# What Mindfulness Is

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 46:32

Tonight I want to talk about what I call a kind of nuts and bolts talk. Basically, I want to talk about mindfulness—the quality of it—so we get a feel for what this energy of mindfulness actually is and how it works.

As Christina spoke of last night so eloquently, our path as human beings, our path of awakening, is one that leads to harmony, to a sense of stillness, to peace, to real freedom from conflict. If that's the path of our awakening, which it is, it's our potential as human beings. And it's right here in this moment, this very moment, nowhere else. Nowhere to go, nothing else to try and get. But if it's right here in this moment, how come that's not our experience? I mean, what's going on?

When we come to this practice, we come with various ideas about what we're going to get, but overall, for most of us, we come with a strong intention, a strong commitment to open, to understand, to open our heart. We have to have a strong intention or commitment, or we wouldn't get through nine days of this. And so we're coming with this belief in our potential and the commitment to investigate and open, and we sit down and what happens? The mind's all over. We're attacked by the hindrances. We're lost in restlessness and knee pain. Our thoughts are flying every which way. And for many, the experience is definitely not one of harmony. If this is a path of harmony, how come after two days you can feel in less harmony than you felt for the last six months of your life? What's going on?

And how does mindfulness work? How is it that sitting and being present with the breath, being present with a pain in the knee, being present with the sound of the buzzsaw—how does this help us see through this false idea of separation, of conflict that we seem to be living under? How does being present with the breath, for example, help to bring us out of confusion?

So what is mindfulness? Vipassana meditation, translated loosely as insight—actually, one of the translations of it means just to see things as they are. Simply that. The key tool to seeing things as they are, to knowing things as they are, is this quality of mindfulness that we're cultivating.

The practice is not to become different from how we are. We're not trying to somehow change ourselves around to become perfect beings. We're not trying to achieve a certain mental state, a certain set of experiences, or get to some plane where there will be peace and then we stay there and that's it. It's not about that at all. It's to open deeply, to know fully, to the truth that is always here, already right here, right now, nowhere else. And this is what mindfulness can help us do.

We often loosely use the synonym of awareness for mindfulness, but this quality of mindfulness is

actually much more specific than a vague, general sort of awareness. We can say, "Well, I'm aware that I'm sitting here and I've been thinking for ten minutes." If you asked me where I was, I would be able to say, "Yeah, I'm here in this room." There's an awareness. But mindfulness is much more specific, much richer than this kind of vague overall awareness.

It's a quality of total attention, giving one's total heart and mind to whatever is present in our experience at this moment. It's a quality of attention that is not fragmented in any way. And it's this total commitment to being present to whatever's happening in this moment that allows for our seeing through our mind-created confusion about what's really going on.

There's a quotation from Krishnamurti that I really love, which to me expresses this quality: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there is no room for fear, no room for conflict, no room for contradiction."

It's this quality of total attention. We all have moments of that—when your attention is totally with a breath, say, or it could be anything. When you're totally with the breath, in that moment there isn't a sense of conflict. There's really no problem. It doesn't matter how the breath is. The attention is completely unified; our being is completely unified around this sensation of tautness, for example. In that, there's no conflict. There's peace.

So why is it so rare in our experience? Why do we seem to struggle so? Because it's not really so esoteric, just being present for a sensation of the breath. So what's the struggle?

There are strong tendencies in our mind. It's like a deeply ingrained habit, a groove that our minds tend to run into. If there's something pleasant or pleasurable in our experience, we move toward it, either mentally—just kind of wanting it—or physically if we can. If it's unpleasant, painful, fearful, just a little uncomfortable, the tendency of mind is to back off, get away, avoid, deny. If it's kind of neutral, we tend to not even notice it, kind of space out.

And the fourth tendency, really, is the one we call the tendency to identify with any particular aspect of our experience as being me, as being some unchanging, permanent entity that's me. All of these tendencies are very strongly conditioned. When you start to look at what we're identifying with as me, in one moment it's the body, a particular pain.

"Oh, my knee, I'm really going to hurt myself." Next moment, "I'm feeling so restless. This is really unpleasant. I don't like being like this." And the next moment that's forgotten and there's a nice smell. "Well, I'm really hungry. I'm just starving. I'll never make it to lunch."

Just start to notice how many different "me's" there have been just in the course of today. And each one, when it's unexamined, we think, "Oh, this is me. This is real. This is lasting." And when it goes, we kind of don't notice it because the next one's real, it's lasting, it's going to stay. Very deeply ingrained tendency.

When these tendencies are operating and we're not aware of them—and that's the key—when we're not examining them, we don't know they're operating. They filter our whole experience. It's like we're looking through the tendency to identify, or we're looking through the way the mind pushes away from something unpleasant. We don't know that's there, and that's how we interpret reality. We think we're perceiving accurately, but we're not, because we don't know in a certain moment, if we're not paying attention, that these filters are operating on our consciousness.

They're so deeply ingrained that, for example, with difficult or unpleasant situations—when we're sitting here, just a little one, a pain in the knee or restlessness, something mild, I'm not talking about really intense suffering—it's so deeply ingrained that the mind moves away that, just without thinking about it, we will interpret something that's difficult or unpleasant as being wrong. "I'm doing something wrong because it doesn't feel good." And then this situation becomes an obstacle. "Well, if this pain in my knee goes away, then I could pay attention. Then I could be meditating. If I wasn't restless, then I could start meditating. After lunch, I won't be hungry anymore, and that's when my meditation will be good."

You know, we notice, well, after lunch you're not hungry, but you're sleepy and tired. So just before tea, maybe that hour, then it'll be okay to meditate, and now I'll just stick it out or get up and walk.

The paradox that we don't see if we're not aware of this tendency is that when we quit trying to run away from the difficulty and actually give it our total full attention, it often ceases to be a problem. If there's a slight pain in the knee and we're really fighting it, you turn your full attention to it, total attention, and suddenly you're just with it. In that moment it's not a problem. It's an unpleasant sensation in the knee. It's not a big deal. The only difference is our attitude—this willingness to be totally present without fighting or resisting what's going on.

But because we're so conditioned not to be aware that we're fighting what's happening, our perception of our experience can tend to be really skewed. In other words, we have a kind of selective presence. We're present for certain aspects of our experience and we're just totally not present for others. And this can even operate on a very unconscious level. We don't even know we're not present.

My favorite example that really helped me to see how this worked is some experiments that were detailed in a book called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* by a psychologist named Daniel Goleman, who's done Vipassana for years. These experiments show ways that our mind can block out perceiving stimuli that are perceived as potentially anxiety-provoking or painful. It's not like we consciously say, "I don't want to pay attention to that"—it doesn't even make it to the point where we're aware of having a conscious choice.

He starts with a physical example, a description of a man—I think it was Livingston, of Stanley and Livingston—who at one point in his African adventures was being chewed on by a lion. And he remained conscious through this. He obviously lived through it because he wrote about it; I don't think he was writing at the time. What he noticed was that he was conscious and he was not conscious of pain. Obviously the body was being really hurt, but there was some kind of sensory blocking that kept the

awareness of pain from making it through to his consciousness. This could probably be seen as a life-supporting factor of the human mind and body, because it would allow you that superhuman energy in a moment of crisis.

They went on to do experiments showing that this same function is operating in ways that are totally not helpful or especially useful. But what was perceived as threatening to life, as real pain, is now stimuli that our mind somehow sees as anxiety-provoking. So they did this minor experiment where they had a bunch of subjects and showed them several different pictures. All they had to do was look at the picture and then later remember and describe what had been in each of the drawings. And they had some kind of way—I don't know how they do this—of measuring where the eyeball looked. So they not only had what the person remembered, but actually they could measure where in the picture they had looked.

And so the pictures would be just normal—like a man sitting reading a newspaper—and then something that for certain people might provoke anxiety, like one would have a really sexually suggestive element, and then a guy sitting reading a newspaper. Two pieces that didn't go together at all.

They could measure where these subjects' eyes looked, and they found—that's the particular one I remember, but there were several different stimuli that could provoke anxiety—they found that in the people for whom, for instance, the sexually suggestive image provoked anxiety, when they went to say what the pictures were, they didn't even remember that part. They remembered a picture of a man reading a newspaper.

And even more strange, they could measure that somehow these subjects kept their eyes from even looking at the part of the picture that would provoke anxiety. It's fascinating to me.

So there's a way that we have of blocking that which is potentially unpleasant in our experience. And there are times when this is perhaps necessary for survival. Like many instances of young children who have been really mistreated, abused—if they were to remember that and have to stay in the same situation, it would be almost impossible. And so that memory is gone, really gone, until it can be retrieved decades later. But often in our experience this blocking is not necessary, and what we're doing is having a really skewed experience of reality. So that's how the mind moving away from the unpleasant filters our perception.

It's the same with the tendency of the mind to move toward the pleasant. They did another experiment. This demonstrates how when there's something you're fixated on, something you want, it gives you tunnel vision. You see what you're looking to see and nothing else.

So they had a short video of a basketball game, a real fast one, balls flying back and forth, and the subjects were instructed to count and report how many times the ball was passed. That was their job, and they did it. In the middle of this video, a woman dressed in white with a white parasol kind of ambled across the middle of the basketball court. Nobody doing the experiment mentioned this at the end. And when they

were asked about it, they couldn't believe it had happened. If you went back and looked again, you'd never be able to miss it. It's like how when we're looking for something we think is lost and it's staring us in the face—because we think it's lost, we can't see it.

So our expectations skew what we perceive. They skew our experience of reality. This is what we call delusion. This is the confusion of mind.

And because we have these blind spots in our experience of reality—blind spots brought about through our not seeing the tendencies of mind to go towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, to space out if it's not interesting enough, to identify with things—we're not seeing. We don't know what's actually going on. If we don't pay attention, this is how we stay out of touch with reality. It's why we feel that there's this weird sense of separation and fragmentation and we can't figure it out.

I think it's one of the reasons that the Buddha said, you know, everyone wants to be happy. All people are doing is trying to find love and happiness. But we keep doing it in ways that increase our confusion and our suffering because we don't really see clearly. We can't see what's happening.

This fascinates me, just how this works—this skewed perception.

Now, as long as these filters on our experience are operating without our knowing it and without our understanding, we continue to act and feel confused, separated. So this is where the power of mindfulness comes in.

Wisdom, real understanding—just what really is—arises with our ability to be fully, totally present with just what is in any moment. That ability to be fully and totally present without conflict is what enables us to know and experience clearly, for just what it is. Because when we're with it without resistance, without expectation, nothing to protect, just there with it, open, vulnerable, we can really be with it, see what it really is.

So this quality of mindfulness, this total presence, as we cultivate it, the light of awareness begins more and more to shine equally on anything that arises in our experience. We start to be less discriminating, not so selective. More things start to come up into our awareness and we're fully with whatever it is, without this unconscious to-ing and fro-ing. And this includes beginning to be aware even of these filters, even of the movement of the mind of wanting, the movement of the mind of resisting, and aware of that energy of identification.

As experiences that have been fearful or unattended to in our life begin to be received with attention, we're not so driven to deny the painful. We're not so driven to only seek out the pleasant and suffer so much when we can't have it.

And it's this drive—this drive towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant—that is the source of our conflict. It's not the experiences themselves. It's our drive to deny and to cling that's the source of our

conflict.

And with this mindfulness that begins to shine equal light on whatever arises, this to-ing and fro-ing of the mind begins to cease. There are moments when it isn't happening. There are moments when this to-ing and fro-ing of the heart and mind isn't going on, and the stillness of heart, the peace of what we really are, is able to shine forth. It's not like we're going somewhere else. It's just that this to-ing and fro-ing stops for a second, and there can be this sense of real peace, of harmony.

And that's really our true nature.

On retreats and off retreats, I think probably all of us have had moments of experience of this. I can think back to many times. It tends to happen more on retreat because I'm practicing being mindful—where there's just a moment of exquisite beauty. And if you were describing it later, well, it was the sunset, it was so exquisite. Or the way the shadow filters through the leaves in a tree, or a flower, or the way a certain person was walking. A sip of tea, a step in walking meditation. There are these moments of exquisite stillness and beauty.

It's not that suddenly this tree is the most magnificent tree that ever existed on the face of the earth, or that this step was some kind of really special step. What's going on is that those filters of wanting and pushing away and identification aren't active in that moment. And so there's this real sense of connection, of harmony, of peace. It's not that the experience itself is so different. And if we went back and tried to recreate it—let me just drink this tea in the same way and have this sip again—it doesn't do it. Because the mind's wanting like crazy. Forget it. It'll never work.

But it's nothing so esoteric. It's a moment of the mind and heart being fully connected and present without this to-ing and fro-ing.

So these tendencies of wanting, aversion, pushing away, confusion, identification—yes, they're really deep and strong. They arise really often, and that's part of what's happening when we sit. You sit down and you're lost in aversion, you're lost in restlessness, and the mind's all over the shop. You're starting to see what's going on. When we're not paying attention, we often don't see it on such a subtle level. So they're deep and they're strong—and they're also impermanent. They come and they go. It's not our intrinsic nature. If it were, we'd be wasting our time here.

Something the Buddha often said, which lately has been inspiring me a lot: when he would talk about working for freedom from suffering and purifying the mind—in other words, moving so that we're not so caught in greed and aversion and delusion—he'd say, "If it weren't possible, I wouldn't tell you to do it." And that inspires me a lot.

So when we're willing to bring our full energy, our commitment, our attention to whatever's happening now—the pain, the breath—we start to see that what we assume to be so in a particular moment isn't necessarily true at all. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, poet, and peace activist—I quote him

a lot—says that in order to have a correct perception of reality, we need to have a direct encounter with what's happening. Pretty straightforward. That's what mindfulness is: giving us a direct encounter right now with this moment.

So what are some qualities, actually energetic qualities, of mindfulness that we can experience when we're being mindful? Even as I talk, if you have a sense of feeling it in yourself, not just taking it in intellectually, that's helpful.

Mindfulness is a real alert, total attention, and at the same time it's relaxed. It's an alert attention that doesn't come from a driving force. It comes rather from interest. And attention that springs from interest is quite natural, quite connected. We're all capable of really strong interest. Sometimes you might think, well, the breath—it's not that interesting. How can I bring interest to it? But first, to know that you're capable of really strong interest helps a lot.

This is my current favorite example—I can only use it a couple more times this year. January in San Francisco was during the Super Bowl, and I knew quite a few people there. Every single person I knew or knew of was glued to their television set during the three hours of this match. The city kind of stopped. It was quite amazing. And watching it with people, the quality of interest—especially during the first half—was remarkable. No move went undiscerned that the quarterback made, or that special wide receiver. They were all San Francisco fans, so they were really into it. It was amazing. And this was just a wide, broad spectrum of people. We're all quite capable of this really connected, total attention. No sound, nothing else would go on. When the commercial came, attention completely dropped. As soon as the commercial ended—boom.

It was fascinating. So if we can do this with a football game, we can bring the Super Bowl mind to our life process. We might think that breath is boring, but really, our life process is a lot more interesting than we give it credit for.

ultimately interesting than a football game. And if we think the breath is boring, think about what it's like when you have a really bad cold. Then suddenly you're really fascinated with the breath. Or if you have the potential of lung disease. I just had to have a pulmonary test, and these incredible contraptions they use – it just tuned me in to how much could go wrong with the lungs and what that would be like, not to be able to breathe freely. It's really quite interesting, the breath. It's worth my attention.

So we can bring this quality, the Super Bowl mind, to whatever's happening in our life process. It's worth it.

Mindfulness has other qualities. Actually, when I'm talking about the attention with the Super Bowl, that is not complete mindfulness, because it has a quality of wanting a certain result, looking for a certain thing to happen. Those people definitely wanted San Francisco to win. It wasn't like, "Oh well, whoever catches the ball, that'll be interesting." So that quality is not mindfulness. The total attention is. But

mindfulness is relaxed, totally non-manipulative, non-violent, not looking for any result, no expectation.

So we bring that same quality of attention, but with no expectation of any result, simply because this is the experience of our mind and body in this moment. This is life right now. It's almost attention with a spirit of loving-kindness, of mettā, towards whatever it is that's arising – towards one's sense of oneself, towards the emotion that's arising, if it's sadness, towards a pain, towards a sound, towards feeling hot. It doesn't matter. It's an attention that's alert but with a real loving spaciousness of mind.

I'm trying to give different images. An image that helps me a lot with this sense is an evening just when the moon is rising with a star. I remember this image really clearly. There's such a sense of the space around that, really holding and cradling the moon and the star. It's that sense of complete spaciousness allowing whatever were to come into that space. There's no sense of, "Well, the star's in the way, it's not in the right relationship to the moon, they should change." But a total spacious acceptance – whatever comes in is fine, it's held, it's cradled, it goes out, that's fine. Very loving, spacious, total presence with whatever arises.

And in this, the whole range of experiences comes and goes, and we're just totally present for each one.

So, for example, here in retreat, if we think we know what good practice feels like or looks like, or we have some idea of what it is we're wanting to get or do, and we don't notice that, it makes it really hard to have this sense of openness and cradling for experiences that come along that don't match our idea, our expectation. And then again, right away, we're in conflict. Right away, we're in struggle. If there's no special thing to happen but we're just fully meeting whatever arises with kindness, with spaciousness, with attention, there's not a problem. And then we can see, more likely, what's really going on.

This spacious non-judging quality of mindfulness is what allows for the next aspect. And even though I'm saying this sequentially, you realize this is all going on at once. It's just that to talk about things we have to separate them and break them out.

But in this non-judging spacious presence and alertness, it allows us to know the actual bare experience of a moment. As opposed to all our ideas about it, our interpretations about it, our concepts about it, it lets us tell the difference between what's actually going on and what we're thinking about and constructing on top of that. This is how we see directly without the veil of interpretation.

We all know the difference. But often our interpretations and concepts are so subtly tied into the experience that we get all caught up and intertwined and can't really tell the difference.

A real simple example. If you're going on with the breathing and your breath turns out to be really tight and rigid and controlling, and you start to think, "God, this is just what I'm like. I'm such a rigid, controlled, uptight person." And each breath this just gets stronger until each breath is a torment. Each breath is further proof of what a totally horrible person you are. This is a real example of confusing our actual experience with all our interpretations.

Bring the energy of mindfulness to the experience and what is it? Well, on the in-breath it's really tight and constricted. That's the experience. Tightness.

and constriction, and then there's a thought: "Such a rigid, uptight person." That's a thought. It might or might not be true, but in the moment the experience is simply one of tightness and constriction, and then this judging thought. When we can bring this total attention to it, it's much easier to be with the actuality of tightness and constriction.

Yeah, that's tightness and constriction. That's okay. Oh, and I'm really judging that. Okay. Just simply seeing what is and not confusing our interpretations for the actual experience. It doesn't mean we chuck out all concepts or all interpretations—of course, they're often helpful. But knowing it for what it is, and knowing what we're actually experiencing for what it is.

This comes about through the power of mindful attention, through simply being present again and again and again, without judging. The more we learn to be present moment by moment—and that's why we just be with the breath, be with the lifting of the foot, be with the pain in the knee, be with the sound—what we're learning the feel of is what that feels like, how it is simply to be present. A moment of that is what begins to allow for the stillness, as I said before, to shine forth.

When we're present, when there's a presence with what's going on without all these veils of interpretation, more and more the conditions are present for deep understanding to arise. Because understanding is simply seeing what actually is, what already is. And so when there's this stillness of mind that comes from our willingness to just be present without resistance or clinging, understanding arises, clear seeing arises, of itself—because we're no longer blinded by our interpretations and assumptions.

And what's so nice actually is that with the understanding, also arises—actually it seems to be mingled—a deep expression and sense of love and compassion. Really the twin wings of the Buddha's teaching are that of wisdom or understanding and that of compassion and love. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Without understanding we are unable to love." And so with the arising of understanding—simply this clear seeing—love and compassion also begin to spring forth quite naturally.

As we develop this energy of mindfulness, we're no longer so driven to avoid pain and seek out pleasure. We begin to get it that it's not what's happening that brings peace or absence of conflict, but it's our relationship to what's happening that makes all the difference. And so, as we no longer hide from pain, we're able to open to our own painful and difficult situations—physical pain, emotional pain, difficult situations in our life.

It's when we can be with our own pain that we're able to open to and be with the pain of others. Because it doesn't trigger off fear of pain in ourselves. We don't have to be afraid of it anymore. And so difficult situations in our life are no longer so in the way. It's no longer, "I've got to get rid of this in order for my growth to continue." Actually, it's really true that the difficult situation—a sickness, a difficult situation in

life, grief—can actually serve as the source of our growth, as the catalyst for our healing, for our coming to heal our sense of isolation and separation. That's when we give mindful attention to the difficulty. Whereas when we are afraid or don't know to pay attention, the difficulty actually becomes the source of our sense of fragmentation, simply when we don't remember to look.

Here's just a little example of how a difficult situation can really turn around when we change our attitude. Well, this is not really difficult, just unpleasant. But I was a couple of years ago on an Indian overnight train, in a sleeping compartment that you share with four people. I was traveling alone, and three middle-aged Indian men were in the other three bunks. You're just lying there eye to eye. And then their whole families moved in. I was really like, "I want my privacy." And they just stare. It's not impolite to stare in India—it's just a whole different way of relating to people. Physical proximity isn't considered rude. Lying there and staring at you isn't considered rude. To me it was like, "Get back. I just want my peace."

And so I spent a lot of the night feeling kind of closed off, aversive, paranoid. It was definitely me and them, and I wanted them to leave. And at some point I kind of got it—what I was doing—and I changed it from "me and them" to "Oh, here we are all together in this compartment." You know, it's us. I just quit fighting and decided to be present, instead of present in body but in mind trying to really not be there.

And the whole—I mean, there was no problem. We suddenly got chatty. They went out and bought me little snacks at the station. We ended up just having a great time the last couple of hours.

And I really learned a lot about where separation and conflict and fragmentation comes from. Even a minor unpleasant incident can really transform into a way to heal ourselves from our sense of separation. Really, all I had to do was remember to be fully present. It didn't take anything else.

As we're more and more present, seeing more clearly what is without fighting it, the sense of connectedness, the sense of love and compassion starts to shine, to spring forth from our heart naturally. It's no longer a "should"—you know, "I should be this loving person." It's not being compassionate out of guilt because I have so much and they don't. It's just a natural expression of who we really are.

I do want to emphasize that for most of us, this is a process. It's not like we have a few moments of clear seeing and then it's all done—we're just living in love and compassion and total understanding. It's a process. It means being willing to wake up and pay attention in this moment, now. And being awake in this moment is only this moment. And now, in this moment, it means waking up and paying attention in this moment. That's all. It's quite simple. It's nothing so esoteric. The experience of total presence and mindfulness is not necessarily some big fireworks going off. It's easy to overlook. But don't overlook it, because it's really important.

We'll all meet situations in our life—here, outside of here—that are too painful, too difficult to completely open to, to be fully present with. And that's fine. That's life. That's not a cause for self-judging: "Oh God, I

blew it. I can't open to this." And it's not about forcing oneself. But that too is the truth of the moment right now: "I just feel completely overwhelmed. There doesn't seem to be the ability to be present and open right now." That's okay.

But then all the moments that we are able to give direct attention—it just strengthens in us so many things. One thing it really strengthens is that deep quality in our heart of trust. Trust in our own experience. Beginning to know that our potential really is that we're much more than this kind of random bundle of sensations and flying thoughts and wacky emotions. Sometimes we wonder, "Is this it?" But these moments of real presence, of stillness, that we each experience for ourselves deepen that quality of trust, the commitment and the willingness and ability to open further, to meet the next moment of our experience.

Because what we know for ourselves, what we've experienced for ourselves—no one can come along and say, "That's not true." I mean, they can come and say it, but we know it's true. No one can take that away from us. Just as no one can give it to us. You can't come along to me and say, "Here, have a moment of total reality, free from suffering." No one can do that for someone else. And no one can take away what we know in our own hearts from our own experience.

I want to end with a short quotation from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer. He's writing about the day of liberation for people being liberated from the prison camps in Russia. It says: "The day of liberation—as if it were possible to liberate anyone who hasn't first become liberated in their own heart. And it's also impossible to impinge on the freedom of anyone who's been liberated in their own heart."

So that's what we're doing—watching the breath and knee pain.

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