

What Right Mindfulness Remembers

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The Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper: one who knows who to let in and who not to let in. This is a gatekeeper at a fortress at the frontier. There are a lot of people you do not want to let into that fortress: basically greed, aversion, and delusion. You *do* let in skillful mental qualities: right view all the way down through right concentration.

So mindfulness is not simply a matter of being open and accepting of everything that comes by or comes up or comes in. There's another place where the Buddha defines mindfulness as the ability to remember, to keep in mind what was said and done long ago.

So how does that apply to what you're doing right now? Well, you're here with a purpose. You're trying to get the mind to settle down. Remember that.

As the Buddha said, the practice of right concentration is the heart of the path, and all of the other factors are its requisites or its helping factors. Mindfulness is what helps you to remember what you've learned about the path both from what you've heard and from what you've experienced as you've practiced: lessons about what works and doesn't work.

The Buddha says to keep reminding yourself that with regard to each of the factors of the path if you detect that something unskillful is coming up, you want to abandon it. If something skillful is coming up, you want to encourage it. If it's not coming up, you try to give rise to it. So basically you're remembering what you want to do.

Because after all the mind is doing things all the time. Whatever comes in by way of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind goes through a lot of different steps in the processes of your actually experiencing it. There are a lot of filters, some of which you could compare to a radio: some turn up the volume and others turn down the volume, focus your attention here, focus it there. Because you're already doing this kind of fabrication, what the path is teaching you is to fabricate in more skillful ways.

So the purpose of mindfulness is to remind you how you want to fabricate, what you're going to do right now. You've got a whole hour here to sit and focus on the breath, and you can make all kinds of different experiences out of it.

A woman one time brought a friend of hers to meditate with us. It was one of those really nice days: We were sitting out in the outdoor classroom under the trees, with a gentle breeze; the temperature was nice. At the end of the hour, the friend opened her eyes and said, "I have never suffered so much in my life." Just sitting there breathing. Of course, it wasn't just that she was sitting

there breathing: Her mind was racing through all kinds of things, adding a lot of unnecessary suffering. The woman who brought her in the meantime had had a really nice meditation, again sitting watching her breath.

This shows you the different ways you can take basically what is the same experience and turn it into all kinds of different things. And because we have so many habitual ways of shaping our experience, it's good to remember the Buddha's instructions, the Buddha's recommendations.

I ran across someone today who was saying that trying to get back to the Buddha's original words is fundamentalism and literalism, and we don't want that—it's bad for us somehow. But actually it's just a matter of accurate reporting: We want to know what he said. The question arises: Would you like to have your words twisted? Well, no. Then why would you want to twist the Buddha's words? What do you think he would have thought about this?

People say "I want to have my own meaning that I extract from texts." That's perfectly fine, but at least give the texts a fair hearing. And remember, his texts are not the sort of things that the post-modernists get all upset about, i.e., the author is trying to impose a definition of you on you that pins you down or makes you the object of that person's thought.

The Buddha's offering you tools by which you can look at the way you define yourself, in the way you create suffering for yourself, and ways in which you can learn how not to create that suffering. It's about as compassionate a text as you can find. If you want to extract some other meaning out of it aside from the quest to put an end to suffering, that's your choice. But it's like trying to impose your meaning, say, on a medical textbook, deciding that you like kidney disease or lung disease, or you don't like a particular treatment regardless of whether it works.

So it *is* good to remember what the Buddha said and put it to the test. Just the fact that it's in the texts doesn't mean it's going to work, but give it a fair hearing, give it a fair try. And try to develop the qualities of mind that'll allow you to give it a fair test, a fair judgment.

You want to be alert. You want to be discerning. Those are some of the things that we're trying to develop as we practice here: the qualities of alertness and discernment. Notice that as soon as you focus on the breath, you're changing it. When you focus on any part of the body, you're going to change that part of the body.

So are you focusing in a way that's going to help it get better or in a way that's going to create more problems? Are you focusing in a way that allows the mind to see things clearly or make things obscure?

What you're doing right now makes a huge difference as to how you're going to read the results of the practice and how you're going to create those results to begin with.

It's one of those paradoxes: that to develop of qualities that helps put an end to suffering is also to develop qualities that allow you to assess fairly whether you really are putting an end to suffering. The more sensitive you are to how things work, the more you're going to be able to see where you're still causing subtle levels of stress in the mind.

So these are some of the things that you want to keep in mind. Your focus does make a difference: where you focus, how you focus, and what you do with the sensations that arise. Try to focus in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being, refreshment.

The factors of jhana include pleasure and rapture. Rapture is one of those words that can cover all kinds of phenomena, from very gentle to very intense. The word *piti* literally means drinking-in. So what kind of sensation would you like to drink in right now?

One way of developing that sense of refreshment is to think of it as a kind of fullness. Allow your hands to relax, then different parts of the body, so that when you're breathe in you're not squeezing those parts of the body and you're not pushing or pulling on them. You're just allowing the sensations that are there just to be there.

If there's a sense of fullness that comes, basically it's the blood allowed into those areas. Allow it just to stay there and then think of that sense of fullness to spreading around.

Look after the breath, look after the sensations in the body in a way that allows that fullness to maintain itself and to gradually grow. It starts out being pretty gentle, but if you give it enough space and allow it enough space continually, it can develop into something really pleasant, really nourishing. It's that sense of fullness and refreshment that really is food for the mind. There's a passage in the Dhammapada that says, "We feed on rapture like the radiant gods." This is how you do it.

Try to keep that in mind, that this is what you're going to allow as you sit here. Try not to push or pull or force things too much. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "If we could push our way in to nibbana, everybody would have pushed their way in a long time ago." It requires a really subtle and gentle touch.

Then there's the quality of persistence, which means that you keep at it, but it doesn't mean you keep pushing yourself up against the wall. You find something good and you stick with it.

This is where the quality of respect for concentration comes in, because it's so easy to think "Well, I can do this anytime, I'll just leave it for the time being and think for a while about this, that, or the other thing." But when you come back, you've lost it. Then the fact that you've lost it starts eating away at you so it gets harder to get back into it again.

So try to maintain it while you can: Give rise to it, let it be there, stay there,

let it grow.

Mindfulness is what protects this. It protects you from wandering away. It protects you from other things coming in. You remind yourself: “This is where you want to stay.” You want to develop this quality here.

It may not seem like much to begin with, but all the important things in the path start out that way. It’s not much to begin with but you give it a chance to grow. When it has a chance to grow then it shows its potential—many times in ways you might not have expected.

It’s in this way that mindfulness becomes the theme for concentration, i.e., you keep certain ideas in mind of what you want to do, where you want to stay, and then you follow them. You keep on doing them, you keep on protecting the good results that you’ve gotten. You don’t forget.

So remember we’re not just here to be accepting and open for everything that comes by. We have our agenda. We’re trying to put an end to suffering. We’re trying to develop the path.

It’s a good agenda. There does come a point eventually when you let go of the path, but let it do its work first. The path is one thing; the goal is something else. If you look after the path, the path will take you to the goal.

So give it a chance.