

Mindfulness 2.0

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Ajaan Suwat tells the story of when he was a young monk and first went to stay with Ajaan Mun. One day, Ajaan Mun asked him how his meditation was going. And Ajaan Suwat said, “My mind is all over the place. It’s distracted.” And Ajaan Mun comforted him, he said, “Well, the fact that you know that the mind is distracted counts as mindfulness.”

And Ajaan Suwat took it well. He realized that Ajaan Mun was trying to comfort him—not saying that what he was doing was good. It’s a beginning step, recognizing that your mind is distracted. But once you’ve recognized it, you’ve got to do something about it. You’ve got to figure out how to make it undistracted.

This is very different from how mindfulness is usually taught nowadays, where it’s all about being nonreactive, just being with whatever comes up. That’s not how the Buddha taught mindfulness.

Now, there is *some* virtue in being with whatever comes up, because all too often we try to deny things. Years back, when they had that Ajaan Chah celebration up in Portola Valley, a lot of his students were talking about what attracted them to Ajaan Chah. And it seems that in every case, they were having trouble just adjusting to the fact that they were in Thailand, accepting things the way they are. So a lot of his teaching had to do with equanimity and patience. He probably saw that Westerners lacked these qualities and that they needed them to be reinforced before they could really get started on anything further in the practice.

So our society’s in sore need of equanimity and patience, which is why a lot what gets sold as mindfulness nowadays actually is about being equanimous with regard to whatever comes up, being patient with whatever comes up. But that’s not the end of the story.

There was an incident way back in Burma, I’ve forgotten which of the Burmese meditation traditions they tell it in, but one of the founders of the tradition went to see an old monk up in the hills and asked him about where to look for good guidance in meditation. And the old monk told him, “Everything you need to know is in the Maha Satipatthana Sutta, isn’t it?” Which was a huge piece of misinformation. Unfortunately, the founder of the tradition went back and took that as his guide.

But the Maha Satipatthana Sutta tells only a part of mindfulness practice. The full formula says, You keep track of the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves: ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. But then the whole rest of the sutta talks about only one part of that formula: what it means to keep track of body, or feelings, or mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves. And so the sutta’s basically Mindfulness 1.0. It tells you one part of the formula, what it means to keep track of something.

But as for the rest—being ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That gets left for other parts of the Canon. But the part that's left out: That's what the practice is all about. Ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: This is how you get the mind into concentration.

“Alert” means that you watch what you're doing and the results that come from what you're doing. “Mindful” means that you keep in mind what you've got to do. And ardency is the desire to do it well.

Ajaan Lee, when he explains mindfulness practice, points to the wisdom in ardency. You don't just know about things. You know that something has to be done with them.

And this is hinted at even in the sutta. When it talks about dealing with the hindrances, dealing with the factors for awakening, dealing with the fetters that arise at the six senses, it doesn't tell you just to watch them coming and going. Say that a hindrance or a fetter arises: You watch for when it's present, you watch for when it's not, and then you watch to see how it may be made to go away and not come back. With each of the factors for awakening, watch for when it's present, you watch for when it's not, and then you watch to see how it can be maintained and developed further.

So even in the sutta it's not just a matter of sitting there watching things. There's a direction where you want to go. There's a direction for your ardency. So Mindfulness 2.0 takes you through the ardency into concentration.

As the Buddha said, one of the functions of mindfulness is to keep unskillful qualities out of the mind and bring skillful qualities in. Like a gatekeeper at a fortress: You've got to watch out for the spies and the other people who might create trouble in your fortress, so you learn to recognize them in order to keep them from coming in. And you remember to recognize the people who are friends and allies—the soldiers and other people on your side—so that you can let them in.

And so, as you're sitting here meditating, you do have to admit what's coming up, but don't just stop with the admitting. You realize that something has to be done. What you keep in mind are the duties of the four noble truths. Stress has to be comprehended; its cause has to be abandoned; its cessation has to be realized; and the path to the cessation has to be developed. In many cases, the Buddha emphasizes two of those duties more than the others: the abandoning and the developing.

And so here we are, trying to develop concentration, which means that anything that comes up that's not related to the breath, you put it aside, put it aside. Anything that *is* related to the breath that helps you settle down, you try to develop it, you try to strengthen it.

This is what it means to be ardent. And this is why it's wise, because without the ardency, things come and things go and you're just sitting there on the side of the road watching them come and go. But here this is *your mind*, it's not just cars on a road. And what shape is your mind in? What shape do you want it to be in? You want your mind to be in good shape. You

want to be able to say No to the things in the mind that are going to harm it, and say Yes to the things that will help it develop. You don't want to just watch the cars. You want to be in the driver's seat, headed in the right direction.

So anything related to the breath, anything that helps you settle down with the breath: Yes. And once you're here, what do you do with the breath? Well, ardency means being especially sensitive to the breath, and to what kind of breathing would feel really good right now. After all, the purpose of right mindfulness is to lead into right concentration. So if you can get absorbed in the breath, gain an interest in the breath, that helps you stay with a sense of well-being.

The Buddha lists four qualities that help with success in doing this, the four bases of power. The first is simply the desire: You want to do this well. That's the ardency. But ardency also contains two other bases of power: persistence and a quality called intent. This is where right effort and the four bases of success overlap. You learn how to generate the desire to do this well. And then you stick with it, you keep at it. If the mind wanders off, you bring it back. It wanders off again, you bring it back again. Three times, five times, ten times, a hundred times: Keep bringing it back. Show it that you mean business.

When it comes back, pay careful attention to two things: One, what would be a really comfortable breath to stay with so the mind will want to stay here? And two, watch out for the fact that it's going to wander off again. You want to be able to catch it before it goes. The more quickly you can catch it, the more you see into the mind, the various stages in how it slips off and somehow tries to deny to itself what it's doing. But when you can see through that, then you're in a much better position to stop it from happening.

And finally there's the fourth base of power, *vimamsa*, which is another aspect of discernment. You try to use your ingenuity in figuring out ways that'll help the mind to stay. This is what gets you absorbed, because you're experimenting and you're learning. You're not just tying the mind down to a stake; you're gaining some training in: What is it like to be with the body? And what's actually going on in the body? What are the layers of breath energy in the body?

We talk about the in-and-out breath and the breath that gets suffused through the nerves in the blood vessels. Well, there's another level that's even deeper still, that's very quiet. It's a kind of energy, but it's an energy that just stays in place. The mind can access it only when the mind is very quiet, too. Different people will find that they have nodes of this energy in different places. It could be in the middle of the chest, it could be down by the breastbone, or right between the eyes. There are lots of different places where—if you're really, really quiet—you can get the sense of great stillness right there. And there's no need for an in-and-out breath right there. If you can access that, try to stay with it. It's a good resting place for the mind.

But know that it's good to be with all the different levels of the breath. Because sometimes the problem is not there with the still breath, it's with the breath energy spreading through the

body. It might not be spreading well, so what can you do to get it to go to places where it ordinarily doesn't go? Try breathing in different directions: in from the left, in from the right, in from the front, in from the back, down, up. See what helps for that particular spot. Or sometimes the problem is simply the fact that the breath is too shallow or too deep. Watch out for the breath when it gets really shallow and very light. If your range of awareness isn't broad, you'll tend to drift off. Sometimes after a day of work, you need some heavier breathing.

Learn to realize that these three different types of breath energy—the in-and-out breath, the suffused breath, and the still breath—have their uses. Then, as you're maintaining your mind in the present moment, this is a good area to study, to apply your ingenuity to figure out what's going on and what could make it better. This makes the concentration more interesting. At the same time, it gets the mind more and more under your control.

As the Buddha said, one of the purposes of meditation is to think thoughts that you want to think and not think thoughts you don't want to think. That, too, is one of the purposes of mindfulness. He calls mindfulness a governing principle. In other words, it watches over what's unskillful and figures out how to put an end to it. It watches out over what's skillful and figures out how to develop it.

When the Buddha talks about how right mindfulness, right effort, and right view all circle around all the different factors of the path, he shows clearly that the role of mindfulness is to remember. If you encounter something that's wrong, you have to remember to abandon it. If you encounter something that's skillful, you remember to develop it.

That's Mindfulness 2.0. After learning how to watch things arise and pass away on their own, you now learn how to make good things arise and make unskillful things pass away. And that way, the mindfulness gives a lot more benefits. It gives you tools to deal with things so that you can actually complete the duties of the four noble truths and realize the cessation of suffering. That's a large goal, but it's within our reach, something we can all do—if we establish our mindfulness properly.

As the Buddha said, if it were impossible to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities, he wouldn't have taught it. Or if the process of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities led to pain and suffering, he wouldn't have taught it, either. But because we *are* able to abandon these unskillful things and develop the skillful ones, and that it's a good thing to do, it leads to true happiness: That's why the Buddha taught, and that's why we're practicing.