Wise Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:16

Your first full day on retreat. One day down, forty-one to go. One day down, eighty-nine to go. Sometimes it's like that in our minds. On these long retreats especially, we keep a calendar in our minds.

Before I begin the talk proper, I'd just like to express my great appreciation for the diversity of this group, and to say that my journey towards cultural humility began a few years ago. Much as with mindfulness practice—the more we see, the more we see that we don't know, the deeper we recognize that our understanding needs to deepen—in very much the same way, I have seen that the more I understand, the more I see I don't understand. This lesson in cultural humility is one of ongoing learning for me. I'm open to feedback, so if you're so moved, you're welcome to leave me a note.

Tonight I'd like to speak about mindfulness, a key aspect of what we're doing here. I'd like to spend some time exploring this quality: what it means, how we use it, how we practice with it, how it's helpful for us.

We all have a kind of intuitive sense of what mindfulness means. Most of us here have practiced for quite a while and have a sense of what it means for us. This quality in general evokes words like being present, being aware, perhaps witnessing, knowing what's happening while it's happening. That was my own working definition of mindfulness for quite a while.

I see mindfulness as a reflective capacity of our minds. It's a function that allows this mind-body system to be aware of itself. It reflects the processes happening in the body and mind, kind of like a mirror does. It's a perfectly ordinary process, a capacity that our minds have—this reflective capacity, this capacity to know what's happening in the present moment. It's just a normal capacity of our minds. It functions. We know what's happening.

But what we don't really recognize or pay attention to is the fact that it is a process in our minds. We're not really cognizant, at least before we meet this practice, of mindfulness as a quality. Mindfulness happens to us, we become aware of something, and then we start thinking about it or planning about it or deciding what to do about it or thinking about what should happen next. We get our agendas going, our decision-making processes going. We don't typically recognize that something interesting has happened—that we've become aware of what's happening in the present moment.

I think it really took the brilliance of the Buddha to point out that this quality is really interesting, that it's special and will help us. But he didn't simply say, "be aware." He actually encouraged us to be aware from a particular perspective—one that will support us in moving towards happiness, moving away from the way our mind gets caught in wanting things to be different, the way our minds get caught in wanting

things to be reliable that aren't reliable, the way our minds construct identities and believe in them, the way we want things to be permanent. The Buddha highlighted a particular way of paying attention that supports this understanding, that supports a deepening of our understanding of how our minds get caught.

If you were to see somebody on the street who was angry, and you went up to that person—just a random person on the street—and said, "Do you know that you're angry?" they would probably say, "Yes, I know I'm angry. What do you think? Are you nuts? Of course I know I'm angry." And then if you were to say, "Well, notice your anger," they would say, "I am noticing my anger. I'm angry at this person or this thing or this situation."

Telling somebody to notice their reactivity, to be aware of their reactivity, isn't quite enough. The Buddha is pointing to an additional perspective, a shift of perspective, one that includes an exploration of what it feels like to be angry from the inside. What is the experience of anger? What is the experience of being a human being? What is that like? And recognizing with discernment—for instance, in the situation around anger—when anger is connected to a situation that is perhaps unjust and needs some addressing, but addressing it from a heart filled with compassion rather than a heart filled with hate.

The Buddha suggested these shifts of perspective: look at experience in and of itself; see if we can act not out of reactivity, but out of kindness, compassion, love. This points to the shift of perspective that the Buddhadharma offers us.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has a kind of famous quote, the title of one of his books: awareness alone is not enough.

It takes wisdom joined with awareness to have mindfulness be a capacity that frees our minds and helps us to understand our minds.

So the Buddha actually recommended that we cultivate right mindfulness. And the definition of right mindfulness or wise mindfulness is often described as the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness. I'm sure most of you are familiar with this teaching. The four establishments of mindfulness being: established mindfulness on the body; established mindfulness on feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral; established mindfulness of knowing mind states; and established mindfulness understanding how experience either helps move us towards freedom or keeps us caught in the cycles of suffering. Understanding the patterns of our minds that lead towards freedom or towards suffering—these four foundations of mindfulness.

In this text, in the Buddha's main instructions to us on how to practice mindfulness, there's a repeated phrase that he repeats for each of these four foundations. He says, "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world. One abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, free from desires

and discontent for the world." And likewise for mind states and dhammas.

This phrase really encapsulates in a way what he means by right mindfulness. And so I'd like to look at this phrase, look at essentially each word in this phrase and see if we can understand what is this perspective. What is the perspective the Buddha is offering us with mindfulness? It's not simply awareness. It's not simply being aware.

The first word that I'd like to look at is "abides." Just allow that word to land in your experience. How does it land for you? Abiding. The word abiding is translating the Pali word *viharati*, which is related to the term used in the brahmavihara practice—the divine abidings, the divine abodes. That literally means something like home or dwelling. Dwelling, contemplating, dwelling, abiding. To me, this calls up or evokes qualities of rest, of being at home, of contentment, of receptivity. Abiding doesn't feel like a doing to me. To me, this points to the possibility of the open, relaxed, receptive quality to our mindfulness practice that Carol was pointing to during some of the instructions this morning. Abiding in mindfulness.

The next phrase is "contemplating," and in this case we'll take one: contemplating the body as a body, or contemplating feelings as feelings, or contemplating mind states as mind states. It's kind of a funny phrase, a funny framing for something. What does it mean to contemplate the body as a body?

Different translations can help to perhaps evoke some of the meaning here. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "contemplating the body in and of itself." To me, this brings in the sense of contemplating, directing our attention to—and that's one of the meanings. Step back for a moment to the word contemplating: contemplating means to observe, to look at. So here the Buddha is suggesting we direct the attention perhaps. It can be understood as directing the attention to the body. It also could be understood as receiving the experience of the body. I think the translation allows for both understandings.

This term for contemplating is encouraging us to look at experience in a particular way. And in this case, look at experience, observe experience, observe the body as a body, observe the body in and of itself. To me this points to observing, knowing, recognizing the body as simply a body—not me, not who I am, not any of the identities I may pick up.

The commentary actually says something interesting about this phrase. It says that this repetition—contemplating the body in the body, contemplating feelings in feelings, mind states in mind states—indicates that we need to precisely determine the object of contemplation and isolate it from objects with which it might be confused. That's an interesting statement. What is it that the body might be confused with? Actually, we easily confuse our body with concepts. We confuse our body with self. So the encouragement here is to look at the body as a body, not through the lens of our ideas, our opinions, our agendas, or identities around the body. And likewise with the other foundations.

The actual experience of body is sensation, vibration, pulsing, tingling, hardness, heat, coolness, tightness, pressure.

moisture, dryness. The actual sensation of body is just sensation. We conflate this experience with concept very easily though.

You can get perhaps a little taste of this right now if you allow your attention to rest in the experience of your hand. What is that experience? What is the experience in that part of the body? Tingling, pulsing, moisture, pressure. Just feel into the texture of that experience.

And now look at your hand. Pick your hand up and look at it. Think about it as a hand, what it does for you. It reaches for things, it picks things up.

And now—what's your experience at this point of those sensations? For me, at least, there's a kind of distancing from those sensations, partly because we're thinking about the concept of hand. We're seeing it through the lens of a concept. This kind of thing happens to us all the time. We don't necessarily actually experience our body; we think about our body.

Another aspect of this contemplating the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states, is that the instructions in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta are actually fairly non-interfering. The instructions on observing experience don't instruct us to do things with what we notice. They just say: notice it. Over and over again, these specific exercises in the text tell us simply to know things as they are. One knows, "This is a body." One knows, "This is pleasant. This is unpleasant." One knows, "This is greed. This is the absence of greed." One knows, "Joy has arisen." Not to do anything with it, but simply to know it.

The effect of this is really to encourage a non-interfering, non-reactive, non-judgmental awareness. This is a key to how the practice of mindfulness supports us in freedom.

So coming into your experience—what is it? Having explored those words a little bit: "One abides contemplating the body as a body." Or an alternative translation: "One abides observing the body in and of itself." Not a lot of doing in there. And yet it is directing us to a particular way of being aware.

The next word brings in some doing. "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful." Ardency. This word brings in the energy, the effort component. We don't simply settle back and think, "Oh, if awareness is there, great. If not, well, it'll come back sometime." This is encouraging us to actively engage—alert, diligent, engaged, wholehearted. These are some words that people use to incline toward this quality.

It encourages a commitment to the practice. We have to do the practice. Bhante pointed to this last night: nobody can do it for us. This is the Buddha's encouragement—do the practice. He told Ānanda, "Practice now before it's too late. Be diligent."

So it's really pointing to a balanced yet sustained effort in our practice. It does have to be balanced.

Not too tight or too loose. The analogy that the Buddha used around balanced effort is that of tuning a musical instrument. If the string is too loose, it won't make beautiful music. If the string is too tight, it will

snap. It's got to be tuned just right—just the right amount of tautness for the string to make beautiful music. So a balanced effort, not too tight and not too loose. This is an art, finding this balance. And I know we'll explore this throughout the retreat. It's a huge topic. I could spend an entire talk just on this one phrase: balanced, persistent effort.

This persistence also encourages continuity in our practice—moment after moment after moment. Something interesting here is that we now have two different words working together. We've got "abiding" and we've got "ardent." Abiding has the sense of settling back and resting. I asked one class to tell me what this word evoked for them, and somebody said, "The dude abides." I didn't know what this referred to until it was explained to me, but there's apparently this film, *The Big Lebowski*, and this is one of his mantras. The dude abides. Really a laid-back kind of place.

But we do have to engage as well. It's not just "the dude abides." It's possible—this is kind of a koan for our practice—to abide *and* engage. What does that mean? This has been a very interesting exploration in my own practice. They're not opposites. It's not either engage or abide. It's not either be diligent or be relaxed. What does it mean to be relaxed *and* diligent? That's the balance point of our practice.

We can settle back and see the mind receiving experience, kind of in the abiding mode. Settle back and receive experience. Carol was pointing to this this morning—just settling back and receiving sound. And yet, we can't just settle back. There needs to be that kind of meeting, meeting of experience. We can direct the attention. We can choose to pay attention, for instance, to the breath—directing the attention and then settling back and receiving. What is the experience of an in-breath? What is the experience of an out-breath? Abiding and diligent. Abiding with engagement.

The next word is "clearly comprehending." One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending. This word, *sampajañña* in Pali—one of the more familiar places it's used is in the first foundation of mindfulness. There's a section called clear comprehension, and it refers to being engaged with knowing your activities throughout the day. Continuity of awareness again, continuity of mindfulness.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it encourages us to notice when we're walking, when we're standing, when we're sitting. It encourages us to notice when we're going to and fro. It encourages us to notice when we're reaching and bending our limbs. It encourages us to know when we're urinating and defecating—it's in there—when we're eating, when we're talking, when we're remaining silent. All of our activities, it's encouraging us to cultivate mindfulness. So again, this points to continuity in this word, clearly comprehending.

This word also has additional meanings in other places in the texts. There's another definition for clear comprehension that I particularly like. It says that one's clear comprehension is recognizing feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away. Feelings, thoughts, and perceptions are known as they arise, persist, and pass away.

That is one's clear comprehension. This is pointing to the wisdom piece. How do we want to be paying attention? What is it that we want to be attuning to? Clear comprehension is encouraging us to attune to the process nature of experience. Not what the feelings are, but that they arise, persist, and pass away. Not what the thoughts are, but that they arise, persist, and pass away. Noticing objects as objects, noticing that experience appears, stays for a while, and vanishes.

This is a perspective the Buddha is offering as important for our freedom. And this perspective encourages us again towards non-reactive awareness, because we are simply recognizing what's arising in the moment. It's a feeling arising, persisting, passing away. If we imagine or reflect on what that means—a feeling arises, persists, and passes away and is known to do that—where is the room for reactivity? Where's the room for wishing it to be a different way?

The commentaries also indicate that this word, clearly comprehending, includes noticing the purpose for which we are paying attention, noticing the purpose for which we're doing something. And the purpose that the Buddha pointed to was freeing the heart from suffering. So again, this brings in wisdom. The wisdom of the Buddha is intimately connected to seeing suffering, seeing how it's connected to the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience. Seeing how our minds—oh, do our minds wish things were permanent! Oh, do they wish they were reliable! And seeing how that very wish wraps us right into our reactivity, our suffering, our struggling.

So engaging with our experience in mindfulness, we notice: what is it that hooks us? We walk into the dining room. We see somebody putting food on their plate. How many times have I gotten hooked into that? How much food somebody is taking, or how little food somebody is taking. Comparing, judging, evaluating what I'm doing versus what somebody else is doing. It's just feelings as they arise, thoughts as they arise, persist, and pass away. Sights arising, persisting, passing away. Can we know that? Exploring, understanding where it is that we struggle. Where do we get hooked? We will talk about this over and over and over again. This is just an overview here.

The next word is mindful. Again, we've talked about this, and we all have a sense of what mindfulness is. One of my colleagues, Gil Fronsdal, has been doing some study on this term. He's been practicing for thirty-five years or so, and he says, "I don't really know what mindfulness is." Kind of shocking to him, in a way, to recognize that. In his study of this in the texts, one of the things that was remarkable to him was that the word mindfulness, as it's used, isn't used as something that we do. The words associated with mindfulness are words like abiding. We abide in mindfulness. We cultivate mindfulness. We establish mindfulness. So these words actually indicate that mindfulness may be a state of being rather than something that we do.

Gil equates mindfulness as more of a kind of samādhi, in a way. And like samādhi, we cultivate the conditions for mindfulness to become established. We don't do the mindfulness. We can recognize when mindfulness arises and know it is present. We can cultivate mindfulness by observing the body as a body.

We can cultivate mindfulness by directing attention to particular experience.

So the active side of mindfulness practice is observing, knowing, understanding, effort. These activities—knowing the body as a body, knowing feelings as they arise, knowing this is pleasant, knowing anger as it arises, knowing anger as it passes away—these activities help to establish mindfulness. Abiding in mindfulness. So what we engage with are these activities of observing, of knowing, of understanding, knowing what arises, directing the attention at times.

The last phrase, "free from desires and discontent for the world," points to the development of concentration, of mental composure, of unification of mind. And the way it's framed—"one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world"—it sounds like it has to happen first. We have to be free from desires and discontent before we engage with this practice.

Now that's not easy to do. Most of us see right away that we are not free from desires and discontent when we sit down. We want our pain to go away. We want our concentration to come back. We want the sitting to end sooner. We want the food to come sooner. We want different food. We want more of this, less of that. Endlessly we have desires and discontent. And so if it is the case that we have to be free of this before we engage, then one might think, "Well, I might as well go home. Why bother?" We're probably not able to get there right away.

Bhikkhu Anālayo, in exploring this text, points out that the way this word appears in the Pali—translated as something like "having removed" or "being free from" desires and discontent—the way that verb is used, that tense of the verb, can mean having completed something, but it can also indicate something happening simultaneously. So we engage in the practice of mindfulness, and simultaneous with that, we explore how to free our minds from desire and discontent.

This to me is another framing of the practice. We are not engaged in this practice in order to get something or get rid of something. This is another pointing to a perspective of our mindfulness practice: we're engaged to free ourselves from these desires and discontent. We may be able to set aside desires and discontent at times, or we may be able to recognize that a desire or discontent has arisen—that frustration has arisen. We may be able to recognize, "Oh, this is frustration." The Satipaṭṭhāna encourages us to do this: Greed has arisen. Anger has arisen. Confusion has arisen.

When we can recognize it in that way, it's as if we take a step back. It may be that we are frustrated, and when we are frustrated, it's like we're looking at the world through frustrated lenses. I was doing walking meditation in the basement here at IMS some years ago, and I knew I was having an aversion attack. This frequently happened to me while doing walking meditation, especially in a crowded room. I was doing the walking meditation knowing that the aversion was there, and I turned around at the end of my walking path. I looked down the path to the other end, and there were somebody's shoes sitting there. My mind exploded. "Who put those shoes there?" The filter of aversion was so strong that those innocent little shoes

became the source of another aversion attack.

Sometimes when we have these reactive states in our mind, we're looking through those states as if through a filter of aversion or greed or confusion or anger or frustration or depression or loneliness—whatever it is. We may be looking through this filter. And yet it's possible to recognize, "Oh, aversion is happening." Then it's as if, at least at times, we're now looking at that experience rather than looking through it. It's like taking the glasses off and looking at them rather than through them. The filter is no longer quite so potent in our minds.

This is how the setting aside begins. We're not necessarily able to be completely free of desire and discontent in our minds, but we can recognize that desire is arising with a balanced perspective, with non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness—knowing that aversion is arising, that desire is arising. We bring this perspective of being free from desire and discontent, as best we can, to the practice. And slowly, in a deepening cycle, in a deepening spiral, we begin to understand more and more what it means to be free of the more obvious levels of desire and discontent. Those levels fall away, and then we may feel, "Oh, things are good for a while." Then we start to see, "Oh, there are some subtler desires and discontent there." We deepen our understanding of what it means to be free from desire and discontent as we practice.

So: one abides contemplating the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states—ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world. This phrase brings together both the what and the how of our practice. What we are paying attention to: we bring our attention to aspects of body, body as a body, body in and of itself.

We bring our attention to feelings, feelings in and of themselves, feelings as feelings, feelings known as they arise, persist, pass away—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Mind states as mind states: anger, aversion, non-greed, non-aversion, non-confusion, concentration, distraction, contraction, all the different states of mind. What we are paying attention to are the body-mind processes happening.

From this perspective of body as a body, body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, clearly comprehending—these are just phenomena, empty phenomena rolling on, as Munindra said to Joseph so many times.

The *what* we are paying attention to, and *how* we pay attention: abiding, settled back, receiving, diligent, connecting, present, persistent, balanced effort, clearly comprehending, recognizing objects, experiences as just experience. With this perspective of recognizing we're not in this to get something or get rid of something, but to understand: how does our mind create struggle, create suffering? How does our mind get confused about the unreliability of experience?

Our mind gets confused about this and just endlessly tries to figure out some way to make things reliable, endlessly tries to make things reliable. And we feel like it's our fault, or something wrong with us, when

we can't figure out how to do it. It's not our fault. It's just the way it is. This is the truth.

Wise mindfulness encourages us to open to the truth of experience and not be confused, not be deluded about trying to create happiness based on things that are unreliable, passing away.

So with right mindfulness, with wise mindfulness, we begin to see our reactivity. We begin to see how our minds create the struggle. This non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness—we begin to see loneliness, confusion, depression arising in our experience. We begin to understand how it's put together.

Pretty early in my practice, I had a really beautiful example of this, of just how powerful wise mindfulness was. I was in the Peace Corps at the time and had a relationship that had broken up—a ten-year relationship, so it was a pretty devastating experience, actually. The anger that was happening, the loneliness, the confusion—I was out of control. The mind was out of control. And I saw, wow, this is out of control. I can barely function here.

And so somebody sent me a book on mindfulness, and I just began trying to pay attention to this confused mind. I was noticing that I was going to bed lonely every night. This was something that was happening, so let's notice loneliness. It didn't particularly surprise me that I was lonely when I was going to bed at night, but I was interested. I had begun to be interested in my mind. I had begun to be interested in how does this mind do what it does?

So I started observing this loneliness every night as I went to bed. One night, some number of nights into this process of observing the loneliness, I noticed that the loneliness clearly began when I set my alarm clock. Now this struck me as very odd. I could not figure out why on earth setting my alarm clock would have anything to do with loneliness. I just kept noticing.

Some nights later—I don't even remember whether it was the next night or a couple nights later—I had noticed there was a pattern around the loneliness that I now recognized. It was clearly connected to this alarm clock somehow. And one night as I was again just observing—I actually had very little instruction in mindfulness practice at this point; it was just curiosity, what is this about, what is it like to be lonely—one night as I was setting my alarm clock, I noticed a memory. I was with my partner in this memory, with my partner in Disneyland, looking up at a clock on a marquee in Tomorrowland. And I could see that there was a connection between setting the alarm clock, the image of the clock here, and the clock in my memory.

And I could also in that moment recognize that the loneliness was something along the lines of a reaction to that memory: "Oh, that was so happy. I'll never be happy again. I'm always going to be miserable. I'll never have another partner."

I'm always going to be alone. That was where the loneliness had arisen from.

I was amazed, actually. This was some four months into my meditation practice—amazed that

mindfulness could reveal the source, could show how this loneliness was constructed, how it was created in my mind. That was pretty amazing to see.

But what was more amazing was the next night when I went to bed. I looked at that alarm clock. I remembered the memory, of course, because it had become conscious in my mind. But the loneliness did not happen. It was as if having seen the hook between the memory and the reactivity had decoupled that reactivity.

Now, I'm not saying I didn't get lonely again—I'm not saying that. But that pattern of going to bed lonely every single night? That stopped. It was a very powerful recognition of how this practice of noticing what's happening in the mind and body brings freedom. I've had many, many experiences like that since then. You've had your own experiences like that.

So right mindfulness begins to create the conditions for insight—the conditions to actually see into how suffering is created, how struggle is constructed in our minds. And it gives us choice. This is another potent aspect of wise mindfulness, especially as it becomes more continuous. The more continuous the mindfulness gets, the more we see choice points, the more we begin to recognize moments where we can choose to act or not act on a particular mind state.

We begin to be able to choose to act out of compassion, out of love, rather than out of anger and hostility and hatred. We begin to be able to respond skillfully rather than react out of habitual patterns.

Continuity is the key here. It is what brings power to our mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is a factor of awakening—the first of the seven factors of awakening—the ground out of which all the other factors grow. In order to become a factor of awakening, mindfulness needs to be continuous. We need to have that sense of abiding in mindfulness, dwelling in mindfulness, with that perspective of not wanting something to happen or wanting something to not happen—being free from desire and discontent.

We bring this perspective, what my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls wise attitude, skillful attitude for our practice. When we have wise attitude, it doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. It doesn't matter whether anger is arising or bliss is arising. I can't tell you the number of times that deep insight has arisen when I was finally willing to say, "Oh yes, self-hatred—yes, that's what's happening," and not fight it or try to sidestep it or pretend it wasn't there, but really decided: "Yes, self-hatred, here you are. I'm going to look at you."

That willingness to meet our difficulties opens us to insight. When difficulty is happening, that is our path. When bliss is happening, that is our path—knowing bliss is happening, not indulging in bliss.

When we join this power of mindfulness with continuity, it becomes concentration. Mindfulness and concentration together are what allow us to deepen into happiness, understanding, and wisdom. And the wisdom is what frees us. The wisdom is what opens our hearts, frees our minds, and takes us toward happiness.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.