

What to Keep in Mind

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Mindfulness means to keep something in mind. You develop it together with alertness—which is knowing what’s happening while it’s happening—and a quality called ardency. Ardency means that when unskillful thoughts come up in the mind, you try to get rid of them. When skillful thoughts are not yet there, you try to give rise to them. Once they’re there, you try to maintain them.

Ardency is basically the same as right effort. It comes from a strong sense of the dangers that can arise if you just let the mind wander wherever it likes, because your thoughts do have consequences. As the Buddha said, if your thoughts tend to go in a certain direction, the mind will go there, your actions will go there, your speech will go there. They’ll get bent in that direction.

So you have to keep in mind the fact that you’re not just here watching things arise and pass away. When something good arises, you want to maintain it. In fact, there’s a place where the Buddha says that when mindfulness starts taking control, this is what it does: It helps you recognize what’s skillful and what’s not, and it helps you remember whatever experience you’ve had in giving rise to skillful thoughts in the past, whatever times you’ve gotten good results, whatever times you’ve gotten bad results from trying to maintain something skillful or trying to get rid of something unskillful. Because this is a skill.

There’s a lot of misunderstanding that comes from reading the Satipatthana Sutta and thinking that it tells you everything you need to know about mindfulness practice. It sounds as if you just watch things come and watch things go. But it’s telling you only part of the picture. It sets out the whole description of right mindfulness and then it simply focuses on one question: What are the different frames of reference that you can use as you’re practicing right mindfulness? It never asks any questions about what it means to be ardent as you’re doing this, or what it means to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Those parts of the mindfulness formula just don’t get touched on.

For that, you have to look elsewhere. And everywhere else in the Canon, the Buddha says that if something unskillful comes into the mind, you want to put it out like a fire that’s suddenly appeared on your head. If your hair is on fire, if your turban is on fire, you want to exert mindfulness to put it out. That doesn’t mean you simply watch the fire. You do what you can to put the fire out. You give it top priority. The question is how to do it skillfully.

A lot of times when something comes up that we don’t like in the mind, we try

to snuff it out, but we don't do it very skillfully: We just drive it underground, exert pressure on it, push it away. Of course, when you push it away, it's going to exert an equal and opposite reaction and push back. This is one of the reasons why working with the breath is such a helpful way of dealing with issues in the mind. You notice that when any kind of thought appears in the mind, there's going to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. Can you breathe through that pattern of tension? What happens when you do? It shows that you have an alternative.

For most of us, there are only two alternatives: Either you bottle something up, in which case it's like one of those chemicals that when you bottle it up and seal it off, it's going to explode in the bottle and you get nothing but glass shards everywhere; or you don't bottle it up and instead just let it go out into your thoughts, words, and deeds, you end up with the karma of having done something unskillful. Neither alternative is good. That's why it's good to have other alternatives, like this ability to breathe through the tension that's holding the thought in place and allow it to dissolve.

When you can breathe through the physical side of the thought, then you can turn around and look at the mental side with a lot more equanimity. Ask yourself, "Where is this coming from? What are the assumptions here?" To do this, you have to have developed really strong concentration. Otherwise, the analysis will destroy the concentration, and the mind will just be wandering around in a world of thoughts without really noticing what brought this on. You want to see these things in action.

So the first order of business is to get the mind to be as still as possible—again, still, but without putting too much pressure on the body. There will be a tendency when you're starting out and you're trying to keep the mind in one place that you put too much pressure on it, in which case the pressure will last for a while and then you feel uncomfortable. Then you reduce the pressure and end up wandering away, and then you come back again. There will be a long period of trying to find the right balance, where you're fully here and you're steady but you're not putting too much pressure on any part of the body or any part of the breath.

This takes time, takes practice. You do it again and again and again, and sometimes you lose your balance. It's like learning to ride a bicycle. You ride along "Oops!" you lost your balance and fall over: You get up again. Your knees are a little scraped, but that doesn't matter. You get back on the bike and you try again. After a while you gain a sense of where your balance lies. And notice that when you're riding a bicycle, especially when you see little kids ride bicycles, they'll lean a bit to the left, lean a bit to the right as they're putting pressure on the different pedals. A lot of the skill is learning how far you can go as you lean one direction or

the other and still be able to recover your balance.

And so it is with the concentration: Sometimes you lean a bit over to the stillness side, sometimes you lean a bit over to the observing side, and you can get knocked over either way. But if you learn how to do it right, you can lean one way and then the other, back and forth, back and forth like this and not lose your balance. This is an important skill.

So always keep in mind the fact that we're working on a skill here. The skill is trying to nurture skillful qualities and to undercut unskillful qualities in a skillful way.

While you're focused on the breath, those are the thoughts you want to allow. You don't want to snuff out thought entirely. After all, directed thought and evaluation are parts of the concentration practice. They're factors of the first jhāna. You think about the breath and you notice how the sensation of breath is moving through the body. Where does it feel good, where does it not feel good? When it doesn't feel good, what can you do to change it?

If you don't have any idea how to change it, just watch things for a while and pose that question in the mind: If the breath were allowed to do its own healing work, where would it flow? Learn to get an instinctive sense of this. As you watch it, you get a sense of what you can do to nudge it in one direction or another. This takes time. Again, you fall off the bicycle many times but fortunately you don't have knees to scrape here. Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and watch again. Experiment a little bit here, experiment there, then watch again. That way, your sense of how to maintain your balance will become more and more intuitive.