

## *Mindful, Alert, & Ardent*

*April 11, 2009*

We want to start meditating now. The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means to develop. We're trying to develop good qualities in the mind, and we start out with a few simple ones: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

For example, think of the breath and try to keep the breath in mind: That's mindfulness, the keeping-in-mind part. You have to start out with the intention that you're going to stay with the breath all the way in with the in-breath, all the way out with the out-breath—and then with the next breath and then the next. But take it one breath at a time. If you start thinking about how many breaths you're going to have to follow in the course of the hour, you'll lose it. You've got just this one breath right now.

Then watch what's going on. That's alertness, to see how the breath feels, and also be alert to notice when the mind is beginning to wander off. If it wanders off, bring it right back. That's the beginning of the quality called ardency. In other words, you really do want to work at doing this meditation skillfully. So when the mind wanders off, you don't let it take a long time to wander around before it comes back. As soon as you catch it wandering off, you don't even have to let the thought be completed. Just bring it right back to the breath. While you're with the breath, the quality of ardency means trying to be really sensitive to how it feels, because you want a way of breathing that feels good. If it doesn't feel good, you're not going to stay.

So notice what kind of breathing would feel best for the body right now. Just one good breath: How would that feel? Would you like a breath that goes all the way down to the abdomen? Would you like long breathing, deep breathing, shallow breathing, slow or fast, heavy or light, short or long, whatever? Just pose that question in mind: What kind of breathing would feel good right now? See how the body responds. Or you can experiment with different kinds of breathing to see how they feel. When you get a rhythm that feels good, stick with it. If, after a while, it doesn't feel good anymore, you can change.

So the quality of ardency doesn't mean that you just put a lot of effort into it. On the one hand, it means that you're continuous in your effort. On the other, you try to be very, very sensitive to what's working, because an important part of right effort in the meditation is that you give rise to the desire in the mind to do it, and then you maintain that desire, learn how to apply the effort in such a way that you enjoy it, you keep on wanting to do it.

It also means that there are different kinds of effort you can exert right now. If the mind is with the breath, you want to maintain it. If it's not with the breath, you want to drop whatever it's going with and come back to the breath. In other words, you don't simply note what's happening, good or bad. If you notice that something happening is skillful, you try to keep it going. Let it grow stronger. If it's not skillful, try let it go.

Another aspect to right effort is figuring how much effort is needed right now. A lot of energy? Or just enough to keep things going? Sometimes, when something unskillful comes up in the mind, all you have to do is look at it, and it goes away. You recognize, "Oh, this is a place where I don't want to go," and it drops out of sight. Other times, though, simply noticing is not enough. You've got to exert some effort to get rid of that unskillful whatever. And the effort here can be what the Buddha calls physical, i.e., using the breath, making the breath as really comfortable as you can, so that you're not interested anything else. It feels good coming in, feels good going out, and that sense of good just saturates every little cell of your body. When there's a feeling of ease with the breath, allow it to spread around.

If that's not enough to get rid of the unskillful distraction, look at it to see what kind of distraction it is. Is this someplace you really want to go? Many of the thoughts that distract us are things that have been churning around in the mind all day long. They're nothing new. You don't learn anything new or gain anything new by following them. So why would you want to? Learn to question them. See them as processes of cause and effect: Where does this thought go? Most of your thoughts don't go anywhere. Or they may go to something that's really unskillful. Seeing that helps you let go of them.

Then there is what's called mental effort, which means learning how to hold certain perceptions in mind. How do you perceive the breath in a way that makes it interesting? Think of the breathing not just as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the whole energy process by which the air comes in and out. That energy process affects the entire nervous system. Think about that. When you breathe in, think of every nerve in the mind being nourished by energy. What does that do to the way you breathe? Try to think of all the different parts of the body working together, rather than at across purposes. What does that do to the way you breathe? What does that do to the mind? Try to find a way of perceiving the breath that makes it more interesting, and to make your distractions less interesting.

As you get involved in exploring the breath in this way, you find that you really are developing these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. The mind

feels energized. It feels more awake, more alive, more interested in doing skillful things, because as the mind gets stronger, you find that not only as you're sitting here meditating, but also as you go through daily life, you have more energy for choosing the skillful alternative. A lot of times in day-to-day life, we know what would be skillful or unskillful, but we just don't have the energy to put forth the effort to choose only the skillful alternative. It seems too much, too hard, too demanding. So we keep on making unskillful choices day after day after day. But as the mind gets more energy, you find that you get tired of the unskillful choice. You'd rather put in the effort to get the good results you really want.

So these qualities of mind, as you develop them, don't stay developed only while you're meditating. It's like going down to the gym. As the body gets stronger, you're stronger not only in the gym, but also as you go through your activities throughout the day.

So we've got a whole hour here. Your only responsibility is to work directly on the mind. Events of the day, events of tomorrow, you just put them aside. Give the mind a chance to develop, to grow, to gain some strength. And as for your responsibilities outside of this, don't be afraid: They'll be there when you come out of meditation. But if you give the whole hour to the breath, give the whole hour to developing mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, then you'll be in a much better position to take on whatever other responsibilities you have.