

Big Desire, Detailed Focus

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Mindfulness isn't simply a matter of being aware of things as they happen. It means remembering: remembering things that are going to be useful to get the mind into concentration. That's right mindfulness, remembering to recognize what's good when it comes up in the mind, recognizing what's not so good, and remembering what you can do with both. You remember things you've learned from books, things you've learned from Dhamma talks, things you've learned from your own experience, and apply them, when they're relevant, to what you're doing as you try to get into concentration.

So when you're being mindful of the breath, it means you keep the breath in mind, and you remember to keep the breath in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

If anything comes up in the mind that's going to pull you away, you recognize that "Ah, this is a hindrance." Thoughts that in the course of the normal day would be perfectly okay are not welcome now. You're setting the mind on a task, which is to get it to settle down with a sense of well-being.

So when you're with the breath, you want to be careful to remember to notice: What kind of breathing feels good? We've been breathing in the past, we have lots of experience with breathing, but for the most part we haven't paid much attention to it. So try to notice when the breath is comfortable, when it's not. And learn how to recognize the signs that, when you've been breathing in, at what point the breath gets too long. Or if you've been engaging in really short breathing and you don't feel right, how do you read that as a sign that you've got to breathe longer? These are things you learn from experience.

And you remember that it is okay to play with the breath. I don't know how many people have come here who've been told that you're just supposed to let the breath do its own thing—you don't do anything at all, just accept the breath as it is. Well, the breath as it is, is—as the Buddha calls it—a bodily fabrication. And the word "fabrication" there means that there's an intentional element, there's at least part of the mind that's watching over the breath and deciding when to stop breathing in, when to stop breathing out. And you have to check the settings for that part of the mind. In other words, what does it use to decide? If you want to get sensitive to the intentional element in the breathing, change your intention around the breathing, tell yourself you're going to breathe longer, shorter, and see how it goes.

In other words, that's something else you remember about the breath: that it's not doing it on its own. We *can* leave it on automatic pilot, but that means simply that a subconscious part of the mind is making these decisions. And if you're going to meditate and learn about your mind, you can't leave these things in the subconscious area. You've got to bring them up into the light of day. That's mindfulness.

Then there's alertness, being very clear about what you're doing, what the breath is doing, what the mind is doing, noticing when the mind is with the breath, noticing when it's wandered away. And here's something else you want to remember: Try to be ardent—in other words, try to do this well. When the mind does wander away, you don't just leave it wandering. You bring it back. If it wanders again, you bring it back again.

It's like training a dog. If you give in to the dog, the dog's never going to get trained. You've got to show who's in charge here. Your desire to get the mind to settle down: that should be in charge. But as with training the dog, you can't just grab the breath and grab the mind and keep them pinned down together. You have to find ways of making the mind *want* to stay.

This is why, as you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels, as sensitive to the least little bit of tension, tightness, or blockage you may feel in the breath—remembering that the breath is not just the air coming in and out through the nose, but also the movement of energy through the whole body. You want to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out.

This element of ardency includes desire. We read so much about dispassion, dispassion, dispassion in the Buddha's teachings. And it's true that we have to learn dispassion for the things that cause suffering and for the clinging that is suffering itself. But we've got to have some passion for the path. We've got to have some desire. All things, the Buddha said, are rooted in desire, and that includes the path.

When we get to the end, you put it down. Or as in Ven. Ananda's analogy, you need a desire to go to a park in order to get to the park, but once you've arrived to the park you don't need that desire anymore. You put it aside. But as long as you haven't gotten there, the desire's needed to get you to walk there.

So this is a desire you have to cultivate. It's part of our motivation. It's basically that we're discontent. You hear a lot about contentment in the Buddha's teachings, too. But the Buddha says you've got to have some discontent with your level of skill if you're going to get anywhere in the path. What that means is that

we take these qualities of desire and discontent and a sense of lack, and we focus them in the right direction. Here it's getting the mind to settle down.

When you're out in the world, it's also a matter of getting yourself to stick with the precepts, trying to be as skillful as possible in how you deal with other people and not get taken in by their values. Because they've got their desires, too. And you have to ask yourself, "Why should I give in to their desires if they're going to be harmful for them or for me?" You've got to hold to your original desire, which is a harmless desire: the desire to put an end to suffering. It's not selfish, it's not harmful, and the more you can keep this desire number one in your mind, the better off you'll be—and so will everybody else.

So we're not here just practicing dispassion and contentment, letting go. There are things we have to develop, good qualities we have to develop. And they require desire. We have to have a sense of direction as to what we're doing. We're on a path. We're not just wandering through the forest, wherever. We've got to have a sense of direction. The direction is that we want to find a happiness that's reliable, a happiness that's harmless.

That's going to require giving up a lot of things and going against the flow in a lot of ways. Because the flow is basically to keep coming back, coming back, coming back to more suffering. That's the natural flow. Here we're going *against* the stream, trying to find a way to stop creating more suffering for ourselves.

The Buddha calls this process samsara. Notice that: It's a process. Sometimes you hear that samsara is the world we live in. And when you hear about people trying to get out of samsara, it sounds like they're trying to run away. Sometimes they're accused of being uncompassionate, not caring about other people, leaving them in samsara while they get out.

But samsara's not a place, it's a process. It's something we're all doing, and the problem is we're doing it poorly. That's why we keep coming back. So it's not an issue of trying to get out, it's more an issue of trying to become more skillful, to stop this process by which we keep creating more and more suffering for ourselves.

There's nothing selfish about that. The more you get your mind trained, the less suffering you're causing other people, the less pain you're causing them. And as for the suffering they're creating for themselves, they see your example and can say, "Oh, this how you stop." You've done them a favor.

There was a book I read years back where the author said the Buddha had the chance to decide between greatness and goodness, and he chose goodness. The author was thinking of greatness in terms of being great like a king. But as I was reading the book, it struck me the author had it backwards. If the Buddha had been good he would have done what his parents told him, he would have done

what his family told him, what society told him. But he wanted something great, something that goes beyond the normal run of things.

So the Buddha had a large desire, and it's a large desire that he's encouraging us to have as well. We get our minds under control so that we can understand them and understand this process by which we keep creating more and more suffering. That's a big desire. So own up to it. Give it priority.

And then, as with any path of practice that depends on desire, you have to realize that if you sit there thinking about the goal—how much you want the mind to settle down, how much you'd like to have nibbana come pretty soon—the desire on its own is not going to make it happen. In fact, *that* kind of desire gets in the way. You want to take that desire and focus it on what you're doing right now. It's a big desire but to work, it has to get very small, focused on *this* breath, *this* breath, what you're doing with *this* breath.

But as Ajaan Lee said, this was how the Buddha became great. He started out small, did each step precisely and carefully. And because each step was well-founded, well-grounded, it became a good foundation for things that were bigger.

So this is the quality of ardency. It's the desire to put an end to suffering focused on *this* breath, *this* moment of the mind, being wholehearted in doing it well.

When you have these three qualities working together—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—that's how you get the mind into concentration. It's also how you *use* the concentration to understand what's going on inside.

But the results don't stay just inside. They spread out in all directions. And they take the mind to a place where it's beyond all directions. So even though the range of our awareness is small—just the extent of our body right here, not going out past the skin—still the implications can be huge.