

Right Effort & Right Mindfulness

August 30, 2021

There's a difference between mindfulness and right mindfulness. Mindfulness on its own is an ability to keep something in mind, to remember things, as the Buddha said, that were done or said long ago. Right mindfulness is a more complicated activity. You're using your powers of mindfulness to stay with certain phenomena in and of themselves—like the breath—right now. You're with the breath in and of itself, which means that you're not thinking about the breath in relationship to anything else except things that are right here, right now: the rest of the body, feelings, the mind that's aware of the breath, mental qualities that are involved in staying with the breath. You stay with these things and put aside other contexts.

In particular, you put aside the context of the world out there. Any greed or distress with reference to the world, any desires you have for the world, or any thoughts where you're upset with the world, you just put them aside.

Now, to these two activities—keeping the right frame of reference and putting aside any thoughts that go into the reference to the world—you bring three qualities. One of them, of course, is mindfulness itself. You keep the right frame of reference in mind and you remember to avoid any thoughts related to the world. You're also alert to what you're actually doing, and you're ardent, which means, essentially, putting energy into developing the right frame of reference and abandoning the wrong one.

That quality of ardency is identical with right effort. This means that the addition of right effort is one of the things that makes ordinary mindfulness into right mindfulness. With ordinary mindfulness, you can just sit there and remember things but nothing gets done and mindfulness doesn't get properly used. In fact, when you remember what you're doing here—you're trying to remember the lessons of right view and right resolve, and you have the desire to carry them out—that desire, which is part of right effort, is what makes us wise, what makes mindfulness right.

As the Buddha said, "All phenomena are rooted in desire," and that includes the path. When your desire is informed by right view, that's right resolve. That's something you want to maintain. So it's not true that all desire falls under the second noble truth. Well-informed desire falls right here—in the factor of right effort. And then, from right effort, it turns mindfulness into right mindfulness,

because you're applying your mindfulness to the right things—things that can accomplish something.

Think of the Buddha's image of the gatekeeper. If the gatekeeper simply sat there and watched people coming and going in and out of the fortress as he recognized the enemy and recognized friends but didn't do anything, it wouldn't be right mindfulness. It certainly wouldn't serve any purpose to have a gatekeeper like that at the gate.

This is an important point to keep in mind. I've read people saying that the Buddha basically taught two paths. There's the six-fold path—the first five factors plus right mindfulness. Then there's a seven-fold path, which was the first five factors plus right effort and right concentration. These were two totally separate paths as far as one author was concerned. Mindfulness for him was all about simply accepting what arises and passes away. Whereas with right effort and with right concentration, you're actually trying to develop concentration in the mind. Actually, though, that six-fold path is one that the Buddha doesn't recommend as a path at all.

Of course, mindfulness is not simply accepting things. There's no place where the Buddha defines mindfulness as just accepting whatever comes up, and there's no place where he even uses the term mindfulness to implicitly mean acceptance or non-reactivity. In all of his explanations of the path, as in the *Wings to Awakening*, mindfulness, is always paired with right effort.

When the Buddha describes mindfulness as a governing principle in your practice, it's not a matter of simply watching things arising and passing away. If there are skillful qualities that haven't arisen yet, you're mindful to try to *make* them arise. And if they're there, you're mindful to make sure they don't pass away. In other words, mindfulness as a governing principle means you combine mindfulness with right effort.

Similarly, when the Buddha talks about contentment, he talks about being content with your food, clothing, shelter. But as for skillful and unskillful qualities of the mind, he says that you delight in giving rise to the skillful ones and delight in abandoning the unskillful ones. As he said, the secret to his awakening was that he didn't rest content with skillful qualities. He kept trying to develop them even further. What is that lack of contentment? It's desire. It's the desire in right effort.

So we bring mindfulness into the service of that desire. That's what makes it right mindfulness. It's simply a matter of learning how to be mature about looking at your mind to see what actually works in developing skillful qualities.

Some people get discouraged. They see their mind's all over the place and they somehow take comfort when they're told, "Well, just be okay with your mind all over the place, and that will be enough." But it's not enough. There are times in life when you want to make sure your mind is very much *not* all over the place. It's going to make a huge difference. When you're sick, as you get old, when you die, you don't want your mind scattered everywhere, because it can latch on to anything at all.

So combined with knowledge that this is an important skill to develop, you have to have the confidence that, yes, you can do it. You do accept where you are but you don't accept the idea of staying where you are. You accept that you have the potential to make something better out of yourself—better out of your mind.

Think of Ven. Ananda's advice to that nun to tell yourself: "Other people have found the deathless. They're human beings, you're a human being. They can do it, you can do it, too." You've got to have that kind of confidence, which is why the Buddha, when he was teaching, would not only instruct but also urge, rouse, and encourage you, to remind you that, yes, you can do this and that it's worth doing.

So try to generate that desire. It's the desire that you don't want to come back and suffer or, as Ajaan Mun would say, you don't want to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again. You hold on to that desire and you then sort out all the other desires that you have in the mind that would pull you in other directions. A lot of times, your discouragement, when you look at what's going wrong in your mind, comes from the voice that *wants* to discourage you. You have to look into that. Why listen to that voice? You have to learn how to generate desire. Together with the generating of the desire has to be the ability to build confidence that not only is this a good desire but it's also a worthwhile desire and it will be an effective desire.

You think about the Buddha during his quest for awakening. How many people encouraged him? Only a handful. Most of the time, he was out there alone. And what kept him going? You might say, "Well, he was the Buddha. He had all those paramis from the past." But paramis are things you can build, things you can develop. Where did he get those paramis? From his struggling with his discouragement and overcoming it. And the key factor was his willingness to nurture the desire to find an end to suffering.

Think of it as a flame that you want to keep going. Sometimes it gets really small, in which case you've really got to protect it. Think of it as your most valuable possession, your most valuable source of energy. It lies at the heart of right effort. It's what makes your efforts right when it's informed with right view.

And then together with right effort and right view, you bring in mindfulness. That combination is what makes your mindfulness right.

Then, as the Buddha said, you apply these three factors—right view, right effort, and right mindfulness—to all the factors of the path. You look at your resolve, you look at your speech, your actions, and your livelihood in the light of these three factors. Do your best to bring everything in line. That way, you turn your random desires into right desires, your random resolves, actions, speech into right resolves, actions, and speech. Because in the path, the Buddha is not telling you to do anything you haven't done before. He's basically saying: This is how you do it rightly. We all have views. We all have resolves. We speak. We act. We have our livelihood. We make efforts in certain things. We have mindfulness of certain things and we even get concentrated on certain things. So these things are nothing new, it's simply that we have to learn how to bring them together in such a way that they're all right.

And although the Buddha does stress right view as the most important factor of the path, it has to be *right* view that directs your desire. It's a sad thing to see people who think that by overcoming desire to change things, overcoming desire to be better than they are, is what the path is all about. That kind of path doesn't last very long, doesn't go very far. The path that goes far is where you nurture that desire—that little flame inside—and do your best to make it more and more skillful.

Remember that right effort is there circling around every factor of the path, helping to make it right, so try to have a sense of its importance.