

Mindfulness of Breathing (16) Clarifying Attitudes

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I've covered the first four steps of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. Rather than continue with the fifth step, I think it's good to emphasize the importance of caring for one's attitude in meditation. One of the inspirations for that is to have an attitude of patience. To not succumb to any attitude of impatience, wanting more, or wanting to somehow always feel like we're improving, getting more, or learning something new.

There's something quite simple and maybe even humble about mindfulness of breathing. There's a lack of greed, wanting more, or expecting more. Instead, there's a willingness to just be ordinary, simple – on the ground floor. To be a modest servant of the Dharma and the practice. To really give ourselves over to the practice as best we can. Trust the Dharma and this process. Be willing to offer the best we can in a sincere way. Then trust that what will unfold, will unfold accordingly. We don't have to be ahead of ourselves, looking ahead, or planning ahead.

In mindfulness of breathing, one of the first lessons for many people is patience – lots of patience. I suppose it's a little bit of a trick to say this, but it's completely true. It turns out that the fastest way to develop in meditation is to *not* be in a hurry.

The fastest way to cultivate the receptivity, openness, calm, and settledness that really allows the practice to unfold and deepen – is to not be too concerned about unfolding and deepening. To be more concerned about just being content. To sit patiently and openly with what we have in the moment. To have continuity with breathing as if we're in it for the long term. As if our job is to just keep showing up and doing the best we can, and let progress take care of itself.

What I'm talking about here is an attitude. A huge part of meditation is coming to terms with, understanding, and adjusting the attitude with which we meditate. One of the advantages of meditation is that there's something about sitting quietly in meditation – doing something as simple as being with the breathing – that we start seeing the attitudes we have, which are invisible in daily life. We don't really notice them that well. We don't notice some attitudes because they're so subtle. Others have become invisible to us because they're so habituated. Certainly we don't see the subtlety of how it works.

When we sit and meditate, we have a heightened sensitivity. Even the smallest movements of attitudes take us away, or interfere with the deepening of settling. Just being there in a simple, relaxed, and patient way starts standing out in highlight.

If we have a tendency to be self-critical when we sit in meditation, we can easily get more material to use to criticize ourselves. If the mind wanders off a little too often, then: "I'm a wandering-off person, and that's not so good." Or if I'm averse to what's happening, or if I'm too greedy and want something better, and I see that, then, "Oh, this is not a good Buddhist thing to be averse and greedy. Now I'm an embarrassment to the Buddhist cause." We're berating ourselves.

Start seeing these movements, attitudes, and beliefs as they come into play. Recognize them as such, "Oh, there's an attitude. There's an interpretation. There's a judgment."

An attitude is more like the way in which we hold our experience, the disposition we have, the way we feel, think, and respond. The manner or the atmosphere with which we respond to things. The way we think and feel. We start seeing these attitudes.

One attitude that I had in my early years of meditation happened when I was sitting in meditation halls with other people. I would compare myself to them. I had no idea what was going on in their meditation. But still, I had the attitude that the grass was greener elsewhere. Over there in that person – that really was supposed to be good meditation. Why am I not there?

It was silly to have this attitude, because I had no idea what was going on in them. It was just an attitude or a belief that I carried. It was actually more than a belief, because it came with an atmosphere of feeling sorry for myself, discouraged, or somehow left out of what was really the important thing – what everyone else was experiencing. All these attitudes or beliefs were coming in, and I'd get caught up in them.

One of the things that was really delightful was to appreciate that I didn't have to solve these things. I didn't have to berate myself, or be too involved in fixing them. I could trust my breathing. Just come back and stay with breathing – stay and stay. When I did that, the energy of attention fed mindfulness of breathing, rather than feeding these attitudes.

All too often, we reinforce unhealthy attitudes, rumination, and preoccupation by believing them, having them be the catalyst or fuel for how we think about things. But just come back to breathing. Trust the breathing.

I have an image of being on a scooter and pushing it. Maybe there's a place where there are cobblestones. Because it's a little rough to ride on, it's not so comfortable. But I still keep pushing and pushing. Soon enough, I come out of the cobblestones, and then maybe the road is smooth again.

I want to offer you a few attitudes or orientations that might be helpful for meditation. Here's a policy attitude or understanding that you can keep close by: it's enough to clearly recognize what is happening. It is enough just to recognize what's happening in the present. Nothing needs to be fixed or changed. Just recognize this.

Have patience with all that happens. It's good to have patience with whatever is happening. Being in a hurry is a form of greed.

There is nothing to prove or resist in meditation. Every occurrence is a time to learn something new about being peaceful. Whatever is happening, you don't have to resist it. You don't have to prove anything in relationship to it. You don't have to defend, justify, or berate yourself. It's just something new to learn about how to be peaceful. How not to be caught. How not to be agitated.

Another attitude is that you are a valuable person. Your well-being is important. Your capacity for attention is a treasure. No message that you are less than beautiful is worth believing.

Finally, trust the awareness that flows out of stillness. Trust the awareness that flows out of calm, tranquility, or stillness.

What these five practices, which I recited, have in common is that they promote calm, nonreactive attention, including calm, nonreactive attention to our reactivity. This is kind of a sleight of hand or a paradox. For some people, they delight in their amusement because, of course, we're going to have reactivity. Of course, we're not always going to be calm. But can we be calm and nonreactive to that?

One way to do that is not to be too concerned about fixing things, or trying to solve anything. But rather, come back and trust mindfulness of breathing. Just be with your breathing, constantly pushing the scooter of mindfulness.

Ride the wave of mindfulness, wave after wave. Waves of breathing. If something is particularly strong and therefore compelling for your mind to pay attention to – like strong physical sensations, pain, emotions, or a bout of thinking – one way to have a certain degree of tranquility is to stay with your breathing. So there's continuity and constancy. It's like the breathing becomes the background beat. Or the rhythm of your music, the rhythm of your poem, which just keeps it going.

One way to do this is to breathe with what's compelling. Breathe through it. Sometimes you really need to acknowledge what's happening – the full acknowledgement and mindfulness of what's compelling and challenging is really important. You can't just ignore it and push it aside. But it's possible to stay with the breathing, and then breathe through and breathe with.

One way to see this is to think of mindfulness of breathing as the center of your focus of attention. For anything else that needs attending, you allow it to be in the peripheral attention. It doesn't have to capture your attention. It just has to be known that it's there. You simply keep going – just like you would on a scooter going through town.

There are all kinds of things you may have to be attentive to: the traffic, the people. But they're a little more in the peripheral vision. The central vision is keeping your eye on where you're going with that scooter.

Where you're going with the scooter of mindfulness of breathing is on a journey – long or short – that takes you to the next breath. That's all. One breath after the next.

So enjoy your mindfulness of breathing. We'll continue on this wonderful path where our breathing practice can take us. Thank you.