

Mindful Judgment

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We meditate because the mind needs to be developed, or the good qualities in the mind need to be developed. The word for meditation in Pali, *bhavana*, means literally that: development, bringing things into being, or taking what's already there and strengthening it.

Mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment: These are all things we have to some extent, and what we're doing is learning how to take what we've got, to appreciate the good things we've got in the mind, and improve the conditions for their growing. It's not the case that the mind is innately good or innately bad. It's got good qualities and bad qualities all mixed up together. The more delusion we have about what's good and what's bad, the harder it is to figure out what needs to be developed and what needs to be abandoned.

So we need to develop this quality of learning how to ferret out what's skillful and what's not. On the one hand, we can benefit from gaining instruction from outside to point us in directions where we should look. But that instruction has to be proven in our own practice. We have to see for ourselves. In other words, just because a teaching comes in a text, or they say the Buddha said this, or whoever said it, doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. But if the source seems reliable, that does mean that what it says is something you want to look into. You want to test it for yourself. And you want to develop the qualities of mind that make you reliable in evaluating the test.

This is why we begin with mindfulness, alertness, and concentration. These are the qualities that make you a steady observer, a more reliable observer. You need these qualities because you're looking for cause and effect. In some cases the effects come immediately on the causes, as when you stick your finger into a fire and it immediately hurts so you immediately pull it out. In other cases, though, the effects take time—as when people begin to notice after they've been meditating for quite a while that the mind is getting calmer. It doesn't react in the ways that it used to. But sometimes you don't notice that effect for weeks.

So to see cause and effect clearly, you have to learn how to be steady in your powers of observation. To do that you have to focus your mind on something that's steadily there. You've got the breath coming in and going out, and as long as you're alive it's going to be coming in and going out. So it's a good place to start. You focus on the breath going in, you focus on it coming out. After a while, you realize that in order for the mind to stay with the breath, the breath will have to be comfortable, something

you like, something you enjoy doing. Otherwise, you get bored and start wandering off to other places.

So you hold that purpose in mind. You're going to explore the sensation of breathing, and try to use your powers of evaluation to see: What kind of breathing feels good right now? What kind of breathing feels good over time? The longer you stay with the breath, the more you realize that there's a lot going on in the breath. It's not just air coming in and out through the nose, but there's also a flow of energy that goes along with it. And the way you conceive of the breath can help or hinder the process. If you allow a concept simply of energy flowing, you find that the energy flows more freely. So you remember to hold these concepts in mind: That's the mindfulness.

Then you try to develop alertness to see what's actually happening with the breath. And also the quality of ardency: You want to do this well. You want to give it your full attention. And as soon as you sense anything going wrong, you want to correct it. In other words, the breath, which seemed to be comfortable, with a particular rhythm that felt good, after a while is not so good any more. Well, change it. Or let it change. If you sense the mind wandering off, you bring it right back.

And then if you notice that you're getting frustrated by the fact that the mind is wandering off so much, you have to remind yourself that frustration is not helpful. You're not here to develop frustration. So try to think in other ways. Remind yourself that each time you bring the mind back to the breath, you're actually strengthening your mindfulness. You may not be happy to see how weak your mindfulness is, or how many gaps it has, but that's the way it is. You've got to start where you are.

As Ajaan Lee once said, when you start to practice, you start seeing your defilements right away. As long as you accept the fact that this is what everybody has to go through, you won't get discouraged. It's not a sign that you're a particularly bad meditator or a hopeless meditator. It's just where you are.

I don't know how many times have I heard people say they can't meditate because their mind won't settle down. It's like saying, "I can't go to see the doctor cause I'm sick." If you're sick, you've got to go see the doctor. That's the only way you're going to get over your illness. And in the same way, if you find that your mind won't settle down, that means you've got to meditate—and learn the patience that's required for the meditation to do its work. This is a good quality to develop, because it will allow your mindfulness to strengthen. And the stronger your mindfulness, the stronger your alertness, the more you're able to see and understand about your own mind.

This way, you're able to put the Buddha's teachings to the test to see if developing these qualities really does create a greater capacity for happiness, a greater capacity for well-being. And you can see what other qualities you need to develop in the mind. Get a sense of what's working and what's not, and under which conditions certain teachings

work and certain teachings don't. Because an important part of the path is balance, noticing that when the mind is too sluggish there are times when you need to gladden it, or when it's too energetic, you have to make it steadier.

As the Buddha says in terms of the factors for awakening, there are the passive ones and the active ones, calming ones and energizing ones. They're all good, but they have their time and place. Meditating is like building a fire. When the fire is too weak, you put more fuel on it. You don't cover it with dust and water. But when it's too strong, you don't add more fuel. That's when you use the dust and the water. It's not that the dust and the water are always bad or always good, or that the fuel is always bad or always good. You have to learn to read the situation to see what's needed. All of these are issues that you have to keep in mind.

It's not that simply by watching things without actively testing things, you'll immediately understand what to do. If that were the case, the Buddha's instructions would be pretty simple. Just watch and you'll understand for yourself and then you can trust yourself and then everything will be okay. But he realized there's more to training the mind than just that.

This is why right view is an important part of the practice. And it starts with understanding what suffering is—as in the chant just now. It says we don't discern suffering, which sounds kind of strange. After all, everybody knows that there's suffering. It's one of the most basic facts of being aware. Being a conscious agent, we're bound to come into pain, suffering, mental suffering, physical pain. These things just right here, but we don't really discern them.

To "discern" them means to understand them. What exactly is the suffering? It's not the physical pain, it's the mental pain. That's the real suffering. And it turns out that the mental pain is not necessary. The fact that we have a body means that there are going to be pains. Once you've been born, you've signed on for aging, illness, and death even though you don't realize it. It's part of the contract. And it's not even in the small print. It's there in bold letters, written out clear. Yet we tend to forget that side of the contract.

But that kind of pain is not the real suffering. The real suffering is the anguish in the mind. And that comes from craving and ignorance. The Buddha defines this suffering as the five clinging-aggregates, which is the technical term for the fact that we try to feed on the form of the body, on our feelings, on our perceptions, on the way the mind fabricates its thoughts, and on acts of consciousness, in our attempt to find happiness.

It's like feeding on potato chips thinking that you're going to get healthy by eating them. They do offer some sustenance, but not much, and they certainly don't clear up the cholesterol in your arteries or lower your blood pressure. And yet you think this is where you're going to find happiness. But the Buddha says No. Actually, the fact that you're trying to feed on things to find happiness is the cause of the suffering. This is

what he means by not discerning suffering. We see it, we feel it, but we don't really understand it.

So it helps to have some of the Buddha's insights on the matter. He points us to areas that we can look into, that we can experiment with and try to understand, so that we can see where we're causing the anguish, where we're causing the disappointment, and what we can let go of so that we don't have to suffer—and what we can develop so that we can let go.

The Buddha says that if you're going to feed on anything, feed on the pleasure that comes from a settled and concentrated mind. That's not going to be the end of suffering in and of itself, but it's the way to the end of suffering. We're following a path, and so we need food to keep going. Once the mind gets more and more still, more and more at ease in the present moment, there'll be a sense of ease, pleasure, refreshment, and that can give us a lot of sustenance right there, so that we don't have to feed in our old ways.

The Buddha's giving us health food: good, solid, sustaining food. When we feed on it, ultimately the mind gets to the point where it doesn't have to feed and it finds a happiness that doesn't depend on conditions at all. That's the goal that he points us to. And it comes through developing these good qualities of the mind.

Now, as I said, when the Buddha talks about the good qualities of mind, some of them are appropriate for some occasions, others are appropriate for others. Mindfulness, he says is appropriate in all situations. But here he means that whole cluster of mindfulness, alertness, ardency: the qualities that go into establishing right mindfulness, because they oversee everything else.

In one analogy, he talks of mindfulness as being like a charioteer. A charioteer has to know how fast to get the horses going, and if one horse is pulling faster than the others, you have to pull that one back. In other words, the charioteer has to keep things in balance. In another analogy, the Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper at a fortress at the frontier of the kingdom. The gatekeeper has to be very careful, because the fortress might easily be infiltrated by spies and people from outside. So the gatekeeper has to be very mindful and alert to keep watch on who is coming in, and to let in only the people he knows and to keep out the people he doesn't know. And as the Buddha said, with mindfulness as your gatekeeper, you develop what's skillful and you abandon what's not.

Which means that mindfulness has an important function in learning how to be wise in judging what's skillful and what's not. You bring your full presence of mind as to what's appropriate, what's not appropriate, what needs to be done in terms of the four noble truths. You want to understand suffering. You want to let go of its cause and you want to develop a path to the end of suffering, to abandon its cause so that you can

realize the cessation of suffering. Those are the duties and activities that we want to keep in mind.

So again, you want to be informed so that you can judge things in an intelligent way. We're warned against being judgmental, i.e., judging things without really understanding them, just acting on our quick gut reaction, which, even though we may have plenty of nerves in our gut, can't really be relied on. You need to educate your gut, you need to educate your mind, so that your judgments are skillful, appropriate—so that they really do help understand suffering and abandon its cause, really do understand how to develop the path. This means that there are certain things you do have to keep in mind.

The primary set of principles to keep in mind is what the Buddha called the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path to its cessation. And keep in mind the duties appropriate to each: to understand suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation, by developing that path. Those are the things you keep in mind to use as your standards of judgment.

We're sometimes told that mindfulness is non-judgmental. And in and of itself, just plain old mindfulness doesn't know what to judge, because plain old mindfulness could keep anything in mind. But when you train it with right view, and get it properly established with the right qualities so that it becomes right mindfulness, then it becomes the crucial factor in learning how to judge things as to what's appropriate, what's inappropriate, for any particular time and place. After all, judgment is not just a matter of holding standards in mind in a general way. You have to see how they apply, right here, right now. Given this situation, given this imbalance in the mind, given this imbalance in the body, how do you bring things back into balance? And the same principle applies in dealing with other people: when you need to tell one person to turn right, you need to tell another person to turn left.

There's a famous example with Ajaan Chah. One of his students once accused him of being inconsistent in his instructions. But as Ajaan Chah said, sometimes he sees a person walking down the path and the person's wandering off to the right side, so you have to say, "Go left, go left." Another person's wandering off to the left side, so you need to say, "Go right, go right." The words differ, but the intent is the same, or comes to the same thing. This is another principle you need to keep in mind: that you have to read the situation before you know what to apply.

This is how your judgment, your powers of judgment, become well informed, so that you've got good standards of judgment and you know how to apply them to specific cases.

It's in this way that mindfulness is an important part of the faculty of judgment. But it has to be informed by the other factors of the path, in particular right view. What

makes it right? Because it works. How well does it work? Well, that depends on your own powers of mindfulness, your own powers of concentration as you develop your own discernment. The Buddha gives standards for judgment and he also gives us standards for judging when our powers of judgment are really reliable or not. But it's up to us to develop those qualities of mind that allow us to judge for ourselves.

The Buddha knew he was in a position where he couldn't tell people what to do against their will. And he couldn't prove his many of his main points. After all, he talks about nibbana. Where is it? Where do you see it? It's not in anything he could point to. But what he did depend on was the fact that people are suffering and they want to know a way to put an end to suffering. He's offering that to them: If you want to find an end of suffering, this is what you can do. What you *have* to do.

And he was so confident that he had found the right way that he didn't try to put any constraints on other people as to whether they had to believe him or not. But it is up to us to develop the powers where we can legitimately judge how accurate his teachings are, how effective they are.

This is what we're working on as we meditate, developing mindfulness, alertness, ardency, intentness, concentration, discernment, steadiness of mind: all the qualities that put us in a position where we can make accurate judgments for ourselves.