

## *Learning with Mindfulness & Alertness*

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Close your eyes and focus on your breath.

Try to develop good qualities in mind while you do this. In other words, by remembering the breath, you're developing mindfulness. By being alert to the breath, you're developing alertness.

Otherwise you just slip right off. You're here for a minute and then you're off someplace else.

You're trying to develop something of lasting value here in the mind. And these qualities that you develop are good not only while you're sitting here focusing on the breath, but also for every task you do. Whatever task you may have, you always need mindfulness, you always need alertness, in order to make sure you remember what the right way to do that task is and that you know what you're doing to make sure that you're doing it well. If you see there are any ways that you can improve, well you learn that lesson and then you remember it to apply it the next time around.

This is how things advance in the world: by paying attention to what you're doing.

All too often we have an idea that something is going to be right and we just stick with it and stick with it and stick with it, without really looking at the consequences. As a result, we don't learn. Things don't improve at all.

It was because the Buddha saw that the way he was doing things was not leading to happiness, there was some stress inherent in what he was doing: That's why he started looking at what he was doing and said, "What can I change?" He experimented with different ways of practicing.

Fortunately, some of his experiments we don't have to repeat. We have the basic principles like the precepts that you always try to stick to; basic principles around developing concentration and how to develop insight.

But the particulars are things that we have to work with on our own because we have to look for ourselves. It's learning how to see where you're causing stress, being sensitive to that stress and figuring out how you can avoid that: That's how you grow as a person.

This is how every skill is developed, and particularly the skills with regard to the mind. The way you engage with the world is determined by what you remember as to what's good. But you want to test it because sometimes you may have learned the wrong things or maybe you learned the right things but you

remembered them wrong or understood them wrong. So you have to test, test, test things over and over again.

There's the story they tell of a university where they taught brain surgery. Their problem was that the kids applying to become brain surgeons all had straight-A averages, so you couldn't tell anything from the grades. The question was, "What kind of person would have a straight-A average and also be a good brain surgeon?"

They studied the people who had failed the program or had done horribly. And they found the two things: that they never really paid attention to what they were doing and if something went wrong they blamed it on conditions beyond their control.

The professors began to realize, "These are the kind of people we want to weed out." So when they would interview people for the opportunity to study there, they had two questions for them: One was, "Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?" And if the applicant said "I can't think of any mistake," then the applicant was out. The second question, if the candidate admitted to a mistake, was, "How would you do it differently?" If they hadn't thought about how they might do it differently, those people were out, too.

You want to be able to recognize your mistakes and then figure out ways so you don't have to repeat those mistakes.

That's how you develop in all areas of life, and particularly here in the meditation as you work on this issue of how to live this life without suffering and without causing any unnecessary suffering to others as well.

So try to develop these qualities of alertness and mindfulness because they help you grow in all areas of life. That way, your life as a human being is not just on automatic pilot but you're actually developing, even as you grow older. There's always the opportunity to learn. No matter how old you may be, you can still learn, if you're willing to be mindful and if you're willing to be alert and if you're willing to develop these qualities as much as you can.