

Two Things to Keep in Mind

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One of the purposes of the chants that we do every evening is to take our minds out of the context of the world: the issues of daily life, the people we've been interacting with, the different narratives that are entwined in the day. You want to get yourself un-entangled from those things, because otherwise you carry them into the meditation, and the meditation gets constrained by the constraints in those narratives. So you want to step back and realize the world is something smaller than your mind. The Buddha defines the world simply as, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, along with your sense organs that pick these things up, and then the things you make out of that raw material.

And when he explains about how suffering comes about, it's not because of the world. It's the prior stuff that's been going on in the mind even before the sensory contact: the thoughts you've had, the intentions, the various ways you have of looking at things. These are going to shape whether you're going to suffer because of the world or not.

So as we're meditating, we're going to back off from the world and get back into the mind to see if we can change a few of these processes going on in the mind that are making us suffer. This is part of the good news of the Buddha's teachings: that regardless of what's happening in the world, that's not what's causing us to suffer. If the world were the cause of our suffering, there'd be nothing we could do about it. We could try a little bit, but you've seen what the world is like. People often start with good intentions and then they get corrupted. There are trends in society that you can't overcome. You can try to push against them. I was reading recently the last volume of *The Once and Future King*, in which two armies are going to go to battle over the slightest little misunderstanding. And as they're rushing at each other, King Arthur stands there trying to push his own forces back and they're not listening to him. Here he is the king, and he can't push his soldiers back.

That's one of the interesting details in the Canon as well. When the Buddha's talking about the drawbacks of lay life, he often focuses on the drawbacks of being a king. After all you'd think being a king would be the best thing you could be as a lay person. You'd have power and wealth, but you would see, if you look at how kings live, that it's pretty miserable. And there's so much that kings can't control. That's why it's good news that our suffering doesn't come from the world. It comes from within the mind. It comes from something we can change.

The Buddha says it starts with ignorance of what suffering is and where it's coming from and what we can do about it. And because we're ignorant, then we start shaping things. Even prior to consciousness, there are already intentions moving in different directions. And this is where the meditation settles in: right at that process of what the Buddha calls fabrication.

Take right mindfulness, for instance. Mindfulness basically means keeping something in mind. All too often it's defined as bare awareness, or an open receptive

awareness of the present moment. That's alertness. Mindfulness means that you remember certain things as you try to be alert. One is remembering that there are certain frameworks for understanding things that are going to be more helpful than others. We hear about this often, that how you question how you frame a story makes all the difference. Well, it's the same in the meditation. How are you framing things? The Buddha recommends four possible frames: either the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, or mental qualities in and of themselves. Often he recommends starting with the body because that's the easiest of these frameworks to keep track of. But feelings will come up in the body and your mind states are going to be experienced right here at the body.

So sometimes it's useful to switch your frame of reference. Do it consciously. But these are the four things you want to keep in mind: four ways of framing what's going on right now. So when you're dealing with the breath and thoughts come up about "Why can't I stay with the breath?" or "What's wrong with me?" you remember to reframe the issue: just the breath in and of itself. Take the "I" and the "me" out. You want to see, "What's this breath like? How does it feel? When the breath comes in, where is it most prominent? What other sensations go along with it?" Any other issues that come up, you just want to put them aside. Leave just the awareness and the breath.

The next thing you want to keep in mind, though, is that once you've got this framework, it gives you some advice on what to do. The big framework that we're operating within, of course, the four noble truths. That's how we overcome ignorance: by trying to keep that framework in mind. But then each of the truths has a duty. You want to remember that, too. And each of the sub-factors within those truths has its duty as well—a duty not in the sense that somebody outside is imposing it on you, but the duty in the sense that if you really want to be happy, if you want to put an end to suffering, this is how you have to deal with this particular thing, in this particular context.

For example, with suffering, the duty is to comprehend it. That means to watch it until you understand where the appeal is in the things that make you suffer. Why do we cling in such a way that it causes suffering? When we're actually suffering, what is it? There's a difference between pain in the body and the suffering in the mind, for example. And what does that suffering in the mind feel like?

Sometimes you start working with physical pain and analyze that. When you feel a physical pain, to what extent is this pain something that's just there on its own? And to what extent are you already shaping it? Remember, even before you're conscious of these things, there are fabrications going on. There are perceptions and ways of thinking, ways of breathing with regard to that pain that, if they're done with ignorance, are going to cause suffering. So how can you bring some knowledge to this process of how you experience pain? How you label it, how you breath around it. When you've learn some of these lessons from physical pain, then you try to apply them to mental pain as well. Where do you sense the feeling of being burdened by things? Of being attacked by things? Of being the victim of things? Can you change that perception? Of course you can. This is what mindfulness helps you do—it reminds you that you can be more proactive. Just because there's pain there doesn't mean there *has* to be pain there. It's simply that the causes have been put into motion—some from the

past, and some from the present. You can change those present causes. You want to keep that in mind. And this way you get involved in the other duties with regard to the other truths.

In other words, if you see that something is causing suffering, you abandon it, let it go. If you see there's something you can do that helps alleviate the pain, alleviate the suffering, you want to develop those qualities so that you actually realize the cessation of the suffering. Those are the four duties. Comprehend stress or suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation by developing the path to realize its cessation.

So that's the main framework you want to keep in mind.

The framework then helps you remind yourself of these duties you can apply to whatever comes up. In the Satipatthana Sutta, for instance, the Buddha goes to a lot of detail about the various ways you can apply the larger framework to what you're doing right now, giving you more specific advice on what to do. For example one of the contexts that the Buddha recommends is the six sense media: seeing things in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, and then the organs that receive these things. In that context, you want to see what's creating the fetter that causes you to suffer with regard to sights, or sounds, or smells, tastes, tactile sensations or ideas. Then you try to see what can you do to abandon that fetter.

This is a useful context when you're trying to carry your practice away from the meditation cushion and out into your daily life. You want to practice restraint of the senses. If you see that the way you're looking at something is causing greed, aversion, or delusion to arise, you want to look in a different way. Again, this helps you to remind yourself that you're not totally on the receiving end of these things. Sometimes you hear people say the because there's something beautiful out there, of course it's giving rise to greed. But actually, all too often the greed was out looking for something to aggravate it first. Or you hear somebody say something and it, as they say in Thai, gets stuck in your ear in the wrong way and you'll be angry about it for a long time. You tell yourself, "Well it's because that person said such and such a thing that I'm angry." But all too often you've got your ears cocked in such a way that you're going to get angry about whatever comes in. In other words, the mind is often looking for trouble. That's what you want to look for. The problem is not so much the things outside, it's what's coming from within.

So as you try to exercise restraint in these ways, it teaches you lots of lessons. On the one hand, it teaches you that you are more in control of your environment than you thought, simply by the way you look or listen or smell things, the way you go about tasting things, touching things, thinking about things. These activities can have a huge impact. And you can be more skillful in this impact on the mind if you exercise some restraint.

And then you can carry those lessons into the meditation, remembering that you can be more proactive. If there's suffering, the cause is not outside. Just turn around and look in your mind. This is not for the purpose of laying the blame on you. It's for the purpose of offering you a path out of the suffering. What people do outside often is totally outrageous. Sometimes people don't even behave like people. They behave like beasts. And it's true. We're not denying that fact. But if you focus on them, that's not going to solve the problem. We're not here to assign who's to blame and who's not to

blame for your suffering. We're here to find a way out. And the way out is by looking into the mind. How do you shape things? When you go about looking and listening, thinking, what are you looking for? Can you look and listen in a different way? When you frame things in this way, it's really empowering.

When you come to the meditation and settle down with the breath, it's the same sort of thing. Keep the breath in mind. Then remember that once you've got the breath, it's not just a matter of putting up with whatever's coming in and going out in terms of the breath. You experiment. What happens when you try to be aware of the whole body all the way through the in breath, and all the way through the out? What happens when you try to calm down the impact that the breath has on the body? What kind of breath soothes the body when there's pain? What kind energizes the body when there's tiredness? How can you breath in a way that's going to give rise to a sense of refreshment or even rapture to energize you? How are you going to breath in way that gives rise to a sense of ease or pleasure? These are some of the questions that the right framework helps you keep in mind.

So the function of mindfulness is to remember two things. One is to remember the framework that you want to bring to your experience. And two, within that framework, it reminds you that there are certain duties that you try to perform. This fits in with the Buddha's analysis of why we suffer. It's all about how we approach the world, how we approach our senses.

If we approach these things in unskillful ways, we turn everything into a burden on the mind. But we have the opportunity to bring knowledge to these processes so that we can shape our experience in a new direction, making it a path, the path to the end of suffering, something you want to develop.

So keep this in mind, that these are the two functions of mindfulness. One is to keep the right framework in mind, and the second is to remember within that framework what your various duties are: the things that are wise to do if you encounter something within that framework. That's how right mindfulness builds on right effort and leads to right concentration, and then beyond right concentration to release.

I was reading today someone saying that the whole purpose of the path was to arrive at right view. But actually, right view is also a factor of the path. It's not the end. It's there simply to give guidance to your efforts.

All of the factors of the path are meant to lead to something beyond where we are right now. So keep that in mind. We're here to know the present, not because the present is a wonderful place, but because it's where all the really good work can be done. Try to keep that perspective in mind so that you can remember what the good work is.