

Mindfulness – Get with the Program

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Mark Twain tells a story of when he was learning to be a steamboat captain on the Mississippi. They had taken off from New Orleans, headed up to Memphis, and after the first day, the captain asked him, “Okay, tell me each bend in the river that we went through: where the sandbars were, where I had to stay close to the shore, where I had to stay away from the shore.” And Mark Twain was taken aback. He hadn’t been expecting that he was going to have to memorize that much, in that much detail. But as the captain said, if you don’t know each bend, you’re going to get into trouble.

And it’s the same with mindfulness. You have to remember each bend of the mind.

Because after all, you’ve got a program. And to get with the program, you have to notice what things work with the mind, and what don’t. The program, of course, is right effort, or the strength of persistence: preventing unskillful qualities from arising, or if they do arise, learning how to abandon them; trying to give rise to skillful qualities, and once they’re there, trying to develop them as far as you can. We’re not here simply sitting on the deck of the steamboat watching the riverside go by. We’re up behind the steering wheel, directing our minds.

And we’re learning, as we go through this process of trying to get with the program, how to wrestle the mind down when it’s unskillful; how to encourage the skillful qualities when they seem to be very small. When you’ve learned about something that works, it would be a shame to forget it. Otherwise, you have to keep on reinventing the Dhamma wheel every time you act, every time you meditate. And you don’t get very far.

So we have to strengthen our mindfulness, our ability to remember. We do that by giving the mind a few landmarks. The Buddha starts with what he calls the body in and of itself. And in the context of the body, he starts with the breath, because it’s your anchor in the present moment. You’re going to be watching the mind in the present moment, so you need to have something to help keep you

here.

The breath also acts as kind of a landmark, because it's right here at the breath that you begin to notice skillful or unskillful qualities arising. So you don't want to leave this point of reference, this frame of reference. The closer you stay to your frame of reference, the easier it's going to be to remember the things you need to remember.

So the breath is in the present moment. Its other advantage is that it has no meaning at all. It's just in, out, and it can be comfortable or uncomfortable. But that's about it. You're going to need this meaningless marker in the present moment because you'll be dealing with other things that tend to have meanings, and it's very easy to slip into the meanings. A feeling comes up and you associate it with an event, something somebody did. Or a mind state comes up and it's got an object. And instead of focusing on the mind state, you tend to focus on the object.

But when you're with the body in and of itself, then it's a lot easier to see *feelings* in and of themselves—in other words, simply as events. Mind states in and of themselves—simply as events. That way, you can get a handle on them. You can begin to see them from the perspective of the four noble truths. Where, in a particular mind-state, is there going to be craving? Where is there clinging? And then you remember: What do you do with craving? What do you do with clinging? You try to abandon craving. You try to comprehend clinging.

You remember these things because you're close to your landmark. This is why, when the Buddha described breath meditation, it wasn't just a matter of being with the *body* in and of itself, and then you *leave* the body in and of itself to go to *feelings* in and of themselves. You stay with the breath and you begin to notice how feelings relate to the breath. You begin to notice how mind states relate to the breath, how mental qualities relate to the breath. You've got an anchor.

Now, the Buddha does recommend other anchors as well. There's contemplation of 32 parts of the body. That's really good for making the body meaningless. Because we want to make sure that we don't slip away from "the body in and of itself" to "the body in the world." And part of "the body in the world" is the question of whether it's attractive. But if you take it apart, piece by piece by piece, there's no question of its being attractive at all. The same with other people's bodies.

Or even more with corpse contemplation: thinking about what your body's going to look like one day after it dies, two days, three days, four. This is where it's going—unless it gets vaporized in a nuclear attack. But either way, there won't be that much there to really hold on to—or to *want* to hold on to. Simply that now, you've got a breath animating it. So learn how to look at the body in a way that makes it meaningless, so that you have this anchor in the present moment as your memory aid.

That way, you're close to the lessons you've learned, not only from what you've done in your own meditation, but also from what you've heard in Dhamma talks, what you've read. This is one of the reasons why, in the old days, they would have you memorize passages of Dhamma. There were monks who memorized the entire Canon or large sections of it as a way of strengthening their mindfulness.

And here again, it's important to remember that mindfulness is not just awareness of the present moment, it's mindfulness as a faculty of your memory: the memory that you're applying to know what you need to *do* right now. Because you remember, as the Buddha analysed the causes of suffering in dependent co-arising, even before there's contact at the senses, there's a lot of stuff going on in the mind. And how you approach that contact is going to make the difference between whether you suffer from it or not. So you have to remember, what are the good ways of approaching it? And when something arises, what do you do with it then?

So you've got to keep working at strengthening your mindfulness. Memorizing passages of Dhamma is a good way of building up your mindfulness so that you can have the solutions to problems at your fingertips when you need them. A couple of years back, I was at the optometrist, to get some glasses. After we chose the frames for the glasses, the receptionist said, "There's going to be a 40% deposit." So I did the math in my head. And as the receptionist was reaching for her calculator, I told her what the amount was going to be. She said "Oh yeah, your generation is like that. You have that in your head."

Well, it's good to have things like that in your head, because you never know when you're not going to have other things to help you from outside. And this is especially true with the meditation. If you have a meditation app that tells you, "Now you do this and now you do that," it's doing your mindfulness for you. You

never get to do your own mindfulness to make it strong. There's always the question of whether you can trust the app, and what's going to happen to your own mind if you can't remember lessons that you need to apply.

So work on strengthening your mindfulness. After all, the Buddha said, it is one of the five strengths. This is why it follows on the strength of persistence. If you're really engaged in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones, there are a lot of things you've got to keep in mind: what's skillful, what's not; how you can recognize an unskillful quality hiding behind what seems to be a skillful one; and all the various duties you have—in other words, the things you *can do* to get the mind in a good place. That's the program.

So mindfulness is strengthened so that you can get with the program and be with the program, all the time. So try to stay anchored right here. And once something works in your meditation, stash it away right here. When something *doesn't* work, stash it away right here, so you know. And then as long as you're right here, everything will be right close by.