

Strengthening Mindfulness

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The breath is something very close to your awareness. As you breathe in, breathe out, it's right here. And so you'd think it would be very easy to stay with the breath. But the mind is like a camera lens whose focal length keeps changing. It's focused here for a bit, then it's focused someplace else. Then someplace else. Then back here again.

They've done studies to show that a moment of attention is just that: a discrete act that lasts only a few moments. If you want to pay continuous attention to something, you have to learn to stitch the moments together. Otherwise you can't make sense out of things. Or the sense you make out of things is just a very rough estimate. So you want to be able to stitch them together very closely, those moments of attention.

This is what mindfulness is for: to keep reminding you to stay here, with the breath, with the breath, with the breath.

And the Buddha recommends that you develop two other qualities along with mindfulness: alertness, which is watching what you're actually doing, and ardency. Ardency is the effort you put into being alert, and into being mindful to keep reminding yourself: breath, breath, breath.

This is one of the reasons why people often use a meditation word to go along with the breath. A traditional one is "*Buddho*": "*bud*" with the in-breath, "*dho*" with the out. *Buddho* means awake. It's actually the term the Buddha used to describe himself: not a human being, not a deva, just "awake." It's a quality of mind you want to develop. And you can use the word as a marker to remind yourself you want to stay here with the in-breath, and with the out-breath, then with the in-breath again, and then with the out-breath again.

It's only when the mind gets to settle down that it can relax some of its tension, so it's not constantly ready to jump, and so you can focus consistently on something, to really see it for what it is, what the connections are. In other words, you want to see how the mind has an impact on the breath, how the breath has an impact on the mind, how the breath has an impact on different parts of the body. Lots of things can be learned if you stay here consistently.

So you need to keep reminding yourself: This is where you want to stay. When the Buddha compares different parts of the practice to a farmer's different implements, mindfulness is the goad. The goad is what you use to poke an animal with. Say you've got a water buffalo pulling your plow, and the buffalo starts turning off to the right, to the left, not in the direction that you want to go. You take the goad, which is a long stick with a point on the end, and you poke it to remind it that there's work to be done, and this is where you want the work to go. So mindfulness is there to remind you to stay with the breath stay, with the breath.

Another analogy the Buddha uses for mindfulness is of a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper is at the gate to a fortress at the very edge of a frontier. There are friendly people who want to come into the fortress, and there are also unfriendly people who want to come in, and the gatekeeper has to know who is who: to let in the people who are trustworthy, and to keep out those who are not. This means that mindfulness is not just a matter of accepting whatever comes up. It's there to remind you that there's a skillful direction and a unskillful direction that the mind can go to at any time—and that you want to keep it headed in the skillful direction.

Now to strengthen mindfulness, the Buddha said you need two qualities. One is virtue, and the other is right view. Virtue strengthens mindfulness because, if you're observing the precepts, you're not harming anybody. You're not harming yourself; you're not harming your friends; you're not harming anyone at all. That way, when you reflect on your actions, there's no remorse, no regret. People who have a lot of remorse and regret have learned how to put their harmful actions out of their mind.

Researchers have done studies to show that people can get very good at forgetting things, so good that it becomes subconscious. But because the mind then becomes talented at forgetting, you find it harder and harder to maintain your mindfulness. The mind has all kinds of tricks for slipping off, changing the focal length of that camera lens—and thinking that that's the most natural thing to do.

So one way of strengthening mindfulness is to make sure that your behavior is not the sort that you're going to regret. This is why there's no clear line between the practice of virtue and the practice of meditation.

Virtue also strengthens your mindfulness in another way, in the sense that if you make up your mind to observe the precepts, you have to keep them in mind, along with the determination to follow them: that you're not going to kill, you're not going to steal, you're not going to engage in illicit sex, you're not going to lie, you're not going to take intoxicants. You keep those things in mind. The easiest of the precepts to break is, of course, the one about lying. You have to be really on top of your speech so that your words don't just come out on their own without anything to monitor them. By developing that quality of being able to monitor your words, you strengthen mindfulness.

As for right view, mindfulness needs some explanations for what it's reminding you to do. It's not just a matter of brute willpower, that you tell yourself: okay, hey, stay here, stay here, stay here. You need to have your reasons for why you're staying here. What are you trying to do as you stay here?

This is where right view comes in: to remind you that you're staying here because this is the part of the path to the end of suffering: learning how to develop concentration. And the path to the end of suffering is something you want to develop. That's why you're training the mind. You're also training the mind because the tendency to cause suffering is something at which the mind is very adept. You want to keep yourself from following your old habits and wandering off onto *that* path. That's something you want to let go.

So there are duties here. There's something to be done. You're not just sitting here passively, accepting experience as it comes along. You're actively shaping it. That's something you have to understand, too. An important part of developing the steps in mindfulness of breathing lies in understanding the process of what the Buddha calls fabrication. It's the way the mind shapes things through its intentions.

There was once a monk who said he practiced mindfulness of breathing simply by letting go of the past, letting go of the future, and just staying focused equanimously on the present. And the Buddha said: "There is that type of breath meditation, but it doesn't give the best results." Then he set out 16 steps for a more fruitful form of breath meditation, and a repeated feature of those 16 steps is that you see the different ways in which you're fabricating your experience, and then you learn how to do it more skillfully—to make those fabrications more calm—as you're breathing in, as you're breathing out.

In particular, the Buddha focuses on three things. One is the way the breath fabricates your

experience of the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Is the breath comfortable? Could you make it more comfortable? How can you make the influence of the breath on your experience of the body more positive? How can you get it to be calm so that it feels soothing to breathe in, soothing to breathe out: soothing both for the body and for the mind?

Another type of fabrication is what the Buddha calls mental fabrication. That covers two things: perception and feeling. "Feeling" covers feelings of pleasure or pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. Of course, these feelings relate to the way you breathe. Some ways of breathing have an impact on the level of pleasure or pain in the body. And pains in particular have an impact on the way you breathe. Sometimes you're holding a pain in one part of the body for fear that it will spread. So you tense up around it. And as you tense up around it, that's going to have an effect on the way you breathe. You're actually cutting off the breath energy to that part of the body, and it's going to make the breath a less and less pleasant experience itself. Then you get into a bad feedback loop where the pain worsens the breath, and the breath worsens the pain.

This is one of the reasons why, if you find that you're breathing around a part of the body you're avoiding, you should consciously try to breathe into it. Or if you're trying to pull the breath past something, breathe into that as well. Sometimes you get into the habit of holding onto a particular part of the body even when the pain is gone. You may have noticed this if you hurt your foot, and you begin to develop a limp: Sometimes the limp is still with you even after the pain in the foot has gone away.

So one of the reasons we survey the whole body is to get a sense of where the breath is being blocked, where it's being held back. And then consciously think of breathing into that area.

This is where perception, the other mental fabrication, comes in. What kind of picture do you have of the breathing process? When you breathe in, what pulls the breath in? Is there anything that you have to push against or pull against to get the breath in? That perception is going to create tension right there. How about thinking of the breath simply as energy flowing through all the nerves? It's already flowing. What you're doing is simply a matter of allowing it to flow better. And as you breathe in and out, the breath comes in and out of the pores. You don't have to pull it in through the nose or past any tension, say, in your neck, or your chest, or to fight with any tension in your abdomen. Think of the breath energy penetrating all of these things, and nourishing them very directly. You don't have to pass them by. Go right into them. See what that perception does.

So you've got to these three elements here: breath, feeling, and perception. And they have an impact on one another.

This means that there's plenty to explore here. A lot of people find breathing a very dull thing to watch. They think it's just in and out, in and out, and that seems to be about it. But if you realize that this element of perception influences the breath, and that feelings influence the breath, and that the breath influences your perceptions, and feelings, you've got some interesting interconnections to explore to understand the way you experience your own body and mind, and to understand how that experience affects other parts of your life.

That's something you want to keep in mind. But if it's too much to keep in mind at the moment, go back to just staying with the breath energy, and holding in mind the perception of the breath energy as something that flows easily in, flows easily out. It's soothing. Refreshing. Energizing. And as you find it easier and easier to stay there, to keep that in mind, you can start adding the other elements: exploring other ways that you can shape the experience of breathing through your perceptions, all the ways you can use your breath to create a greater and greater

sense of calm.

In all these cases, the Buddha says to take this element of fabrication and make it more calm, make it more tranquil, soothing. Because as the breath gets more refined, the events in the mind, what the mind is doing, come more and more to the fore. After all, that's why we're here. We're not here for the breath. We're here to train the mind. We're *using* the breath as a way to train the mind. And you want to get your attention settled very clearly here in the present moment so that you can watch the mind directly. Keep the focal length right here. Don't go zooming out, or zooming away. Zoom right in on the present moment. Stay here so that you can see these things more and more clearly.

So these are the qualities we're trying to develop. This is what we want to keep in mind. This is why we're focusing on the breath, so that when the mind complains it's boring staying with the breath, it wants to wander around a little bit, you have your reasons to tell it to stay. You're not just ordering the mind to stay here. You have an understanding of why this is important. That makes it easier and easier to strengthen your mindfulness, to make it more consistent, more resilient, so that it really does become a dominant factor in the mind.

So you stay right here, right here. And develop that quality of mind that monitors whether you're staying right here, and notice when you're slipping off, so that you can refocus the mind, refocus the mind.

In the beginning it may seem tedious but it's an essential step in the practice. And this is where the understanding, where right view, comes in to help: to remind you *why* you're here, to give you the motivation to stick with it until you start seeing results. Then the results, when they come, feed into your ability to stay even more mindful.

You have to be careful, of course, when a sense of pleasure develops. It's very easy to lose your focus on the breath and move over to the pleasure. Here again, you have to remind yourself: "Hey, stay here with the breath. There's still work to be done." The mindfulness is what keeps you focused.

This is why mindfulness practice and concentration practice are so intimately connected. If you didn't have this ability to remind yourself, you couldn't stay concentrated on anything for very long at all.

So we're here to focus on the breath, to ferret out the breath so that you can see more clearly how it's related to the other things that are very similar to it, the other things that have an impact on it. That's how we get to understand the mind. The more we understand the mind, the more clearly we can distinguish between the cause of suffering and the path to the end of suffering. And keep ourselves more and more consistently on the path.