or if you know that something is skillful but you don't feel like

doing it, how can you motivate yourself to do it? If you're faced with something that you know is unskillful but you want to do it, how can you talk yourself out of that? This is where your motivation is important.

Think about the fact that your actions are not just a line drawn by a stick in the water. They're going to have a long-term impact. Particularly with a practice like this, where you're really trying to remake your mind, you have to have strong motivation.

I was reading a very peculiar piece a while back: someone saying that putting a lot of effort into the practice requires strong motivation, and strong motivation requires a sense of self, so it's a bad thing. So don't put any effort in. Well, that's couch-potato philosophy.

After all, there are skillful ways of formulating a sense of self. Thinking about yourself, identifying things that you really want, identifying things that you don't want: These go into your motivation to escape from suffering. The primary motivation the Buddha recommends, of course, is heedfulness: the realization that your actions do make a difference, and if you're careless, the difference can go in a direction you don't want.

That's to counteract the little voice inside that says "Well, it doesn't matter." It does matter. Do you really want to suffer? Do you want to miss out on the opportunity to get past suffering? You've got an opportunity right now. You don't know how much longer you're going to have it, but you *do* have it right now, so try to make the most of it, because you will benefit down the line.

You benefit now, too. It may be difficult, but as the Buddha said, even if you're following the holy life with tears screaming down your face, that's a practice that's unpleasant in the present but is going to lead to good things in the future. So even when it's difficult, you want to stick with it.

Another motivating factor is compassion, goodwill: not only for yourself but also for the people around you. This, too, is useful for counteracting the voice that says, "It doesn't matter," or when you're dealing with someone in an unskillful way and a voice inside says, "Oh, they don't matter." They do matter, because what you do to other people is going to come back to you.

So a very good way of motivating yourself to do the skillful thing and avoid the unskillful thing is to develop thoughts of goodwill. You may have heard the question: Do other people deserve your goodwill? But that's not the real question. The real question is: Can you trust yourself if you don't develop goodwill? It's primarily for the sake of your own skillfulness that you're developing these thoughts, so that you don't create any bad kamma.

Another good way of motivating yourself is to remember the great meditators

of the past, either from the time of the Buddha or more recently. You read the biography of Ajaan Mun or the autobiography of Ajaan Lee. You read Ajaan Maha Boowa's accounts of his practice in his Dhamma talks. That's to counteract the voice that says, when you're tempted to do something unskillful, "Well, everybody does it." Well, no, not everybody does it. There have been people who have learned to say No, and they've benefited as a result.

It also counteracts the little voice that says, "Hey, this is just the way I am." If you try to hold on to that idea, it's just going to *kill* your practice. You've got to keep remembering that the way you are is the result of conditions, but you can change those conditions.

It wasn't that Ajaan Mun or other great people of the past were already arahants when they were born. They had defilements just like us. Yet they realized that if they didn't change their attitudes, didn't change their ways of thinking, didn't change their ways of practice, they were going to suffer. And they'd had enough. That sense of, "When will you have had enough?" is what kept them going. That's a question you should take up instead of the questions coming from the unskillful voices. Have you had enough suffering yet? How much more do you want?

Another way of motivating yourself in the practice is with a pair of qualities: shame and pride. Shame has a bad name in modern culture. But we have to make a distinction between healthy and unhealthy shame. I was reading recently someone saying, "Buddhism doesn't really deal with the problem of shame very well, doesn't recognize how debilitating it can be." Well, there were people in the time of the Buddha who were debilitated by their sense of shame—remember the monks who committed suicide—and the Buddha dealt with this issue. What it comes down to is that shame that's focused on actions is very helpful. If it's focused on thoughts, it's very helpful. If it's focused on just *you* as a person it's not. So learn how to make that distinction.

The purpose of healthy shame is so that when you think about doing something unskillful, you realize, "It's beneath me." This is why this kind of shame is actually an aspect of pride. You've come this far as a human being. You don't want to drop back down. This counteracts the little voice that says, "What's wrong with that? Everybody's doing it." Remind yourself that you're better than that.

You need a certain amount of what Ven. Ananda said is conceit around the practice. We're not here to be just ordinary people. We're here to model our lives on the people who've gained awakening. They can do it, why can't we? Why can't we make something special of ourselves? Not that we're trying to show off to

anybody else, but we'd like to be special in our own minds—special in the care with which we choose our actions, special in the way that we think about the consequences of our actions, special in the kind of happiness we want.

So these are some of the ways in which you might want to think about the future as you're trying to focus on the present.

Another useful motivation, another application of heedfulness, is when the voice in the mind says, "I've got to worry about this, I've got to worry about that, I don't have time to meditate." You don't know how much longer you're going to be alive, you don't know what's going to happen in the future, but you *do* know that whatever unexpected things come up, you're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, you're going to need discernment to deal with them. You're going to need a strong determination to do what's skillful. Well, those are the qualities we're working on developing right now.

So what we're doing right now is *the* best preparation for the future. And the purpose of this future thinking, of course, is to turn your attention back to the present moment, so that you can develop those qualities of mindfulness and alertness and ardency without being distracted. Take what you've learned from the past and apply it to the present and know that it's going to be good for the future. These things are all connected.