

Alertness: What Are You Doing?

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Of the three qualities we bring to meditation practice—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—alertness is the one that's most exclusively concerned with the present moment. Mindfulness brings in memories of the past to bear on the present, memories that give useful guidance for what we're doing. And ardency tries to shape the present with an eye also to the future, so that we get good results both in the present and in the future. Alertness is aware of what you're doing right now and the results you're actually getting.

Now notice, alertness is not simply aware of the present in a very general way. It's very focused in placing most of its attention on your actions.

You see this aspect of alertness all the way through the practice.

When the Buddha was introducing the practice to his son, Rahula, he started out by saying that you've got to be truthful, and then told him how to be observant—specifically, how to be observant of his intentions and his actions as he was doing them. The truthfulness, of course, underlies all of this because if you're not truthful about what you're doing, you're never going to see anything; you're never going to gain anything from the practice—or you may gain a few things, but not much, and if you're not trustworthy, what you gain won't be trustworthy, either. You have to be truthful about what your actions are and what your intentions are right now so that you can learn from them, because if you see that you're getting bad results, then you know what to change. If you're hiding your actions from yourself, then when you look at the results, you have no idea where they came from, or you don't admit to yourself where they came from, and that cuts off the practice right there. So you've got to be truthful.

What are you actually doing? What are the actual results? For Rahula, the instructions were, before you do anything, ask yourself what your intentions are, what you expect the results of the action to be. If you foresee any harm, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, see if any harm comes up. If you notice any harm is coming up, you stop. Otherwise, you can continue with the action. And then when the action is done, you look at the actual results that came out over time.

This is all a function of alertness.

Then the mindfulness and ardency come in. Ardency tells you, if you made a mistake, "I don't want to make that mistake again." Mindfulness helps you remember what you did. And then you go talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path so that you can get some ideas of what some other alternatives might be. Then you remember that. So even right there in the beginning, the Buddha's giving Rahula instructions in mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

And specifically, what you're alert to in the present moment is what you're doing. Always keep that in mind. That's the bottom line. What are you doing right now? Even when you seem to be passive and just taking in sensory input, to what extent is the mind really passive? Is it just sitting there with images coming into the brain without your interpreting them, without your focusing your attention here as opposed to there? Of course not. You're always doing things. You're commenting on things. You're highlighting some things and pushing other things into the background. Simply in looking at things or listening to things, your engagement with the senses is a two-way street: input is coming in, but also your shaping of that input is going out.

You want to see that, because otherwise you can go through the day picking up lint: little bits of lust, say. You're picking up anger without realizing it if you're not careful and alert to what you're doing right now. Then all of a sudden, you find these things flaring up in the mind. You don't know where they came from. Well, you've been gathering these things all along, so to be on top of the situation, you've got to keep in mind, "Okay, what am I doing right now?"

It's this focused kind of awareness that turns awareness into alertness. Notice that when the Buddha talks about being in the present moment or seeing clearly what's going on in the present moment, it's always a matter of actions and it's always in context. The context is not that the present is a wonderful place to be or whatever, it's simply that there's work that has to be done right here, right now, and if you don't do it right here, right now, it's not going to get done because death could come at any time.

The shadow of death lies over all the Buddha's teachings on the present moment. So, under the shadow of death, what should you be doing right now? What's the most skillful thing? Are you frittering away your day, building up defilements? Or is there a better choice? The Buddha said, if you're heedful, then you say, "I've got this breath. Let's practice with this breath," because you know you've got this breath. You don't know about the next breath. But you do know that you've got this breath.

So, do it now. Do what is skillful now, conscious that you're not just watching a TV show here. You're not a totally passive audience to your life. Experience is more like an interactive game. You've got some input. And it turns out that you actually have more input into this than you do in an interactive game. You're shaping all kinds of things here. And it's because the mind has been doing this so long that you stop noticing it. So try to back up a bit. Be alert to what you're doing and the results you're getting from your actions. That's the focus right now.

As we're meditating, it's the same sort of thing. What you're doing right now is the directed thought and evaluation. You use those mental activities to shape the breath, to shape your experience of the breath. If you shape it well, then there's going to be a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of rapture. The mind can settle down. You're doing something good here.

Now there are cases where you simply drop your affairs of the day and the mind seems to settle in with no apparent action on your part. That's just because the conditions have been

right. But to stay there, you've got to maintain it. This perspective is especially important in two ways. One is when the meditation is not going well, you know where to look: What am I doing right now?

Now, there are some cases where you're running up against obstacles that come from your past actions, but a large part of the skill of the meditation is learning how to work around those. Say there's a pain in the body that came from your overworking it today. Okay, you may have to sit with the pain for a while, but you don't have to be pained by it. And you can work around it with the breath. You can work around it with the way you picture the pain to yourself; the way you picture the breath to yourself. There are lots of things you can do right now.

The other time when this is a useful perspective is when you're moving from one stage of concentration to another. Often this will happen without your realizing what you're doing. The mind just settles in, settles in, settles in. You come out and you say, "That was deeper than it was before." You want to stop and think, "Okay, what was I not doing? What did I stop doing?"—so you can get a sense of how you can do it again the next time.

For developing discernment, it's the same sort of thing. This question of "What am I doing right now?" is the question that underlies the four noble truths. You're doing something right now that's causing stress. Look for it. When you get to something really big in the meditation—say, a sense of just knowing, knowing, knowing—always keep that question in mind: "What am I doing in the knowing?" If it seems like you're not really doing anything, well, just look really, really carefully.

This is one area where people tend to trip up a lot. They get to the sense of knowing and they say, "Well, this is just the basis of everything. There's some sort of deep cosmic principle here, a deep psychological principle here that I've touched." You think you've run into the underlying knowing of all things. That's because you've posed the wrong questions. If you pose the right questions, the question is always, "What am I doing right now? What's maintaining this?" You learn to see that maintaining even that knowingness involves some fabrication. That's how you learn how not to get stuck on things. Always look for that question, "What am I doing right now? How can I change?"

The alertness that lets you know what you're doing gives information that your ardency is going to need to use: "How do I do this better?" Then you use your mindfulness to try to remember, "What did I do in the past that worked?" If you can't think of anything, well, look very carefully. Try a few things. It's the interplay among these three qualities that allows your meditation to develop. Alertness is what keeps you focused on the right things in the present moment so that you know what to deal with, where the big issues are, where the solutions are going to lie. So as you're in the present moment, don't just be in the present moment. Also be focused, be alert to what you're doing. And you'll be in the right place.