

Strength of Mind

In practicing mindfulness of breathing, in making an effort to keep the mind on the breath, it's essential that you take a proactive approach. A significant aspect of this approach is manifested in the way you use internal verbal fabrication. You're persistent. You keep applying directed thought to the extent that you need to, in order to keep the mind on the breath. You remember to keep the mind on the breath. Essentially, you keep thinking about the breath.

One of the misconceptions that people have about meditation is that it shouldn't include thinking. This misguided notion includes the idea that the purpose of meditation is to eliminate all thinking. But the fact is, meditation requires thinking. In order to meditate, to practice mindfulness of breathing, you have to think. You're only going to get so far in your meditation practice if you don't learn to use your ability to think.

Meditation isn't a practice of not thinking, but rather a practice of thinking skillfully. In practicing breath meditation, you're asked to think skillfully. You're asked to replace unskillful thinking with skillful thinking.

As you learn to develop the skill – as you learn to think skillfully – the process may seem awkward. Using thinking, in the way we're being asked to use thinking, may seem difficult. As you guide your meditation using thought, your tendency, given your lifelong habits, may be to engage in unskillful thinking. That's okay, that's what happens when we're learning a skill. If you're going to make an effort to use thinking in a skillful manner, you're going to make mistakes. It's awkward, challenging, to develop any skill, whether it's playing the guitar, cooking an omelet, making pottery. It requires practice. But it's something you can do; it's a skill you can develop.

As you develop the skill of thinking in meditation, as you engage in the act of remembering, you strengthen the mind. You strengthen the mind in the same way you might strengthen the muscles in your arms and legs; that is to say, you strengthen the mind by exercising the mind, using it in a skillful manner.

You strengthen the mind through making effort. Effort, in meditation, goes largely into internal verbal fabrication; the effort we put into fabrication strengthens the mind.

Research in neuroscience has shown, in fact, that the act of remembering strengthens the mind. When we remember the breath, we build mental strength. Every time we remember is like a repetition when we lift weights in the gym. The more we remember the breath, the stronger the mind gets.

In his book, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr describes how by relying on the Internet for retrieving information, we forsake the process of remembering. The Internet is great in that it provides all kinds of information; the downside, Carr explains, is that when we use the Internet to cull information, we don't exercise the mind. The mind, reliant on the Internet and other technological forms for its information, grows weak from lack of use.⁷

As dharma students engaging in the process of remembering the breath, we strengthen the mind. It's one of the reasons why we don't recommend that students use any sort of contrivance, a smartphone app, or an online guided meditation, to support them in their meditation practice. When you use a device to help you to remember – or, really, to do the remembering for you – you don't build the mental strength that's required to maintain yourself in the present moment, keep your awareness on the body. It's akin to going to the gym and having somebody else lift the weights for you; you're not going to develop your strength.

Mindfulness, again, is remembering. When we understand this, when we understand what the process of remembering entails, when we make a proactive effort, by using internal verbal fabrication,

to remember the breath, we strengthen the mind. We develop the mental strength that's required to cultivate skillful internal pleasure.

From *Skillful Pleasure*

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