Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 50:16

So it was fun this afternoon to hear where everybody is from and just one little thing about them. I especially related to the people who were grooving on the weather and the sunshine down here, because I just came from Massachusetts a few weeks ago, and I was really struck also by the sunshine. It's delightful.

I wanted to share with you all, especially those from the states of Oregon and Washington and the province of B.C., that the reason it's so sunny here today is that the storm we were supposed to get hit the Pacific Northwest instead. That might not be exactly mudita, but it might let you feel a little more gratitude for being here.

The first day of a retreat is often one of the more difficult days in our lives. If you're feeling a little tired or sore or achy or frustrated, that's really par for the course, so not to worry. As James said, there's a detox thing going on, so it's kind of like detoxing and starting up at the gym on the same day. The muscles ache, and you come home sore, and you're really tired, and it does get better.

But I want you to listen to this quotation and see if you recognize the source. It's by a well-known spiritual teacher: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to suffering, and those who go through it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few."

Any idea who said this? Jesus. Yes, this is from the Gospels. It could just as well have been said by the Buddha. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life and those who find it are few. So welcome to the hard gate.

On a day like this where it's not always so easy, it can be difficult to remember what we're doing here. If you're out there and you open your eyes and peek, it looks like everybody else in the room is a Buddha. When you open your eyes, people are, for the most part, still. Of course, if you keep them open for a while, then you see what's really happening. Other people are moving just as you are. But in a snapshot, it looks like a room full of Buddhas. And then we take a look around in the slow walking, and we really wonder where we are. What is going on?

Ajahn Chah was Jack Kornfield's first teacher, a wonderful monk from Thailand. The first time he came to lead a retreat in the United States was in 1979. He led a retreat at Insight Meditation Society, our sister center on the East Coast. He teaches a way of practice that's really a way of life. He likes people to come and make at least a five-year commitment to him. They live a simple life in the forest. They do their communal chores, their communal meetings, and they do some meditation. But it's not as intense and

silent as it is here. So he thought this was kind of a funny form, but he did it because it was the West.

People were doing their very slow walking meditation out on the grass on the front lawn at IMS. He would go up to them and just say a word in Thai, and he'd give them this big smile. Then he'd move on to the next person, say a short phrase in Thai, and big smile. At the end of the day, someone asked his translator, "What was Ajahn Chah saying to us as he came around and talked to us?" He said, "Oh, Ajahn Chah was saying to each person, 'I hope you get well soon.'" It can kind of look like that in slow walking. So I hope you all get well soon.

Given that it can be a little unclear exactly why it is we're here, I wanted to talk tonight about the basics of our practice, really mostly as a way of reminding all of us of things that we already know. And really, it's kind of a sales pitch for the present moment. I just want to encourage you to come back as often as you can. That's really the purpose of the talk.

As the Dalai Lama said, the present moment is the only place that we can feel love. It's the only place that we really encounter life. So for that alone, it's very, very valuable. But this ability to stay in the present moment is not the way that our mind has been trained. It's not the way our culture thinks or grooms us. Rather, the opposite.

So one of the first insights that people tend to have in an insight meditation retreat is that their mind is out of control.

And this is a simple thing to see if you've been doing the practice for any time at all. But when you think about it, it's a little bit of a rare insight as the world goes. If you went up to the man or woman on the street and said, "Is your mind out of control?" how many people would immediately say, "Of course"? Not that many. So this is a useful insight to know. It's humbling.

There was a cartoon in the New Yorker not long ago that kind of summed this state up. It's really the human condition—the state that we live in most of the time. The cartoon was of a man working on his computer, apparently at his workplace. While he was working on his computer, he was thinking—the thought image over his head was of playing golf. The next frame showed the man out on the golf course, and the thought bubble above his head was being at home, making love to his partner. The third panel showed the man at home making love to his partner, and the thought bubble was being on his computer at work.

No matter where we are, it's never quite enough if we aren't really here, if we aren't really present. So the beauty of this training of our dharma practice is that it gives us an avenue to find our way into the present moment again and again and again. And out of that avenue, we find a whole world of richness, a whole treasure that we didn't see before.

It's a little bit like diving underwater and seeing that there's a whole world—if you have a mask and snorkel, there's a whole world of coral and fish that lives down there that we never knew about before. In

our tradition, the avenue to these riches is mindfulness. Mindfulness.

It's kind of a curious word. It's a translation of the Pali word *sati*, which basically meant simply remembering before the Buddha put this new spin on it, which we call mindfulness. It's a pretty good translation because it doesn't mean a huge amount in English, so we can make it mean what the Buddha meant by it. So I wonder what that is.

Many of us have been practicing mindfulness for years, in some cases many years. Some of you have been practicing for twenty years or longer. And I've been practicing for at least twenty years when I asked myself the question, "What is mindfulness?" And I found that I actually didn't know. I couldn't come up with an answer that would satisfy me about what mindfulness was. So I invite you to just take a moment to reflect on that.

It's become a very common word, certainly in our circles, but even in the culture at large. Mindfulness is getting very broad play, partly because of all the mindfulness-based stress reduction activities that have gone on around the country. It's being incorporated by other religions who have had some contact with it and because of its secular language can take it up and incorporate it in their reflections and contemplations. And there's beginning to be a lot of scientific interest in this factor of mind.

About three weeks ago, I taught a retreat at IMS, this sister center, to a group of scientists who had gotten interested in meditation through their conferences with the Dalai Lama through an institute called the Mind & Life Institute. They had gotten inspired enough by the Dalai Lama that they wanted to take it to the next level to make their understanding practical instead of just theoretical. So we had ninety scientists sitting for a week at IMS with all their intelligence, learnedness, education, and critical faculties. Most of them had not meditated a lot before. Most of them had not done a week's retreat.

So for the first three days, I was really uncertain how it was going to go. The questions in the hall sometimes were quite pointed. When you get intelligent people of a skeptical frame of mind looking at what you do with your mind when you're with the breath, well, that can raise some questions. But it was really wonderful to see because about three days in, there was a whole sea change in the atmosphere, and most of the people started really connecting very well with the practice and starting to feel the benefit of it.

By the end of the retreat, almost everybody had made a strong connection to the dharma, and it was really beautiful to see. We thought this could be a really interesting kind of launch pad. Just to give you an example, one of the scientists on that retreat is about to receive a twenty-five million dollar grant to study mindfulness and its effects and is on the verge of hiring a Spirit Rock teacher for two years to oversee the project from a meditative point of view.

Really, the studies are just beginning to come out to establish scientifically what most of us know experientially—that mindfulness has tremendous health benefits, certainly mentally and also physically.

And as these studies are done and these findings come out, I think the health benefits are going to become so compelling that this is going to become even more of a mainstream activity. More and more people will get the benefit, even if it's done in a very secular way. So I think there's some really exciting potential here.

But what is this quality that's so powerful, so potentially transformative, and yet when we start to feel our way into the meditation, so kind of elusive? What is this factor of mindfulness? It's sometimes been described as the quality of bare attention. And this captures an important component of it.

Mindfulness is the quality of connection with our present moment experience. It's definitely grounded in the present moment. The bare part points to an aspect of what's absent from mindfulness—that is, any kind of conceptual overlay. Mindfulness is the ability to connect with our present moment experience without the barriers of judgment, comparison, evaluation, insufficiency, projection, or looking for something other. It's a clear seeing of what is.

It's called bare because it means we don't add anything extra. It's just the bare experience, and our attention is really fully with that. In Tibetan Buddhism, they have a term that's even a little more striking—they call it naked awareness. Tibetans always take things a step further, you've probably noticed that. But it's the same quality, this unadorned quality of being with the experience.

But I think there's more to mindfulness than just bare attention. I think my cat has a lot of bare attention. She is very much with her present moment experience, and I don't think there's a lot of thought going on on top of it most of the time. So is that mindfulness? Is a baby mindful, because it is so present moment oriented before the ego develops and the thoughts start wandering into past and future? I would say not. And I would say the cat is not either. What they have is a beautiful quality of presence, but I don't think it's mindfulness.

The extra quality that's needed to turn it into mindfulness is this—and I would say that this is a reasonable working definition of mindfulness. It may not have the whole picture, but it's a good way to approach it. I want to suggest that mindfulness is knowing what our experience is in the present moment. It's the knowing of the experience that is the important piece.

We find this stated quite clearly in a text of the Buddha's called the Satipatthana Sutta. This is really one of the key texts, probably the key text to meditation practice in our tradition. It comes from a part of the Pali Canon called the Majjhima Nikaya, the middle-length discourses. Every time the Buddha is giving instructions in this sutta on how to be mindful, he basically says it the same way.

I'll read you some examples: "Breathing in long, he knows 'I breathe in long.' Or breathing out long, he knows 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, she understands 'I breathe in short.' Or breathing out short, she understands 'I breathe out short.' When walking, he understands 'I am walking.' When standing, he understands 'I am standing.' When feeling a pleasant feeling, she knows 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling.'

When feeling an unpleasant feeling, she knows 'I am feeling an unpleasant feeling.'"

So it's this quality of knowing what our experience is as it's happening that is really, I think, the heart of mindfulness. As you start to relate with that factor, you'll see that in a moment of contact with your experience, sometimes this mental factor is present and sometimes it's not. I want to submit that it's this knowing that's the transformative property in our practice.

It's like a culture in yogurt, the acidophilus. You take milk and you add a little bit of acidophilus culture to it, and then it starts to replicate itself through all that milk. It changes the flavor and the usefulness of the milk into yogurt. In the same way, when we drop this mindfulness into our experience, it starts to act like that transformative culture. Little by little, it spreads itself through all of our experience—first through our formal practice, then into our informal practice, into our full daily life, until it touches it all with this flavor of knowing and understanding that brings with it the flavor of the Dharma.

There are two levels of this knowing that I think it's helpful to be familiar with. There's a kind of simple level that's almost a conceptual level, and then there's a more detailed knowing that Carol referred to this morning in the walking instructions. Let's say on the simple level, when we breathe in, we're instructed by the Buddha to know "I'm breathing in." When we breathe out, we're instructed to know "I'm breathing out." So this is a level of mindfulness.

If you simply know "I'm breathing in" and you simply know "I'm breathing out," mindfulness is being established and the strength of this quality starts to work. But there's another level below that.

When Carol was talking about paying attention to a step, she was giving us the instruction to look and see what the sensations were that really made up that contact of the foot with the floor—feelings of hardness or softness, coolness or warmth, tingling or pressure, weight or heaviness. This is a more detailed level of knowing that we can also apply to the breath as well as to walking.

So start to see that your practice can happen on either of these levels. Both of them are good. Even if you just know, "I'm taking a step. I'm taking a step," that's good. That's mindfulness. The practice will go from there.

But as your mindfulness gets more subtle, as it gets more connected to your experience, you'll see that it also starts to reveal the details of what that experience of a step or a breath is like. And as you pay more attention, you'll start to see more and more detail.

It's not that we have to be super detail freaks about our practice. And it's not that the person who sees the most details goes to heaven first or gets enlightened first. The beauty in seeing detail is that it arouses interest. And so as you let your attention really sink into the experience and you see how rich the experience is, you tend to get interested in it. And as you get interested, the strength of that is that it holds your attention there more naturally. Not so much effort is required to be with something that you're really interested in. So this is some of the advantage of connecting strongly on this level of the sense data, the

richness of the sense data.

This ability is really enhanced by two factors that we'll talk about probably over and over in this retreat. I want to introduce them tonight and make sure that we come back to them again and again. These are the factors of connecting and sustaining. They're an important part of meditation technique. They're the foundations of concentration. The Pali terms are vitaka and vichara. And for those of you who are a little familiar with this, they're the first two of the five factors of mind that make up the first jhana, a state of strong concentrated absorption. But very practically, they are the ways that we can start to deepen the mindfulness and activate the property of concentration.

So these are very practical instructions to connect and sustain. Let's talk about them in relationship to the breath.

The idea is as an in-breath begins, we want to use that in-breath beginning as a prompt to connect our attention to the experience in our body of breathing in. So that's the sense of connect or vitaka. It's also translated as aiming. So as soon as the in-breath starts, that's your invitation. Aim your attention. Aim it and connect—more or less synonymous—with the experience, your direct experience of an in-breath. So for some of you it'll mean aiming at the belly, for some at the abdomen, for some at the nose, some may be experiencing it in the whole body. The start of the in-breath is your invitation to connect.

Then the instruction is to sustain the attention there with the in-breath just for a half-breath. This is an important point. Sometimes as we start meditating with the breath we think, "I've got to be with every breath for the whole hour." And we soon find we can't do that. And then we think, "Well, maybe I just need to be with every breath for half an hour." And we find we can't do that. So we get a little more modest. "Well, I'm going to be with every breath for the next five minutes, and I'm really going to stay right on top of it so I won't miss any." And then we sort of start leaning heavily, and we think, "I've got to make this last. I've got it. I won't let it go away." And all of a sudden, we're getting really tight, because we're trying to make the sustaining last longer than it wants to, or longer than is realistic.

So what's realistic for us? Half a breath. Half a breath is the right length of time to sustain. Sayadaw U Pandita—a true meditation master, a Burmese master who's taught a number of us—said that you basically won't be able to sustain, truly sustain for more than two breaths.

Don't bother trying to sustain longer than this natural rhythm allows. You'll just tie yourself up in knots if you attempt to force a longer duration. So play with this approach and see if it's helpful for you.

The idea is that we aim at the start of an in-breath and sustain the attention just for the beginning of that in-breath. When the out-breath begins, we aim again, connecting to the start of the out-breath and sustaining for just that half-breath duration. In this way, we're renewing our intention with every half-breath, renewing our intention to be present.

It would be wonderful if we could sit down at the beginning of a meditation period, declare our intention

to be present for the entire session, and have it happen automatically. But it mostly won't work like that. However, if you renew your intention again and again throughout the period, you'll find yourself resting in the present much more frequently.

I really encourage you to work with these two concepts of vitakka and vicara—this rhythm of aiming and sustaining. Another way that the sustaining aspect, vicara, is sometimes translated is "rubbing." This offers a particularly intimate way of understanding the practice. As you sustain your attention on the out-breath, for example, cultivate the sense that your awareness is gently rubbing against the sensations of the breath. This creates an intimate relationship between your awareness and the phenomenon of breathing.

There's one way to be with the breath where you're observing from a distance—where there's a fixed sense that the observer is located in the center of the head, somewhere behind the eyes, while the breath is way down in the abdomen. From this perspective, you're looking at the breath from quite a remove. That's one way to meditate, and it's not necessarily wrong.

But there's a gentler, softer, and more immediate approach. In this method, you cultivate the sense that awareness is located right with the object—in this case, with the breath sensations themselves. All you need to do is gently rub those sensations with awareness, and mindfulness will naturally arise from that contact.

I mentioned that when we try to sustain for too long, we can create tension through excessive effort. The opposite extreme involves sitting down, making an intention only at the beginning of the meditation, and then adopting a completely passive attitude: "Okay, it's in your hands, Buddha. I'm going to relax here, and if you choose to connect me with the breath, I'll be available." This is rather like a laid-back California approach to meditation.

While this attitude has a certain appeal, many breaths can pass without much real connection. You might enjoy pleasant fantasies and emerge from the sitting feeling that it was fairly agreeable, but recognize that you didn't actually connect with the breath very much. This represents being a little too relaxed.

On that end of the spectrum, it's helpful to increase the effort. Renew your intention more frequently, and apply slightly more firmness to the contact between attention and object.

There's a wonderful analogy for finding the right degree of contact—really a metaphor for right effort. Picture picking up a baked potato with your fork. We can all relate to this experience. You have this delicious baked potato, perhaps sliced and covered with butter, sour cream, cheese, and other toppings. At some point, you want to pierce it with your fork and bring it to your mouth.

If you strike the potato too forcefully, it can splinter into pieces, making it impossible to pick up. This represents applying too much effort to the meditation object. But if you don't use enough force, the fork will simply bounce off without piercing the potato's flesh at all, and again, you can't pick it up.

You must find the right balance—firm enough to pierce cleanly, but not so forceful that you destroy what you're trying to hold. This same principle applies to connecting your attention with the chosen object, whether breath or another focus. You want to make firm enough contact that it truly connects and can be sustained, but not such a forceful connection that you're pressing, leaning, or creating tension in a way that actually pushes the object away.

Somewhere between being completely laid back and being overly aggressive, you'll discover the right balance of effort. This understanding will guide you in both the connecting and sustaining aspects of practice.

I encourage you to play with this balance. The only way we learn about right effort is through trial and error. Don't be afraid to sometimes be a little too active and at other times a little too relaxed. It's precisely through exploring these extremes that we discover where the middle way lies.

Continue to evaluate how this meditation unfolds. Now often, especially at the end of a sitting, we find ourselves slipping into evaluation: "Oh, this was a good sitting" or "This was a bad sitting." Just remember that a good sitting doesn't necessarily mean a pleasant sitting—these aren't synonymous.

A good sitting, in terms of developing mindfulness, is measured by how present you were with your experience. It's not about whether your experience was pleasant while you were spaced out thinking about something else. Even if you spent most of an hour present with pain in your knee, if you were truly there—that, in our terms, is a good sitting.

What matters is the degree of your connection with your experience and the quality of mindfulness you brought to it, not whether the experience itself was particularly pleasant or unpleasant.

As James mentioned, we can become discouraged, especially in the early days, about being absent for long periods or not staying with many breaths in a row. We judge ourselves harshly for this. Of course, if you look closely, you know you shouldn't. In these early days of retreat, if you're present with two breaths at a time, that's a genuinely good start. At this point in the retreat, two breaths is wonderful.

Sometimes you'll feel frustrated: "Oh, I could only stay with two breaths." But ask yourself—what's the right number of breaths to be present with that would be good enough? What's the magic number that constitutes success? Is it four? Five? Six? Ten?

We simply don't know, yet we judge ourselves about it. Then we drift away—maybe for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes—and we return with harsh self-criticism: "Oh, what a terrible meditator I am. I'm never going to get this. I'm away so much. What an awful practitioner."

But what's the acceptable length of time to be away? Two minutes? Five minutes? Eight minutes? We don't know that either, do we? Yet we still judge.

So at this point in the retreat, try not to rely on arbitrary standards. Instead, as James suggested, when you

wake up from distraction, appreciate that moment of wakefulness. It's like a gift—a spontaneous gift. We can't control when it happens, but it does change over time. The more we connect with the present moment, the more the mind becomes reconditioned, retrained to naturally rest in the present.

Our aspiration is to abide more and more in the present. As the *Satipatthana Sutta* teaches: "contemplating body in body"—meaning feeling the experience of the body directly. "The practitioner abides fully mindful." *Abides*. This is actually possible. It comes when it comes—we can't force it through effort alone. But over time, we discover we're present more and more often. This naturally emerges from our willingness to return when we have the choice.

Another pattern that can arise, as James pointed out, is that when we return from distraction, we feel we've done something wrong and need to make up for it somehow. Have you ever wished there was a little rosary you could use to do penance after being away for a while? As if saying a certain number of "Hail Buddhas" could clean the slate and let us start fresh?

But in fact, you don't need to do any penance. We can simply begin again. There's no need to retrace our steps: "Where did I go astray? What thoughts took me away? Where did that thought lead?"

We don't have to walk back the ladder of thinking to see where it diverged. We can simply drop it and start fresh. The moment is always fresh. Always remember it's fine to just start over, start new. Don't carry judgment, frustration, or discouragement. Simply begin again, noticing this next moment. It's always available.

Now I want to talk about our relationship with thoughts, because this is a big part of our meditation in the early days especially. The thoughts come in and they're really seductive, aren't they? They offer so much color and drama in a situation that intrinsically doesn't have a lot. We're sitting here, it's calm. Not much going on externally. Maybe there's a little boredom coming in. And thoughts offer this fantastic channel of amusement—entertainment and escape.

Especially as we get a little bit still, the thoughts get a lot more interesting. There's this quality called vipassana brilliance—as we settle down, the thoughts really wake up. I think it's true that the place of meditation and the place of creativity are very close. It's a quiet place that lets the subconscious do its work.

So how do we relate to those particularly alluring thoughts that come? Because they seem to offer so much promise. It might be the promise of creativity: "Oh, this is going to solve the problem I've been working on at the workplace," or "Now I know what I really want to paint when I get home in front of my canvas." Or we think about the problems in our lives. Problems are really seductive—relationship problems, child-raising problems, money problems, housing problems. "I could spend some time there and maybe I could solve some of them."

I want to share with you one of the mantras I've learned from one of my teachers, Joseph Goldstein, in

relation to thoughts. He has this phrase that's good to remember: In the context of meditation, nothing is worth thinking about. This doesn't mean the topic of emptiness—it means nothing's worth thinking about. And this is really true. In the furtherance of mindfulness, thoughts don't really have a great deal to offer.

If you look closely at most of what goes through the mind, there's not much substance there. It's mostly things we've thought many times before, coming up again and again. So we start to have confidence that the problems of our life, the suffering in our life, are not going to be solved by thinking. We start to trust that the solution is going to come from a different level than we think about the problem on.

I really encourage you to reflect on this over the course of the retreat and see if it's true—that the real shifts in our relationship to work, to partners, to money, to all the situations of our daily life don't come so much through thinking over and over, but come from a deeper shift in us that changes our relationship to them in some more fundamental way. More openness, more acceptance, more caring, less reactivity, less anger. These kinds of shifts don't happen as a result of thinking. They come out of silence. They come out of the depth of our contact with the moment, with life. And they come from our intuition.

This place of stillness, creativity, meditation, contact with the present—these are all the ground that insight comes from. Insight both into our personal life, our psychology, as well as insight into the nature of things, the realm of impersonal truths about existence. I think it's from this level that our lives can deeply change and our relationship to the problems in our life and our suffering can deeply shift.

So I really encourage you to reflect on and trust in the power of your intuition. It's a much more potent force than rationality for really making a change in life. This is a quotation from Albert Einstein: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We've created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Meditation is one way we can really restore that balance. I think it's a very powerful way to reactivate our intuitions, really bring them into our life as a stable, ongoing source of wisdom and understanding. The stillness of mindfulness brings us that channel to access that intuitive place much more reliably over time.

At first, this quality of mindfulness doesn't seem like such a big deal. If I know I'm having a breath, it doesn't seem like it's going to have that much impact. But as we do it, moment after moment after moment, it builds up to a tremendous power. Part of that power is to find this stillness that's out of the flood of thinking—the memories, the fantasies, the future imaginings, the anxieties, the regrets, the remorse, the fears. All that wave of thought activity and all the emotions that get stirred up with it can start to settle just through this moment-to-moment contact.

The way the Buddha expressed this was to say that mindfulness can dam any flood. Mindfulness can stop any flood. When I think about all the changes I've experienced through about thirty years of meditation now, this is one of the most striking as I look at my actual experience. The force of thoughts is so much weaker than it was when I started meditating. It's not that I don't think anymore, but they are not so

overpowering. The place of peace and stillness is usually not very far away at all. Usually, most of the time, it's really quite accessible.

This kind of access to peace and this foundation of calm creates a sense of well-being and a lot more space in life, so that we're able to accommodate the bumps that come and hopefully have enough clarity and balance to continue to make wise choices when those bumps come.

One other comment I wanted to make: sometimes the breath can be quite hard to find, and you may feel frustrated in your inability to be with it because maybe the mind has gotten dull, or on the other extreme, maybe the mind's gotten really active. In both those cases, it can be very hard to even find the breath, much less sustain the attention on it. You might think, "Oh, there's no way to be mindful now. I've lost my object. I can't really be present."

If that happens, remember that there is another option than the breath to which you can pay attention. In that case, back up just a step and ask yourself, "Well, what's really going on in my experience?" It's a way of stepping back and taking a broader view of what's going on. In that broader view, just ask, "What's happening now?" Maybe you'll see the mind is dull. Maybe you'll see there's sleepiness or fatigue in the body. Maybe you'll see that there's restlessness or that the mind is very agitated, lots of thoughts and lots of emotions.

Knowing that is also mindfulness. In this moment, my experience is sleepiness, dullness, restlessness, agitation. It doesn't have the fine detail of mindfulness of sensations, but it's also knowing our experience. So when the fine detail isn't available, back up and be with the broad picture. "Oh, this is what's happening now. This is my experience." And the mindfulness will continue to develop.

Because fundamentally—I hope you know, I hope all of you know, you've all done retreats before—mindfulness is not about breathing. Liberation is not just about the breath. Sometimes people who've been meditating for a while get the idea that if they were good Vipassana practitioners, good mindfulness practitioners, they'd be with the breath all the time. When they're not, when they have to be with a body pain or thoughts or some mood, it's because they've really failed and wandered away from where they really should be, which is the breath. This is really a misunderstanding, and I hope that you don't share it.

The point—and I think Carol said this this morning—is not about the breath, it's about awareness. We can find that awareness with any aspect of our experience. We start with the breath because it's fairly neutral and it's mostly accessible for most people, so it's a convenient object to begin with just to develop this quality of presence. But we want to then take it and open it up to all of our experience. We'll do that over the next several days—to other body sensations, to emotions, to thoughts, to feeling tone, to intention—because finally, release from suffering doesn't come from being a good breather. It comes from understanding the mind.

We really want to understand how our minds take us into suffering and how we can release that suffering that's created by the mind. So in the big picture, we want to develop this keen-looking mind, this close moment-to-moment attention, sharpen it on simple objects like breath and body, but we want to include more and more the activities of mind because that's truly where we get caught and that's where we can get released. Without making that pointing to mind, we can just be stuck in some technical feat of meditation that may not release us in the way that we're looking for.

As we open up over the days to come, I hope you'll really understand and appreciate that practice is central, not a distraction from what is central. As we start to expand, as we start to look more closely at the breath and all the other phenomena, we want to really understand the characteristics of what we're experiencing. The quality of rubbing or sustaining does this to a certain extent. As you rub your awareness on whatever phenomenon you're experiencing—the breath, the sensation, an emotion—you will automatically start to pick up the qualities of that experience.

In a sensation, you'll know its qualities of being hot or cold or rough or smooth, hard or soft. As you start to get into emotions, you'll understand the difference between irritation, impatience, anger, hatred, ill will. By rubbing the awareness against those states again and again, you'll understand the distinction between loving-kindness and compassion.

So the individual characteristics will become clear to you, but you'll also start to see the impersonal characteristics—you might say the universal characteristics of all these phenomena. You'll start to see their natures of arising and passing, their natures of disintegration, their natures of insubstantiality, of uncontrollability, of unreliability, of there being no owner or no center to all this experience.

The doorway to this kind of seeing is just from this close moment-to-moment attention to the various phenomena in our experience. And it's that rubbing of the awareness with our direct experience that is the ground for insight—the insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, that themselves are just the doorway to the opening to the unconditioned, to nibbana. And that contact is said to be the most deeply liberating of all.

And that's why the Buddha closed the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness with this statement: "Friends, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, and for the realization of nirvana—namely, the establishment of mindfulness."

When we come to the end of a talk, we like to just sit for maybe a minute in silence together just to let the words settle. So please, we'll just sit comfortably for a few moments now.

This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nirvana—namely, the establishment of mindfulness.

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