

You'll Wish You'd Meditated More

January 31, 2020

They say that when you're about to die, you're not going to wish that you'd spent more time at the office. But the same thing can be said about a lot of other activities, not just the ones where you're forced to waste your time, but also where you voluntarily waste your time. You're not going to wish you'd spent more time watching TV or surfing the net. You may think that you'd like to have more memories, more time spent out in nature. But those memories can fade, and those memories can lie to you. What you're going to really need at that point will be a set of skills to deal with all the issues coming up in the mind. You're going to wish you'd spent more time meditating. So here's your chance.

As the Buddha said, heedfulness is what lies at the basis of all skillful qualities in the mind. In other words, it's not that we're innately good—or innately bad. What makes us want to be good, what makes us want to be skillful, is the realization that the qualities of the mind will make a difference. And if we don't make the effort to develop more skillful qualities in the mind, we're going to suffer. This is why the Buddha said the sign of a wise person is that the wise person sees that the mind needs to be trained. If the mind is untrained, it's like having an untrained dog in your house. It makes messes all over the place. In other words, good things can come your way and yet you turn them into bad. People try to help you and you give them the brush off. People are kind to you, and you don't really appreciate it. Circumstances are good, and they're not good enough. That's a sign of an untrained mind.

A trained mind sees what opportunities there are and tries to make the most of them. It realizes that you can't let your goodness depend on the goodness of other people or the goodness of things outside. It has to be something independent. You have to learn how to create the desire within you, because after all, all things are rooted in desire. And the desire to be skillful is something you want to nurture.

What kind of skills are you going to need?

You have to be mindful. You have to be alert. You have to be ardent. These are the qualities we develop as we meditate. They're part of the mindfulness instructions. But then, the instructions that the Buddha gives in his description of right mindfulness are basically instructions on how to get the mind into right concentration. And then through the concentration, there are instructions in how to develop discernment, because discernment is what you're going to need to solve the problem of suffering.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who had many cases of cancer. The cancer would appear here. They'd cut that out. Then it would appear over there; they'd cut that out. It would appear someplace else; they'd cut that out. One time she was getting radiation treatment and she developed an allergic reaction to the anesthetic. The doctors didn't know what to do, so she said, "Well, just try it without the anesthetic." At first they were hesitant, but she said, "Look, I'm a meditator. I can stand this." So they tried it. And as she said later, she was able to withstand the pain, but it took all her strength, and she was exhausted after the treatment.

Ajaan Fuang visited her after the treatment. She told him what had happened. He said, "That's because you're just using concentration. Use your discernment. It won't take so much energy." This, of course, is the discernment that can see the distinction between awareness and the things it's aware of, and the mind's commentary on the things it's aware of. You have to be able to divide these things out. And to do that is going to require a lot of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency: getting the mind into concentration and then seeing where there is still something that's eating away at the mind, even in the concentration. Or when you leave concentration, what is it that leads the mind to get involved in things outside?

One way of developing insight is, as you leave concentration, just try to notice: What is the first thing the mind's going to pick up as it leaves the breath? Why did it choose that? How does it get involved? What are the stages? In other words, when you leave concentration, don't just jump out. Try to be ardent, alert, and mindful as you leave. And you'll see things you didn't see before.

There are so many things in the mind that fall through the cracks. Ordinarily, when you leave concentration, it's as if you pass out for a second and then you're back in the world. That shift in your frame of reference: You've got to learn how to see the stages it goes through, because that's how you're going to understand becoming. That's how you're going to understand the craving and clinging that lead to becoming, the things that you're doing that create suffering where you don't have to.

So you want to be mindful to remember when you leave concentration: Don't just jump out. You have to be alert to what's happening. And you have to be ardent in really looking carefully.

So these three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—are not just for being mindful or getting concentrated. They're the qualities you need to gain discernment as well. And this discernment is what's going to protect you, because the biggest thing you need to protect yourself from is the way the mind creates suffering out of whatever comes up. If we're creating suffering out of relatively

pleasant circumstances right now, imagine what the mind is going to do when the body starts to break down.

So, on the one hand, learn to look for what's good. Learn to look for your opportunities while you have them. But make that ability to change the way you talk to yourself, change the way you try to be mindful, change the way you're noticing things, change your efforts so that as negative things come, and learn how not to make suffering out of them. It seems all too natural: Pain comes, unpleasant circumstances come, the mind suffers. It seems all too natural. The mind just turns them into more suffering, and it can justify itself. But is it really necessary? And is it wise?

The trained mind learns how not to feed on things that are going to give it a stomachache, and it learns how to create its own food. It's like going to a place where you know that the water system is poisoned. You don't drink the water there. You take your own water with you. This is what mindfulness is for: It's the stuff you take with you as you go through life, remembering that you don't have to feed on bad food. You don't have to drink bad water. You've got other resources inside.

This is why we're heedful. This is why heedfulness leads to skillfulness. You realize you've got to take your skills with you into places that are going to be difficult, dangerous. Here I'm not talking about places outside, but the places in your own mind, events that happen in life.

I remember when I was young, hearing old people talk about their illnesses, and I kept thinking, "What a boring conversation." And yet you realize, that's a large part of aging. Which part of the body's going to rebel? Which part of the body's going to stop working? Which part of the body's going to stop cooperating, and how are you going to deal with it? Now, some people just sit around and complain. That *is* boring. And you'll notice that right complaining is not one of the factors of the path. Some people have advice on how to handle the pain. Those are the ones whose conversations are interesting and useful and helpful. So try to have that kind of conversation in your own mind.

After all, one of the lessons of the four noble truths is that we suffer by the way we talk to ourselves. So learn to talk to yourself in a new way, a skillful way. Remind yourself of the dangers that will happen if you don't develop these skills. That's to motivate yourself to work more on them. And remind yourself of the good things that can come when the mind *does* have these skills.

That's the other side of heedfulness. Heedfulness doesn't focus just on the negative. If everything were negative, heedfulness wouldn't make any difference. The whole point of heedfulness is that you can make a difference through the way

you act. You can make a difference through the way you think and talk to yourself. There is safety that can be found.

So spend as much time as you can in finding that safety, and you'll always be glad you did.