Practice in Daily Life

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 35:19

This afternoon, I'd like to talk about practice in daily life. This was a question that came up this morning—a little bit about how we take this back. How do we take this practice back into our daily lives?

When we're on retreat, everything supports our practice: the silence, the environment, the schedule. Sitting in meditation actually supports the remembering to be mindful, to come back, to be present. When we're sitting in meditation, we're usually sitting with our eyes closed, in stillness. And so when the mind wanders off into thought, into one of these worlds that we create in our minds, it's pretty obvious when we wake up into the midst of that thought that we are not in that world, that we are attempting to meditate. This supports our ability to remember, to come back to the breath, to the body, to our direct experience.

When we go out into our daily lives, we lose all of these supports. So it becomes much more challenging to do this work in our daily lives. The ideal or the hope of just being mindful all the time is a beautiful goal, a beautiful ideal. And in reality, it's very, very difficult to accomplish.

I had a demonstration of this at one point. I was about twenty-three years old and I picked up the book *Mi racle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh. I read this book and was very drawn to the teaching of mindfulness. I thought, "Wow, this is great." I was reading the book at night and thought, "This is great. I'll practice this all day long tomorrow." The next time I remembered it was when I picked up the book the next night. After a few days of that, I decided, "Well, obviously I can't do this," and I put the book aside. It was another fifteen years before I met mindfulness again.

The next time I met mindfulness, somebody had given me one of the books by Joko Beck. I think it was in one of those books—I'm not exactly sure; I've been trying to find out where I got this idea—but somewhere in a book I read that fifteen years later, it said, "Well, if you try to be mindful all day long, you're just setting yourself up for failure. So pick something, pick some things to be mindful of, pick some projects for your daily life."

James was suggesting this this morning in the question and answer, and I'd like to elaborate on this a bit, because this has been a huge part of my practice. In fact, in the early days of my meditation practice, I wasn't particularly interested in meditating at all, but I had some emotional patterns that were going on that I really was interested in understanding. I had the idea that perhaps mindfulness might help me with understanding those patterns. So I was very focused and had a lot of interest and motivation in exploring that particular pattern in my life.

In terms of picking projects for working with mindfulness, I like to suggest a couple of things for people. I teach this practice in daily life at the center in Redwood City where I primarily teach with Gil Fronsdal. I teach what I call a householder retreat where we get together on Sunday afternoon and I give some instructions about working in daily life. We have a daylong on Saturday at the end of the week, and we meet every morning and every evening during the week essentially to bracket our day with practice and support for working with this in daily life. It's an intensive week of learning how to engage with mindfulness throughout our day.

One of the main instructions I give for people is to pick something that happens regularly throughout your day that's kind of neutral. It might be standing up, it might be walking through doorways, turning on light switches. If you sit at a computer a lot, it might be clicking send on an email. Something that happens regularly throughout your day, which can serve as a reference point for knowing how much we're mindful.

When we're in sitting meditation, we have this reference point of the breath. We're paying attention to the breathing, and then the mind wanders off. When we come back, we wake up from thought and realize, "Oh, I haven't been paying attention to my breath." So there's that remembering. There's a kind of reference point that the breath provides to help us know how much we're lost in thought and how much we're present. That goes away in our daily lives as well. So choosing something that happens regularly throughout your day to serve as a kind of reference point is very supportive.

Now, if you do this practice—and I hope some of you will try it—what you'll probably find is that if you choose something, it'll be a long time before you remember it.

Like I said, we don't have the supports of our stillness, of the silence, to remind us about what we're trying to do.

So at some point you'll remember, oh, I had resolved that I was going to notice when I stood up. And maybe that happens when you're going to bed at night. Boy, I'm sure I must have been standing up all day long, and I didn't remember once.

That moment—which is the kind of moment when I, reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *Miracle of Mindfulness*, basically said, well, obviously I can't do this—that moment actually is not an indication that you have failed. That is the moment when the practice begins.

That moment of remembering, oh, I forgot to pay attention, or I didn't notice the thing I said I was going to pay attention to—that moment of remembering is a moment of mindfulness, and it's the moment that the practice begins. It's the moment when you have a little bit of an inroad into having the practice work, because you have remembered about it. You have remembered your chosen task.

So in that moment that you remember as you're going to bed at night, you can't actually go back and stand up all day long. But in that moment, just recognize what's happening right now. Check into your body. Is

there tension? Is there ease? In a very light way, just what is obvious about what is happening right now?

Now, this lightness to the mindfulness is one of the keys in our daily life practice, because in our daily lives we have to engage in the content of what we're doing. On a retreat like this, we have the luxury of letting go of the content. Over and over again we let go of the thoughts and just come back to the experience of the body, not engaging in the thoughts. In our daily lives, we do have to engage in the content of what's happening. And so just the light touch of what's obvious about what's happening right now—and then just go on with whatever you're doing. Getting ready for bed, brushing your teeth, whatever it is.

And in that moment when you've remembered, make the resolve that you're going to keep trying. That's one of the keys here. Resolve that you will try again. So in that moment of remembering: what's happening right now, and resolve to try again to pay attention to this thing that you want to pay attention to.

Over time, what I found happening when I tried this the first time—what I picked was switching between DOS and Windows on my computer—the first time I remembered was when I was going to bed at night. And then as the days went on, I began to notice I was remembering more through the day that I hadn't remembered. So I was beginning to notice more of the remembering, but it wasn't exactly landing on the thing. And that's okay. Actually, this is a whole part of the point of this exercise—it helps us to get more of these moments of noticing just through our day.

And at some point you might remember right after the thing happened. Then it's getting really close. Then you notice that it's actually beginning to be linked with the event. And at some point you will notice right as you are standing up or right as you're reaching for a door. At that point, that task you've chosen can start serving as a trigger for mindfulness for you. When you stand up, it'll kind of pull the mindfulness along with it.

So this exercise is mostly about just getting familiar with what it's like to be aware in our day. In that moment of remembering, there's a kind of coming back into the world again. There's a light—it's like a light goes on. Getting familiar with what that feels like, this task of waking up, or vowing, dedicating ourselves to waking up for something that happens regularly through our day, begins to give us a sense of what it feels like to just be aware, just be awake in our day.

And this tends to then start to kind of leak out of that particular activity. We get more of a sense of when we wake up all through our day—a moment of mindfulness. Those moments happen all the time through our day. But what we typically do with those moments is we think we're supposed to do something with them. We walk down the hill and we see the golf cart coming up, and we see that, we're aware of it, we know that we're seeing the golf cart, but we're not really aware of the fact that we're aware of it. We think we're supposed to do something about it, like move out of the way. And that is a very good thing to do with it—that's what I mean by engaging with the content in our daily lives. But we can also recognize that we

have woken up in that moment. We don't usually notice that quality of waking up.

What is that like? Just beginning to be familiar with that feeling is a huge part of this exercise I'm suggesting. That in and of itself is what I think of as the training wheels for daily life practice. The juice for daily life practice, for me, is in looking at patterns and habits.

Where we get caught, where we suffer.

And again, it's helpful to pick something—one particular pattern or habit, particularly one you might be interested in exploring, interested in understanding about yourself. That interest really supports our willingness to observe what happens for us around that pattern.

So patterns and habits are things like having a particular habit of procrastination that developed when you were a teenager. Or you might find a pattern going on with a particular coworker in the office. Now, most of us would not tend to call that a habit, but there may be a pattern that you're seeing developing. It's really helpful and interesting to pick some kind of pattern that happens regularly for you and that you are interested in exploring. If it doesn't happen regularly enough, your memory—your remembering to engage around it—is not as likely to get triggered. So picking something that happens kind of regularly.

Now I'm going to describe for you what happened for me when I worked with this. When I started my practice, as I said, I read this book and it said, pick something. Pick something that you're interested in. Pick a project. And as I mentioned, one of the projects I picked was switching between DOS and Windows. The other project I picked was the thing that got me into the practice in the first place: out of control anger. It was making me non-functional at times. I would just be in a rage. I'd kind of wake up in a rage at my computer, frozen, not able to do anything because I was in such a rage. This anger was getting in the way of my living my life normally, and I was very interested in understanding it, very interested in understanding what it was about.

In this book that I had read, it said it's helpful in paying attention to emotions if you simply notice the emotion rather than act on it. That didn't make much sense to me, but I was willing to give it a try and see what happened because I felt I'd pretty much hit bottom. I was not functioning very well.

So along with the switching between DOS and Windows, I resolved that I was going to remember, I was going to be mindful whenever I noticed that anger. The first time I remembered, it was a little different than the way it unfolded around the switching between DOS and Windows. Switching between DOS and Windows comes and goes so quickly. There's not much of an emotional charge around it, so it could be nighttime before I ever remembered. With the way anger was functioning for me—and I'm sure many of you are familiar with this kind of pattern—it had a cyclic, feeding quality so that the anger just kept getting worse and worse. I would work myself up into a rage.

So the first time I noticed, after I had made this resolve about the anger, was when I was in a full-blown rage. And I remembered, "Oh yeah," at some point during that time—it lasted for a while—"I said I was

going to pay attention to this."

I didn't have a lot of instruction at that point. I was in the Peace Corps and I had read this one book. Basically what I did was recognize: I'm angry. Just recognize it in a very simple way. Yeah, I'm angry. I remember even thinking, "What am I supposed to do with this?" All I could do was recognize I'm angry.

That simple recognition is actually incredibly powerful. Incredibly powerful. I didn't have a lot of instructions on paying attention in the body. I don't think I even connected with the body for quite a while. But I recognized that anger was happening. It was kind of like that noting or naming—I don't know if you've talked about the noting—it was like just naming it. This is anger. This is anger. That noting itself puts a little space around the anger or around the difficulty, and essentially puts us into a place of observing it as opposed to being spun by it.

So I did this. I kept doing this. And over the course of months, I began recognizing that I remembered about this practice of paying attention earlier in the cycle of anger, so that I was no longer getting to the point of a full-blown rage. It was more like normal anger. And that to me was a huge indication that something's happening here.

With the mindfulness in the task of switching between DOS and Windows, I was seeing the mindfulness begin to approach the actual event. What was happening with the anger was that the mindfulness was kicking in, or I was waking up, earlier in the process of the anger. I was getting closer to the beginning, the arising of the anger. And in that seeing of just being with the anger—not in the full-blown rage—I could see, "Oh yeah, this is a little bit easier. I can be with this. This isn't quite so difficult."

It wasn't nearly as painful to be with that normal anger. And over months of just continuing this practice, I began to notice more of the beginnings of anger. It gave me such tremendous working room around my anger to do this exploration. It was quite helpful.

And then one day, I was in my kitchen, cutting an apple. As I was cutting the apple, I saw a memory of being with the person I was angry with—we were at a fruit stand. So I saw the connection between what I was doing and the memory. And I also saw that in that moment, I was not angry. But I also saw something like a freight train of momentum to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry. There was a desire, a momentum, to get angry.

But having spent the past several months really getting to know the suffering of anger, that hanging out with the anger essentially gave me very clear instruction: anger does burn me when I pick it up. It was a very clear demonstration of that teaching about picking up the hot coal. I saw that I thought somehow it was going to hurt the person I was angry with, but actually that notion popped pretty quickly because I was in the Peace Corps on a little island in the South Pacific and he was in California. I realized fairly quickly there wasn't much way that anger was going to cross the ocean and get to him. But it was burning me up. And every time I experienced that anger, I saw the suffering of it.

So in that moment when I saw that thought, when I saw that momentum, I didn't have to do anything, actually. It was like the mind itself said, "I don't think so. I'm not going to go there. I know this way lies suffering." And the mind just let go of that momentum towards anger. I stood there in my kitchen with the knife in my hand, waiting to get angry—because I hadn't had the experience of this person appearing in my thoughts without anger arising. And I didn't get angry. I was so blown away by that moment.

That essentially was the moment of verified faith for me, of seeing the benefit of this practice. I saw so clearly how this practice of mindfulness can reveal the subtle movements of mind—a thought leading to an impulse, and the mind just letting go of it. Now, I'm not saying I didn't get angry again. I worked with this anger for a long time. But I had a lot of confidence that this path was going to help. And so as the anger came up in the future, it was much easier to just be with it.

So picking some habit that you have some juice around understanding, and resolving to pay attention to it—even in the simple way of simply recognizing, "Oh yeah, this is frustration," or "Oh yeah, this is procrastination"—just that simple labeling is enough to make inroads into understanding this pattern. This is one of the most powerful ways we can explore our mindfulness in our daily lives: through looking at habits and patterns.

Sometimes I get the question of why do this? I hope there's been some clarity about why it's helpful. For me, at least in that example, the benefit around mindfulness was pretty clear—it gave me so much space around the anger.

Habits and patterns essentially run our lives. We operate on autopilot, it seems, much of the time. When we're not mindful and aware of what's happening for us, our habits and patterns are running the show. The ways that our conditioning has come together—those conditions are running the show if we are not aware of it. But through mindfulness, we have the opportunity to begin to break into those patterns and habits and see essentially moments of choice. Moments where, like I saw, there's the momentum of the mind towards anger. And I didn't actually have to make the choice—some wisdom in me made the choice not to go towards that suffering.

So essentially a lot of our practice—our daily life practice, our practice on the cushion—begins to open us up to making skillful choices in our lives. There's a lot of suffering out there in the world. There's suffering of racism, sexism. People lose their jobs. There's a lot of things to react to in the world. And reactivity is not such a helpful place to respond from.

In paying attention in our daily lives to our habits and patterns, we begin to see where we have choice. This exercise I mentioned about picking something that happens regularly through your day—at some point you'll remember it right as you're doing it. Just as you're standing up, you recognize you're standing up. If you keep engaging with this practice, at some point you will know you're going to stand before you stand. The awareness will kick in before you do it. And that's essentially the moment of noticing the intention to act.

An intention happens before every action of our bodies, every action of our speech, even every action of our minds. We can know we're going to move before we move. We can know we're going to speak before we speak. And we can know our minds are inclining towards a pattern before the pattern has appeared, as I mentioned in my example of the anger.

When we catch that moment of knowing we're going to do something before we do it, we can see the reason why we're going to do it. Often we can know the motivation. That motivation may be skillful or unskillful. It may be a motivation based in compassion, generosity, kindness. It may be a motivation based in greed, aversion, delusion. Beginning to see our motivations and making skillful choices is a huge part of this practice.

Sometimes I think people hear about Buddhist practice—this notion of just being with what is—and we think it means we're not supposed to try to change anything. What it actually means is that it's not so helpful to try to change things out of greed, aversion, or delusion. We may want to try to change something because we don't like it and we want to get rid of it. We may want to ignore something. We may want to just take ourselves out of a situation—"I can't deal with that, forget it, I'm just going to ignore it."

The practice brings us to a point where we can make skillful choices, choose to change something out of compassion, generosity, and kindness, as opposed to greed, aversion, and delusion. These practices I've mentioned begin to open us up to seeing our motivations, seeing why we do things. And it can be humbling—definitely humbling—when we see our motivations. Using, as James talked about, that compassion and letting go of judgment around unskillful motivations when we see them is so important. We don't always have control over our motivations.

So we observe. We notice. If you notice an unskillful motivation, can you let go? Maybe you can, maybe you can't. But following through with the awareness and noticing what happens after making these choices—this really is the training. We make choices. We notice what happens. We make mistakes. We're not going to be able to be perfect. And in fact, the only way we can learn is by making mistakes.

Joseph Goldstein, one of my teachers, often likes to say: we want insight into suffering without experiencing suffering. That's not going to happen. In my case with the anger, for instance, I felt the suffering of that anger really clearly because I was mindful of it. And then at some point the mind saw and let go because it saw where it was inclining. "Not going to go there. I know what lies in that direction."

I find that the sitting practice and these tools for daily life work together. We learn in our sitting practice how to open up to just what is happening. And in our daily lives, that's where we really meet our challenges. How we learn to engage in the sitting supports our ability to meet our difficulties in our day with some kind of balance of mind.

There are two qualities that are incredibly helpful as you engage in a daily life practice, and those two

qualities are resolve and patience. Resolve, because if we simply think we're going to do this by just saying, "Oh, I'm going to try this," it's probably going to fall away. We need to resolve over and over and over again. Every time you remember, you've forgotten.

I'm going to try this again. Not as a beating yourself up, but just as a recognition: I've got to keep trying. This is hard. Doing this in daily life, the momentum of life is against us. We're swimming upstream, as the Buddha said. So we need to continue to make that resolve every time we remember that we've forgotten.

And patience—because it is so difficult, patience and kindness, compassion for how difficult it is. Recognizing that this takes time.

But I think if you try these practices, you will start to see, as I did, little incremental changes. A little more space around these habits. A little less being completely run by them.

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