

Mindfulness over Time

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Of the factors for awakening, there's one that the Buddha says is useful everywhere, and that's mindfulness. And of the factors, it's probably the most misunderstood.

You often hear that it means being in the present moment, totally accepting what's going on. But then you look at the very beginning instructions in mindfulness of breathing. They talk about discerning long breathing and discerning short breathing, and if you were totally in the present moment, you wouldn't know what a long breath was. You would have forgotten when the breath started. You wouldn't be able to compare a long breath with a short breath.

Actually, mindfulness means keeping something in mind. That cuts across the present moment, coming from the past, going to the future. You're picking up messages from the past and transmitting messages to the future. Exactly where those messages get kept is something of a mystery. But it's this process that allows us to see what's going on in the mind.

Think about when you're playing a musical instrument and you're trying to keep a steady beat. How do you know that you're keeping a steady beat? It's this combination of mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness keeps in mind how long it was from one beat to the next. Alertness watches over what you're doing to make sure that what mindfulness is telling you to do is actually happening.

The fact that we have this ability to keep things in mind while we're also alert is what enables us to practice, enables us to get into concentration. We make up our mind to stay with one object and then we remember that intention. Then we're alert to make sure that we're actually following through. Alertness is very similar to what in education they call metacognition, where the mind is watching the mind.

It's the ability—say, when you've read a page—that allows you to go back and ask, "What did I actually learn from that?" You're looking over the activity of the mind. And it's because of that ability to look at the activity in the mind that you can realize, "I read something and it just went right past me." You can go back and read it again.

When you make up your mind to stay with the meditation, it's the same process. You stay with the breath, stay with the breath, and then you ask yourself: Are you really staying with the breath? What's going on? This ability to know things over time, to keep something in mind, to send a message to the future and

then to watch over the mind as it's doing that helps in all levels of the practice—as when you're getting the mind to stay with one thing and then gaining a sense of skill in the practice.

The Buddha talks about having your meditation object in hand. The image he gives is of a person sitting watching a person who's lying down, or a person standing watching a person who's sitting. In other words, a part of the mind is watching another part of the mind. It's here you can see what's going on in your meditation: where there's unnecessary stress and what needs to be done to relieve it.

If you realize that your energy level is low, what do you do? You cast back in your mind and ask yourself, "What have I done in the past that's helped in cases like this?" There's one meditation I found useful. It's equivalent to that little message that comes on your phone sometimes, saying, "You only have 10% of your battery left. Are you ready to go into low energy mode?" In other words, do you want to conserve energy so that you can still use the phone?

The mind has an equivalent setting, you might call it, where you just focus on one spot and say, "I'm not going to think about anything at all." No evaluation, no nothing, just staying with that one spot, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Let the body do the breathing on its own. You don't have to think about the rate of the breathing. I've found it's very useful to focus in the area right around the eyes or in the third eye. Blot out any little motions that would lead to thoughts in that area, because that tends to be an area that the mind uses a lot while it's thinking. As you get on conservation mode like this, you find that you can build up some energy. Then you can get back to your usual mode of meditation, if you have to. That's just one thing you might keep in mind.

When your energy is hyper and you're thinking all over the place, then you have to remember other techniques you've used. But the fact that we have this ability to store things away in the mind, even just from one moment to the next, is a necessary part of learning any skill.

As in the skills of discernment: Sometimes you hear that discernment is about seeing things as they truly are. That's a common translation of a Pali phrase, *yathābhūtañāna*. But when you look at the Buddha's description of what gets involved in *bhūta* as part of the *yathābhūta*, it's less knowledge of how things *are*, and more knowledge of how things *have come to be*. The word *bhūta* can either mean true, or coming into being. There are a couple passages that indicate that what's really of interest is seeing how things have come into being. It's a process. And the only way you're going to see a process is if you can remember things over time.

There's one passage where the Buddha's talking about how you navigate the delicate passage between becoming and non-becoming, because people tend to fall off to either side. He says the way out of the dilemma is simply to see things as they've come to be, as they have come to be. In other words, you don't interpret them in terms of becoming. Becoming is a sense of yourself in a world of experience. What the Buddha wants you to see is not what has turned into a becoming, but the process of coming into being. Which means: How does this process develop?

This is indicated in another passage where the Buddha's asking Sariputta to interpret a passage, a poem. At first, Sariputta's quiet. The Buddha finally says, have you seen that this has come into being? Then Sariputta launches into explaining the topic of seeing how things have come into being based on nutriment, and then trying to develop a sense of dispassion for the nutriments, so that you can develop dispassion for whatever has come into being.

So it's a process. You're looking at how things arise through causes, so that you can attack the cause. This applies on the one hand to unskillful things that have come into the mind—things that are causing suffering—but it also applies to learning how to develop the path. You're watching processes here. It's not a matter of seeing things as they are, but of seeing how things work, how things perform, how they function, so that you can direct the function in the right direction.

That requires that you keep things in mind. Which is why this understanding of mindfulness is so important. The messages that the past sends to the future, the messages that it's sending to you right now: Which messages are worth opening up and listening to? Which messages do you send on? In the four noble truths, the Buddha talks about the duties we have to perform. Those are part of the message that he would recommend. He also recommends frames of reference: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, dhammas in and of themselves. These are the messages he would have you send on.

So first you create a sense of feeling at home here where you can settle in and be concentrated. Then, once there's concentration, you can look at whatever else comes up as a process, to see how you're creating unnecessary suffering out of it—and how you can trace things back to the cause.

Try to develop this ability to send useful messages, and to watch over the mind to make sure that it's actually performing in line with what you've learned from the past. This is what alertness does. This is how alertness turns into evaluation, provides the information for evaluation, so that you get an idea of what you need to change: where you need to look, what needs to be improved.

This way, your concentration becomes a skill.

Then you get into discernment, again, as you're evaluating. These actions that you're doing: Do they lead to suffering or away from suffering? If they're leading to suffering, what can you do to stop? Where is the cause, where's the nutriment? Watch things over time.

When you understand mindfulness in the right way, that helps you do that, because if you were 100% in the present moment, you wouldn't even have language. You wouldn't have any questions. You wouldn't know what you're doing. The fact that the mind can store this data from one present moment to the next is what enables you to accomplish things in life. And it's what enables us to accomplish good things in the practice.

That's how it's a factor for awakening, and how it's useful all the time. When you need to read the mind, when the energy level is low, what do you do? Well, there are certain factors for awakening that can arouse it: analysis of dhammas, persistence, rapture. These are the ones that you would emphasize at that time. When there's too much energy, then you go to the calming factors: calm, concentration, equanimity. But mindfulness is what remembers what the possible problems are, the possible solutions, and then it, together with alertness, checks to make sure that you're actually getting the results you want.

So take careful notice of what messages you're sending to yourself. This is one of the ways in which we use perception skillfully on the path.