



The Way to Meditate: The Importance of Mindfulness

By Yangsi Rinpoche

In order to have a faultless practice of calm abiding, we need to develop very strong concentration supported by very strong mindfulness and wisdom. Wisdom in this case refers to the function of mind called introspection, which acts as a kind of security guard for the mind – watching for faults or weaknesses that may arise in our concentration. We should train in the mindfulness possessing three qualities. Our mindfulness must be able to remember the aspect of our object of concentration. It must have the ability to hold that aspect, and it must not be distracted by other objects.

You should seek to develop a concentration that is stable and lasting. In order to be able to bring this about, mindfulness is very important. Of course, even in terms of our ordinary perception, every primary mind is accompanied by five determining factors, one of which is mindfulness.

Although this kind of mindfulness does fulfill the function of helping you to hold the object that you are perceiving, it is not stable or continuous, and cannot hold the mind on its object for an indefinite amount of time. Ordinarily, when the primary mind changes its object from one thing to another, that mindfulness changes its object as well. In the practice of concentration meditation, we must strive to develop a more developed type of mindfulness that can fulfill the function of remaining focused on the object of concentration for a long period of time.

In the beginning, when we engage in the practice of single-pointed placement of the mind for the first time and begin the battle with our conceptual thoughts, we must apply concentration, mindfulness, and introspection in equal amounts. As we gain stability, we should check repeatedly to make sure that we have not lost our object. Simultaneously, we must be careful not to overexert ourselves, because if we tighten the mind too much, we run

the danger of falling into the extreme of mental sinking.

This process is similar to what you go through when setting up your television set. The picture on your TV is controlled by many different buttons: one button fixes the image so it doesn't shake, another adjusts the color, another adjusts the brightness, another button makes the image appear very sharp. Cultivating concentration is similar. We need to fine-tune our minds calming the mind until they do not move at all. It is very important to support our concentration with just the right amount of mindfulness – not too little, not too much. Accomplishing the right balance depends on how well we have trained in the mindfulness of the experienced practitioner, which in turn depends upon how well we have trained in the mindfulness of the new practitioner and the general form of mindfulness.

On the first and second levels of the nine levels of mental placement ... we practice the general form of mindfulness. On the third through the seventh levels we practice the mindfulness of the new practitioner. On the eighth level we practice the mindfulness of the experienced practitioner. At the ninth level of mental placement, we are able to apply mindfulness in just the right amount. We are able to place the mind in concentration effortlessly, for however long we wish. On the seventh and eighth levels of mental placement, the practitioner also has the right balance of mindfulness, but effort is required to maintain it. In the first and second levels of mental placement, applying the right balance of mindfulness is totally impossible.

Although we call these stages of mindfulness general, new, and experienced forms, and although each stage is superior to the one that precedes it, it is important to remember that, in reality, it is the same mindfulness all the way through. The difference is that in the later stages of

mental placement mindfulness has been developed to its fullest extent, while in the earlier stages it has not.

In some other Buddhist traditions an even more extraordinary form of mindfulness is taught, in which the mind is developed to the point where the practitioner is able to observe conceptual thoughts arising from the mind and subsequently receding back into the mind itself. This is observed as occurring in the same way that a bird takes off from an island and flies away into the sky, only to return to land on the same island. Another illustration is the way that the waves rise and recede back into the same sea. In sutra, the practitioner's skill is compared to a man with a single shield who is able to ward off thousands of arrows that are shot at him merely by the force of his mindfulness. The end of the story about this man, just as a note, mentions that despite his great dexterity he meets with a bad end – he becomes distracted when a woman that he is attached to passes by, at which point he loses his mindfulness and is killed. ●

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