

Joyous Discernment

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Mindfulness and alertness are two different things. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. Alertness means noticing what you're doing while you're doing it.

There are times when mindfulness gets in the way of alertness, which is a sign that it's wrong mindfulness. You're focused on one particular thing, and that means you miss something else that you're doing, something else that's going on around you. This is especially clear when you're preoccupied with something and you miss other things because they're not in the radar of your particular preoccupation.

This is something we have to watch out for as meditators. We get locked in a particular idea. This is particularly true as your powers of concentration grow. You find it easier and easier to get locked into one particular groove of a particular set of views, a particular idea of what the practice should be. And that, more than anything else, blocks insight.

This is one of the reasons why we need teachers. We need somebody from the outside. The texts say that there are two main causes, internal and external, for the arising of insight. On the internal level, there's appropriate attention, learning to ask the right questions: framing your mindfulness in such a way that you don't miss what's going on, that you really can be alert. On the external level, there's the voice of another person, someone who calls attention to the fact that you're not paying appropriate attention. This can be on the external or the internal level.

When I was with Ajaan Fuang, he would often get impatient with me. If he saw I was missing things that he saw very clearly—things on the external level, things that I was doing, things that were happening around me that I wasn't noticing—he'd let me know in no uncertain terms, the purpose being to get me to notice. After all, as meditators, we have to be very quick to see what's going on in our minds. Often a very subtle defilement can come in very quickly, and you hardly notice it. You're paying attention to something else, but there is, say, an element of desire, an element of irritation that you're missing. It plants a seed and it grows.

This is why quickness is an important quality to develop as a meditator. We've seen many pictures of people doing mindful walking. It's all very slow and it gives the idea that mindfulness means doing things slowly. But the mind doesn't move

slowly, even when you're walking slowly. It can move very fast. And it's not the movements of your feet that's a problem. It's the movements of your mind.

So try to develop the habit of being quick to notice what's going on around you, quick to notice the results of your actions. When you develop that habit on the external level, it's easier to see things on the internal level. When you're working on the internal level, there's no voice from someone else to tell you what to do, or if there are voices that you're hearing, they're not voices you can necessarily trust. Try to develop the habit of being quick, alert, and not just locked into one way of looking at things. When you get into one way of looking at things, locked in that particular groove, your defilements figure that out pretty quickly. They find ways to avoid your line of sight, so that greed, anger, and delusion can still arise, even though they're not appearing in your line of sight. They're off to one side. But that's what the mind always does. When it's going to play tricks on itself, it tends to find ways of getting out of the line of sight.

This is one of the reasons why we emphasize so strongly the development of a 360° range of awareness, looking all around. You're sitting here meditating, trying to work toward a full awareness of the whole body, and then trying to maintain that all-around awareness. But often even a 360° awareness is probably 359°, with 1° where things are still hidden. You've got to watch out for that. It'll move. Today it's 1°, and a few minutes later, it's going to add another degree, and if you're not quick, you won't catch the movements of these things in the mind. And when you don't catch those movements, you can sit here meditating till your dying day and you won't see anything. Everything will seem very quiet as your defilements work underground.

There's that famous Zen story about a monk whose mind was very solid. His meditation was like a mountain; everything was very still. He went to see his teacher and asked, "Is there still any ignorance left?" And the teacher said, "Yes, a whole mountain's worth." It's possible to be concentrated, to be mindful of one thing, in such a way that you block out huge areas of awareness.

So always be on the lookout for areas that you haven't been noticing. And try to be quick. Develop this habit of being quick. Ajaan Fuang used to force it by giving me a job to do and demanding that it be done, one, well, and two, quickly, to develop the kind of attitude that's needed in the meditation. You do the meditation well, but you do it quickly, too. Don't let the mind take the course of a whole hour to settle down.

Say, you give yourself two hours to meditate. You say, "Oh, a whole hour for it to settle down, then once it settles down, I've got a whole hour of stillness." Don't think that way. Try to make the mind as still as possible from the very beginning.

That's one way of checking to see if there are any little movements that will come in to destroy your meditation. You can't have a complacent attitude toward them.

Once the mind is still, do everything you can to keep it that way. Have an all-around surveillance, because it's inevitable that there will be little things coming to sneak in. If there's any blind spot, that's where they're going to enter.

So work on the alertness of your meditation in addition to the stillness: an all-around alertness. That way, your concentration really does become an effective way of seeing what's going on in the mind, rather than something that simply blankets over what's going on there. If it's a blanketing kind of concentration, all it does is keep things still and under control for a while, but it never uproots anything. In fact, it's like the kind of blanket that they use when they moisten the blanket and put seeds on it, and then they top it over with another blanket. It actually becomes a great sprouting farm.

That's not the kind of concentration you want. You want to be as alert as possible, and to have your alertness all around so that it's not simply funneled in one direction. It's your alertness that makes all the difference in giving rise to insight, giving rise especially to the kind of insight that can uproot things and lead to release.

Those are the insights we want: the ones that are effective, the ones that teach us new things rather than simply confirming what we've already heard or we already know. When the meditation simply confirms what you already know, how do you know that it's true? You're not learning new things in the course of the meditation. After all, the Buddha said that this is all about realizing the as-yet-unrealized, attaining as-yet-unattained. In other words, there have to be new things that you're learning, that have new effects on the mind. Those insights can come only through all-around alertness, quick alertness.

The Buddha termed this joyous discernment. There's a passage where he says, "Sariputta has quick discernment, joyous discernment." In other words, he likes exploring things, likes learning new things. He's not simply sitting around waiting for old habits, old ideas to be confirmed.

So develop the alertness that looks more quickly and looks in areas you didn't know before, because that's where all the new things lie.