

Hold on to Your Frame of Reference

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The Buddha defined mindfulness as the ability to hold something in mind for a long time. This is a really essential quality in the practice, because it's easy to learn the teachings, but also easy to forget them. You sit and listen to them, they make sense. And the next day you find yourself doing the exact opposite of what made sense. Sometimes it's because of greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes it's simply a matter of going back to your old surroundings, and all the associations from those old surroundings begin to take over.

So one of the main qualities we're developing as we meditate is this ability to keep something in mind. The word for "meditation" in Pali, *bhavana*, actually means to develop, to bring something into being, and then maintain it in being. The standard formula for mindfulness practice gives you an idea of what's required to develop this quality of mindfulness.

First you start with a frame of reference. Like right now, we're focusing on the breath. This is part of the body in and of itself, and that's what you want to hold in mind: that you're going to stay with the breath in and of itself, regardless. Earthquakes can come, huge tidal waves can come crashing over on you, but you'll just hold on to the breath. Keep the breath in mind. Keep remembering it every time the breath comes in, every time the breath goes out. This is where you want to be: right with the breath.

That introduces one of the other qualities you're working on, which is alertness: the ability to see what's actually happening, and in particular to notice what you're doing while you're doing it and what the results of your actions are. If you realize you've forgotten the breath, then you come right back to it. You remember, then you focus again on the breath. You notice whether the breath is comfortable. You notice whether the mind can stay with the breathing, what kind of breathing is easy to stay with. Sometimes, when the breath gets too subtle, it's hard to stay with, so you want to start out with breathing that's strong enough. Ajaan Lee recommends taking a couple of good long in-and-out breaths, so that if the body needs extra breath energy, you can provide it right at the beginning.

That, in and of itself, is important because it's very easy to slip off and go to other frames of reference, like the body in the world. The body in the world means thinking about whether

other people find your body attractive, or whether it's strong enough to do the work you want to do, or how healthy it is, or all the other issues that come from focusing on how your body functions in the context of the world—the world of your senses, the world of human society. So put that frame of reference aside.

You're going to stay with the body, in and of itself: simply the fact that you have a body, and the issues that come from that mere experience of having a body, like the breath, or the elements, or the postures of the body. Try to keep everything on that level, in and of itself.

And then you're ardent. You really want to stick with this; you really want to do it skillfully. Ardency here relates to right effort. In other words, if something unskillful comes up in the mind, you just put it aside. You don't have to get involved. You want to develop skillful qualities instead, and the Buddha has a whole list of skillful qualities that can build on mindfulness.

Like the ability to analyze what's going on in the present moment, to see what's skillful and what's not skillful: It's called analysis of qualities, and it's one of the factors for awakening that follows on mindfulness. In the beginning, you're sitting here directing the mind to the breath and you're evaluating how it's going. If it's not going well, you try to figure out ways to make it go better: changing the way you breathe, changing the focus, changing your perception of the breath.

This perception that you hold in mind is essential to the mindfulness practice—to perceive the breath not just as air coming in and out through the nose, but as the whole range of energy flow in the body. Some people find it easy to tap into that energy flow; for other people it's harder.

You focus on whatever you can experience: just the movement of energy, wherever you notice it, that tells you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. You try to hold that perception of breath in mind. You can think of the breath coming in and out through every pore of the body and see how that affects the way you breathe. If it has a good effect, then stick with it. Keep trying to maintain this frame of reference.

And then finally, the last part of the formula is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, when ideas about the world come up, saying that you'd like this, you'd like that, or you get upset about this, or you're worried about that happening: Just put them aside for time being. Remind yourself that you're here to train the mind, and there's a lot more to be gained by training the mind than going after beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations.

As for distress: On the one hand, you may have distress about the future, worrying about the future. Remind yourself that you don't really know what's going to happen in the future, how much longer you're going to live, what you're going to face, but you *do* know that the more mindfulness you have, the more alertness you have, the more concentration and discernment, the better the position you'll be in handling whatever comes up. So meditating is one way you can really prepare for the future, one that's actually constructive.

Or there might be a distress about the past. You suddenly remember things you've done that were unskillful or harmful. The Buddha has you remember that you can't go back and change what you did, and that simply sitting here feeling remorseful is not going to undo what you did in the past. The best way to deal with memories of that sort is just to tell yourself, "Okay, that was a mistake, but I'm not going to make that mistake again." You learn how to hold that determination in mind.

Then you can strengthen it, he says, by developing thoughts of goodwill. Remind yourself that you really do want to be happy. You want a genuine happiness, and you wish genuine happiness for others. Whether the world will all find genuine happiness or not, that's not the issue, but you want that desire to help other people find true happiness. You want that to be your main motivation in whatever you do, and say, and think.

And again, this is another kind of mindfulness.

So to keep that motivation in mind, you've got to work on your powers of mindfulness by keeping the breath in mind, by coming back to the breath as soon as you notice you've forgotten it. You maintain this frame of reference regardless of whatever winds or waves come blowing or flowing through the mind. In some cases they're distractions from outside; sometimes they're issues from inside.

Ajaan Lee has a long passage on enemies of concentration. The first set of enemies, of course, includes all the different kinds of distractions. But then as the mind begins to settle down, it's very easy, once there's a sense of ease, for you to lose your frame of reference. That's your first enemy: that sense of ease. Here you've been working so hard to get rid of distractions, and then you fall into this trap. The ease becomes so pleasant, so blissful, that you just let go. You forget your frame of reference; you lose your frame of reference.

So you've got to hold it in mind, the body sitting here. This is one of the most important things in the meditation: Once there's a sense of ease, you've got to expand your awareness to fill the whole body. You hold the whole body as your perception, from the head down to the

feet, out through the arms, out through the legs, the whole body. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you want that perception to be there. And you want to develop the alertness that's aware of the whole body and the breath energy flowing through the body in a way that feels good. You need this large frame of reference to maintain your foundation. If the range of your awareness gets too small, it's very easy for the mind just to slip off, into the pleasure.

Sometimes a vision will come along, and you go for that. That's another one of the enemies of concentration. There may be a light, a sudden thought bubble may come into the mind, which is not so much a distraction, but it's an awareness of something. It's so easy to slip off into that area, and follow that bubble until it bursts. You've got to stand your ground. You've got to remind yourself: You're here with the body, you're here with the breath. So, any visions, any light: Regard them simply as signs along the road. When you're driving along and you see a sign that says, "Now entering Valley Center," you don't get up and drive on the sign. You stay on the road. The sign may be there, the light may be there, the vision may be there, but you're going to stay with the breath.

Another one of the enemies of concentration is rapture, which may seem paradoxical because rapture is one of the factors of first and second jhana, but it's easy for it to become so powerful that you lose your frame of reference. You've got to watch out for that. It can be like a big wave crashing over you, and you've got to hold on to something on the shore so that you don't get dragged out to sea when the wave goes back out. This is another reason for trying to make this sense of the whole body, the shape of the whole body, the perception that you hold in mind.

So you see that meditation is very basically an exercise in developing this ability to hold something in mind, to maintain this active memory. That's what you're going to need in order to remember all the lessons—either the lessons you've learned by listening to the Dhamma, or the ones you've learned by observing your actions and their results, on your own. It's only by developing this quality that you can really stay with the practice and not lose it.

Someone once said that mindfulness is easy, but remembering to be mindful is hard. Well, one, that's based on the misunderstanding about the word mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to remember, the awareness is something that's always there. There's always some awareness of something, but mindfulness is remembering to hold the important things in mind, like the desire to act skillfully, and your memory of what's skillful and what's not.

The Buddha says that mindfulness is like a gatekeeper at a fortress. The gatekeeper has to remember who's reliable and who's not, who are the people you can allow into the fortress, and who are the people you can't.

So you've got to remember: What's skillful, what's not? What have you learned about skillfulness? What have you learned about unskillfulness? What's your experience of doing skillful things? What's your experience of doing unskillful things? What lessons have you learned from all that? You've got to keep those things in mind. It's not the case that each present moment is a totally new moment, and that the past has no bearing on it. After all, the Buddha did teach four noble truths, and they apply all the time. There's stress, there's the cause of stress, there's the cessation of stress, and there's the path to its cessation. These things never change.

Each of them involves a duty, and that doesn't change, either. You want to comprehend the stress, particularly mental stress, so that you can let go of the cause. Now, to do that, you have to develop qualities of mind, like mindfulness and concentration, so you can stay there and watch these things, and understand them for what they are. You recognize where the stress is located and you understand it, so that you can trace out what's the cause. Only then, when you trace it out and see the connection, can you let it go. That way, ultimately, you can realize the cessation of stress.

These categories can always be applied so that you can figure out what you need to do at any one time. Is your mindfulness weak? Okay, that's something you want to work on developing. Is the mind overcome by stress? Okay, try to figure out the stress, to whatever extent you can. You track down the cause, and then you can let the cause go. It's like going into a house filled with smoke. You can't put out the smoke. You have to trace where the smoke is coming from. When you find, "Here's the fire," then you put out the fire, and that takes care of the smoke.

It's the same with the stress that's weighing down the mind. There's an element of craving, clinging, and ignorance that's causing that stress, but you have to watch the stress carefully, to trace it back to those things. It's one thing to know, in general, that these are the causes for stress, but to actually see them in action is something else. It's only when you see them in action, and you realize that you have a choice to continue acting in that way or not, that you can really let them go.

So these are things you have to keep in mind, and you have to develop this ability to keep

things in mind if you're going to stay on the path, if you're going to gain the benefits that come from having listened to the Buddha's teachings and having practiced.

The practice is not just a matter of what you do when you sit when your eyes are closed. It's something you carry with you throughout the day. This is one of the reasons why the breath is such a good topic for meditation, because it's with you all the time. Every time you're aware of the breath, it can act as a reminder. As you're going through the day, you take these skills in learning how to breathe comfortably, how to breathe in a way that dissolves the tension in different parts of the body, and you use them to nourish yourself, to nurture yourself, when things are difficult. That way, you have your foundation, you have your frame of reference right here. You have something you can hold on to for dear life when the winds and the waves get really strong.

So remember, this is the primary skill you're working on as you meditate. Keeping your frame of reference in mind protects you from getting blown away by distractions, it protects you from getting blown away by visions, by the energy of the rapture in the body, all the good and bad enemies of concentration.

So when the Buddha says that mindfulness is useful everywhere—and, of course, he's talking about right mindfulness—this is what he means. It's the basis for everything else you need to know as you develop good qualities in the mind. It's this ability to remember to keep things in mind that keeps you on the path.