



Daily Life Practice I: Prevent the Arising of Unwholesome States of Mind

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As we experience life on a daily basis, our reflection and mediation practices help to prepare us for the challenging unwholesome thoughts that arise and also to cultivate and sustain joy, contentment and peace. Practicing Skillful Effort to deal with our mental states is the heart of daily life practice. Mental states are either wholesome or unwholesome. The first step is to be mindful of your mental states to discern wholesome or unwholesome nature. In the Skillful Effort step of the Eightfold Path, the Buddha noted that we should direct our efforts toward our mental states in four ways:

1. Prevent the arising of unwholesome states of mind.
2. Overcome unwholesome states which have arisen.
3. Strive for wholesome states to arise.
4. Maintain those wholesome states which have arisen.

Each of these ways will be described below.

Prevent the arising of unwholesome states of mind

“Your first line of defense is to prevent negative or unwholesome states of mind from arising in the first place. How? By maintaining unremitting mindfulness. Just that.”¹ When you are being mindful, you are experiencing the present, preventing unwholesome thoughts from arising. This is called “paying wise attention.” Wise attention means that you are experiencing the experience rather than the perceptions that that conditions the experience. For example, on hearing a sound, the mind wants to check with your memories and cause you to identify it with something specific you have heard before such as a bell, a gunshot, or a handclap. With wise attention, you are aware that you just hear the sound and no more. You stay with the experience rather than trying immediately to do something about it, unless of course, the situation is urgent. For example, if you are in a cool room and feeling uncomfortable, you notice the changes in your physical discomfort and your mind’s changing reactions to it rather than quickly going to change the thermostat.

“If you are able to maintain continuous mindfulness, nothing will upset you. You will not become angry or agitated. You can be patient no matter what anyone says or does. You can stay peaceful and happy. An unwholesome or negative state of mind cannot arise at the same moment as a moment of mindfulness.”²

Other measures to prevent the arising of unwholesome states of mind include:

- Leading your life skillfully practicing skillful speech, skillful action and skillful living as noted in the Living Skillfully section.

- Resolving any feelings of resentment that you have toward others through loving-kindness and compassion practices.
- Associating with spiritual friends (those whom you want to emulate) and avoid those who might lead you astray.

Also, guard your sense doors. How do you do this? There are three ways:

1. Avoid exposing your senses to sense objects that can lead to unwholesome mind states. For example, when dining, having the intention to avoid food buffets that are a temptation for overeating. This is called setting boundaries.
2. Paying wise attention as noted above. Be mindful of the difference between what the sense body senses and what the mind makes of it.

Ayya Khema explains: "When the eye sees, it simply registers color and shape. All the rest takes place in the mind. For instance, we see a piece of chocolate. The eye sees only the brown shape. It is the mind that says: "Ah, chocolate! That tastes delicious - I want a piece!" Not to grasp at the major signs or secondary characteristics is to stop the mind from doing exactly that.

We can practice this easily with anything we either very much like or very much dislike . . .

. . .

If we are easily swayed by what we see, the best thing to do is to recognize the sense-contact and stop the mind at the perception, the labeling. It is very hard to stop it before that. So, for example, if we see a person, or even think of a person, for whom we have hate or greed, someone we either dislike or long for intensely, we should practice stopping at the label, person friend, male, female. Nothing further. The rest is our desire. That is what is meant by guarding the sense-doors.

Our senses are our survival system. It is much easier to survive if we can see and hear than if we are blind or deaf. Most people assume, however, that the senses are there in order to provide them with pleasure. We use them in that way and become angry when they fail to do so. We then blame the trigger. If someone displeases us, we blame that person. It has nothing to do with the other person, who, like us, is made up of the four elements, has the same senses, the same limbs, and is looking, as we are, for happiness. There is nothing in that person that is producing displeasure. It is all in our own mind. Exactly the same applies when we think another person will provide us with pleasure . . . There is no reason to look to that person for pleasure or blame then for not providing it. All we have to do is see "person". Nothing more. There are so many "persons" in this world, why should we allow this particular one to arouse our syndrome of desire-distaste?

If we guard our senses, we guard our passions, which enables us to live with far greater equanimity. We are no longer on that endless seesaw; up, when we are getting what we want, down, when we are not, which induces a continual inner feeling of wanting something that just escapes us. Nothing that is to be had in the world, anywhere, under any circumstances, is capable of bringing fulfillment. All that the world can provide are sense-contacts - seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking. All are short-lived and have to be renewed, over and over again. This takes time and energy, and here again it is not the sense-contact itself that satisfies us. It is what the mind makes of it. Guarding the sense-doors is

one of the most important things we can do, if we want to lead a peaceful, harmonious life, untroubled by wanting what we do not have, or not wanting what we do have. These are the only two causes of dukkha (suffering); there are no others. If we watch our sense-contacts and do not go past the labeling, we have a very good chance of being at ease.”³

In summary, the steps to prevent the arising of unwholesome states of mind include:

- Pay wise attention
- Lead a skillful life
- Resolve any resentment toward others
- Associate with spiritual friends and avoid those who might lead you astray
- Guard the sense doors

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¹ Gunaratana, Bhante. Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness. p. 161

² Gunaratana, Bhante. Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness. p. 163

³ <http://minddeep.blogspot.com/2010/06/not-forgetting-to-guard-sense-doors.html>