Mindfulness

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:02:52

Tonight's talk is about mindfulness.

When Trungpa Rinpoche, the well-known Tibetan Buddhist master, was asked the essence of the teachings, he would say, "It's very simple. It's simply the teaching of openness, complete openness." And complete openness really isn't any different than complete letting go. So Annie was right last night when she said that all of our talks would in some way be talking about letting go. Trungpa Rinpoche would also say, "Turn towards everything."

What supports this openness and this ability to turn towards everything is mindfulness—this direct, present-time, nonjudgmental awareness of life as it unfolds. This openness means a deep connection with life as it is. And this is what we yearn for, whether we know it or not, because it's peace.

There's a poem that reminds me of this yearning, which I'd like to read. It's by Robert Penn Warren, called "Ornithology in a World of Flux":

It was only a bird call at evening, unidentified,
as I came from the spring with water,
across the rocky back pasture;
but so still I stood,
sky above was not stiller than sky and pale water.
Years pass, all places and faces fade,
some people have died,
and I stand in a far land, the evening still,
and I'm at last sure that I miss more that stillness at bird call
than some things that were to fail later.

We yearn for a deep connection with life, a deep connection with peace and with stillness. Meditation is about waking up to presence, to aliveness, and to connection in the present moment so that we can learn from that connection. We can learn what brings the deepest kind of happiness to our lives, what brings suffering. So it's a training in presence and a training in learning.

Mindfulness doesn't mean that we're pushing for something or rejecting something else, but actually that we're allowing—awake, curious, and open to what arises in experience. The goal of our spiritual practice is freedom of heart and mind, a heart and mind that isn't contracted or fettered, restricted in any way, one that lets go. This freedom of heart and mind is as wide as the world—a heart and mind that can include

everything, that can accept the full range of life's expression without any contraction. Sometimes it's said: the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, the laughter and the tears, the sunshine and the rain clouds—all of it.

This freedom of heart and mind is developed by seeing deeply the true nature of reality, of this life, this universe, or even this mind-heart-body process. And there are two qualities that really support us in seeing deeply. These are the qualities of concentration and mindfulness. They work together. I like to think of them perhaps as two wheels on a bicycle. You hope that both wheels are going the same direction, that they're working together. In our practice, we balance concentration and mindfulness so that they pull together, they work together.

I'll talk first a little bit about concentration, though most of the talk will be about mindfulness.

To develop concentration, we often start with connecting with an anchor, like we were talking about today with the breath. That's the most common anchor. The anchor is a tool that helps us connect with the present moment. It gives us a place or an experience to come back to when we're lost. It's a way of gathering the attention, gathering our usual scattered attention, bringing it home.

It's really important to remember that the anchor is just a tool. It's not the goal of our practice. Sometimes we get fixated on whether we can stay with the breath, how long we can stay with the breath, how many breaths we can stay with. That can become like the goal of our practice. But it's just a tool. It's a foundation for establishing contact with our senses. It's a way of reconnecting when we're lost, coming back to the anchor.

We need an anchor that feels comfortable, or we're not going to want to come back to it. We need an anchor that feels either neutral or slightly pleasant—sometimes I even say an anchor that feels safe. Because if we have an anchor that's unpleasant to us, we're going to keep fleeing it.

The breath is traditionally given as the most common anchor. But for some people, that doesn't work. The experience of the breath is unpleasant. There's a tightness or controlling, and it doesn't feel like a place where one can relax. If that's true, then we use an alternative anchor. Sometimes we'll use the anchor of the whole body sitting and then the hands touching: body sitting, hands touching. It's another way to come back. Or sometimes we'll use the anchor of hearing, just opening up the attention wide and allowing sounds to come and go. Hearing as an anchor.

So having an anchor helps unite our scattered energy. It increases the power of our mindfulness, that unity of attention. We go from multitasking, which is very surface-like—when we're doing a lot of different things and going a lot of different ways at one time, we can't go deep with anything. So we're moving from multitasking to unitasking, just doing one thing, and that helps to bring power and depth to our practice.

For those of you who've just arrived here, most likely you didn't feel like you had a whole lot of

concentration today. I read somewhere on the internet that somebody described the first few days of a long meditation retreat as like being stuck in a phone booth with a raving lunatic—and that lunatic is our very own self. So don't feel bad if you're feeling a little scattered.

For me, for quite a while in my early long retreats, the first day I would be in complete panic. I would have all kinds of doubt: I shouldn't be here, I can't do this, I'm going to go crazy. I got so used to it that I just started calling it my "24-hour panic," and I quit believing it, and it was fine. So if you're having a 24-hour panic, don't worry about it—it passes.

After giving several alternatives for an anchor, I want to point out that it's quite helpful to really choose one, to have one anchor that is your primary anchor. It helps to train the attention and to train the mind if we know where we're coming back. If every time you're lost in thought you wake up and then think, "Well, maybe I'll go to the breath this time, or maybe I'll go to the body this time, or hearing this time," it's not going to help unite the energy, unite the attention.

Sometimes I say it's like training wild horses—and our mind is sometimes compared to a wild horse. If you're training wild horses to come to a corral, and you change the position of the corral and move it around to different places, the horses are not going to get trained. So having one primary anchor is most helpful.

Concentration builds by coming back, returning over and over again. It doesn't build by an attempt to hang on to our anchor—it can't be forced. It builds every time we wake up and come back. So the effort is really in the moment that we wake up out of a mind story. You're lost somewhere, dreaming about this or that, planning this, remembering that, and suddenly you realize, "Oh yeah, I'm meditating." You wake up. The moment of work, you could say, is the choice not to indulge in that thinking—not to say, "Oh well, that was a really nice fantasy, let's just go back there"—but to actually choose to reestablish present-time awareness in the present moment. And one way you can do that is by coming back to the anchor. Later in the structure instructions, we'll talk about a more open awareness.

We're trying to develop a sense of being fully and wholeheartedly present, because really the present moment is the only time in which we have to be alive and to discover freedom for ourselves. So we're trying to train ourselves to be here.

One mistake we often make is thinking that we can control whether we go off into thought. During my first three-month retreat, I got pretty upset with myself. I thought I was a very bad meditator because I could follow a couple breaths and then I would be off in thought. I thought I was supposed to stop the thought and be able to come back to the breath. Finally I went into one of my interviews, complaining about what a bad meditator I was and how I couldn't stay with the breath. My teacher at that time was Sharon, and she said, "You know, you can't control whether you go off into thought. The only moment you have some choice is that moment of waking up, and then you can choose whether you want to indulge or not in the thought."

I was so relieved. I thought, "Oh, I can do that. I can make the choice to not indulge in the thought and come back to my anchor." That was doable. It was such a great relief.

It's also important to know that we're not trying to get rid of thought. I'll talk about this a lot more in another talk, but we're trying to understand the nature of thought and understand how we can unhook from being lost in thought—we're not trying to get rid of it. But concentration does grow by being willing to let go of the stories of our mind, to not feed them, to not indulge in them.

When we develop some concentration, when we have an increased ability to be present—less scattered, less lost in the hindrances and the stories of the mind—it's quite pleasant. We tend to like it. We may feel secluded and somewhat free from the hindrances. But sometimes we like it a bit too much. We become attached to it and think that this is the way to freedom. And while concentration is an important quality and necessary for our spiritual path, it's not on its own the way to freedom. It has a weakness in that it's dependent on circumstances. The kind of freedom that we're looking for is free of dependency on circumstances.

You may have noticed that concentration is kind of fickle. Some of you who've been here for six weeks may have noticed a few blips on your concentration radar in the last few days, because it's fickle. When circumstances change and new things come along, concentration tends to diminish. This is one reason why we recommend that people don't read or write—the stimulus of reading and writing disturbs concentration. Monastic conditions, like we have here, foster concentration. They support it: the silence, the relative lack of responsibilities.

the slowed-down pace—all of that supports concentration.

So what we want to do with concentration is harness its energy, its power, to help us see more deeply how things are. And for this, we use momentary concentration. Momentary concentration is the ability to be present for whatever arises, moment after moment. It's not fixed on one thing like the breath, but rather it's aware, moment after moment, of whatever is arising, whatever is present. Momentary concentration is the mind unified on changing experiences that arise moment after moment. It's freer. It's not restricted to one thing.

Sometimes I say concentration gets us to the park and mindfulness smells the roses. This is how they work together. Concentration deepens the power of mindfulness. With concentration, we arrive here, and with mindfulness, we pay attention to what's happening once we're here. Repeated moments of mindfulness develop concentration and bring out the power of presence, out of which insight emerges.

I want to read a story. One of the retreats that I teach here is the teen retreat, and one of the yogis wrote something after his retreat. He called it "The Power of Presence":

"Last summer, during a sit towards the end of the teen retreat, I was going about my normal routine—settling the mind, focusing on the breath, and letting ambient sounds come and go. Suddenly, I

experienced a first in my meditation practice. I was uncontrollably happy. Feelings of total relaxation, of fullness, of being in the right place and doing the right thing were produced. Experiencing this happiness was extremely powerful. It wasn't about beating a video game or buying a new pair of shoes, but was pure joy in its simplest form—joy about nothing at all. Added to this was the awesome presence of sixty other teenagers meditating all around me. I was radiating positive energy. I was at the pinnacle of my spiritual, mind-altering high. Breathe in, breathe out. And a couple of minutes later, I was back to the struggle of staying in the present. While this deep happiness only lasted a short time, it was gratifying to know how rewarding it is. It has given me the curiosity to become mindful on a day-to-day basis, whether it's taking a deep breath every so often to remind myself of now, or noticing subtle scenes of beauty while walking down a sidewalk."

Just breathing in, breathing out, not trying to make anything particular happen—and then insight arose that it's possible to experience a happiness that isn't dependent on things, on having things, on doing something particular. Insight arises. It was a paradigm shift for him, important just from sitting and being with the breath and whatever else comes up.

So let's shift into talking a little more about mindfulness, or *sati* in the Pali language. Mindfulness is, as I said, present-time, non-conceptual, non-judgmental attention to our experience. So what do we become aware of with mindfulness? What is our experience?

I'm convinced that when I was about fourteen years old, I was actually doing Vipassana and didn't know what it was. I used to go camping with my family at that age. I come from a large family—there are eight of us—and my dad liked to take us camping. We could all bring a friend, so there would be about fourteen or fifteen young people. We were all within eight years of each other, so it was a very big crowd. We used to go camping on land that a friend of my dad's owned north of Minneapolis, and we had a lot of fun. We'd play games, and we'd have a girls' campsite and a boys' campsite and a little kids' campsite.

But there was something I really enjoyed doing away from everybody else. There was a meadow there, and I would go to it and sit under a tree. I would do an exercise that I called "finding myself." I was just exploring, trying to understand what it meant to find myself. And what I learned from sitting there and paying attention was that when I attended to seeing or hearing or smelling or sensing, I felt like I'd found myself. And when I was lost in thought, in some other world, I felt like I'd missed it.

So basically what we do in Vipassana meditation is pay attention to these senses that I mentioned. We pay attention to the human experience of life: the five traditional senses we think of in the West—tasting, smelling, seeing, hearing, and tactile—and then the sense door of the mind. In Buddhist cultures, the mind is considered a sense too.

So the experiences of body and mind—that's what we pay attention to. That's it. That's life. Tell me if you find something else.

We come out of living in some kind of dream or substitute reality and arrive at the level of our experience through the six senses. You could say awakening is coming to our senses. Experience the breath, the pressure of the foot on the floor, the sound of the wind, the taste of rice. Toni Packer says presence is the whole world just as it is, moment by moment.

Mindfulness frees us from the past and the future. Presence is this moment just as it is. The Zen master Dogen from many centuries ago said that in twenty-four hours there are six trillion four hundred million mind moments that we can experience. So we have lots of opportunities during the day to reconnect to what our experience is.

I'm reading this interesting book called *The Feeling of What Happens* by a neurologist named Antonio Damasio. He's really interested in how the brain constructs a sense of self. So if you're just arriving, this might be a bit much. You might be thinking, "Well, I'm still trying to make sure I know where my room is, and she's going to start talking about brain psychology and how we create our sense of self." But just hang on. Don't worry if it gets a little complicated.

Damasio talks about core consciousness and extended consciousness. He describes three kinds, but the two we're going to be interested in are core consciousness and extended consciousness, which create either what he calls the core self or the autobiographical self.

The core self that he has studied is the self created moment after moment through contact with the senses, with experience, the sense experience, and the knowing that comes with the arising of sense experience. He talks about it just like Buddhists do—fresh each moment, a process that unfolds. No past, no future, just the moment unfolding, each moment of sense experience and the knowing of it. He calls that the core self, though I'll put "self" in quotes. He even admits that it's not any kind of permanent self; it's this changing process.

Then he talks about another level called extended consciousness, which creates the autobiographical self. The autobiographical self is the story of who we are. It includes the remembered past and the anticipated future, our memories and how they relate to a coherent sense of who we think we are and how we put it all together. This extended self, this autobiographical self, tries to make sense of reality and actually freezes reality so that it's manageable. The concepts, the stories we tell about ourselves—it's a way of trying to freeze reality so that we can pay the bills, basically, so that we can control life enough to make sense of it. But it's a bit removed from that fundamental reality, that core reality of the changing sense experiences. It's conceptual.

He also talks about a phenomenon some of you have probably experienced. I call it the sportscaster—that voice in the mind that gives a running commentary of what's going on: "Now she's doing this, and now she's doing that." He describes this as part of the autobiographical self, part of how it makes sense of the world through that kind of background chatter we can sometimes hear in our minds.

If we keep our investigation at the level of the autobiographical self, we can learn many useful things about our personality and our particular habits. We might work through some of the stories we carry from our past. But if we want the deepest liberation teachings of the Buddha, we have to be willing to relinquish this level of story or self and drop down into that other level—bare attention, the moment-after-moment unfolding of sense experience and the knowing of it.

Because this core self, this unfolding moment by moment, this level of mindfulness and attention, unfreezes reality. It lets us see reality as it is, which is continually changing. This unfreezing of reality reveals the true nature of this wild, changing, ungraspable life. Paying attention on this level is what teaches us to let go, what brings the deepest kind of happiness.

It's said that mindfulness as an enlightenment factor is mindfulness aware of the rising and passing away of phenomena. So if you want the most value for your dollar here, this is the level we're interested in—this nonverbal experience of the changing process of life. Change as a lived experience, lived mindfully each moment.

Because then we start to see that hanging on causes suffering and letting go brings peace. We see that automatically when we recognize that change is continuous. It's like a hot potato. Somebody puts a burning hot potato in your hand, and you let it go. When we see this process of continual change, we see that attachment is burning, it's suffering.

So I said we relinquish or let go of the autobiographical level of self.

So do notice, please, that I didn't say we repress it or squelch it or get averse to it or try to get rid of it, because that also feeds it. Anything that we react to, we actually give more power to. But we have some choice at times. Are we going to spend our time thinking about our lives, or are we going to spend our time experiencing the moment-to-moment arising of experience? Are we going to make the choice to come back to that simplicity?

So it may mean we have to let go of our expectations or our plans or the self-improvement projects that we may have brought with us. But it's worth it. We get a lot more value for our dollar that way. But it's kind of radical. It takes a certain amount of trust. It takes a lot of trust. The great thing is we're in a safe place where we can do that—amazing circumstances that make it possible for us to do that.

Sometimes we talk about mindfulness, and at times it can seem kind of dry or even like a chore, like something we have to do to make ourselves better. So I've played around at times with not calling it mindfulness but calling it heartfulness. In East Asian cultures, mind and heart are the same word. We've just translated it as mindfulness, but we could just as easily translate it as heartfulness. Now, for some of you, heartfulness—you'll be going, "No, I don't think so." Mindfulness is a better word for you. But if mindfulness starts to feel too dry, what's it like to think of relating to our lives with heartfulness? There's that wholehearted feeling with that word. So we're looking for what helps us arrive in the present

moment with energy and curiosity, connection, interest.

One way to talk about mindfulness is using a word that my teacher Michelle coined: RAIN. R-A-I-N, using each letter as an aspect of mindfulness. This can help us deepen our understanding of it.

First, we have R for recognition. We need to know what's happening. One aspect of mindfulness is just to know what is happening. Sometimes we can use mental noting to help us with this if we feel like we don't know what's happening. Greg talked about it a little bit with the walking today—stepping, stepping, or lifting, placing, lifting, moving, placing. With the breath: in, out. Hearing. Thinking. So we note what our experience is, and it can help us sometimes if we're feeling confused. We'll talk more about that in the instructions as we go along.

The A in RAIN is for acceptance. With mindfulness, we practice connecting to experience as it is—not how we think it should be or how it was or how it will be or how we want it to be or how it ought to be, but how it is. So we develop this non-judgmental attention, attention that isn't judging each moment as something we want to keep or get rid of, as great or bad.

I think of this as openness with the flavor of mettā, loving-kindness or love. Jon Kabat-Zinn says mindfulness is a radical act of love, and this acceptance part of RAIN is pointing towards that. It's said that mindfulness arises in conjunction with many wholesome mind states, and one of them is non-anger, which is one way that mettā is often described. So mindfulness arises with mettā.

This acceptance is developing an intimate relationship with our experience, getting to know it intimately. It's not about creating the perfect state, but about connecting to what is with a sense of kindness. Sometimes I talk about a kindness-infused awareness. Our attention, our awareness is often very judgmental. It's like each moment: Is this okay? Do I want it? Do I not want it? Do I want to keep it? Do I want to get rid of it? How do I want it to be different? I remember going through a period in my practice where every breath was judged this way. It was really quick, but every breath was like, "Was that breath okay? Did I follow it okay?"

Just this sense of trying to get everything right, everything perfect. With mindfulness, we relax. We relax into what is. The intention is to understand rather than to judge.

There's a story about Suzuki Roshi one day talking to a group of students, and he said, "You're all perfect just as you are, and you have some work to do." I really like that balance. The "perfect just as we are" means that our experience is good enough, that what is arising is okay, that we can embrace it, allow it. And yes, we do have a little work to do—that part's true too, or we wouldn't be here. But we learn how to work with our difficulties with kindness rather than a sense of harshness or needing to get rid of things. In my experience, all change, all true change, comes from this deep acceptance, this true transformation.

So R-A-I—the I is for interest. Mindfulness is a deep awareness. It's sometimes said that it's not superficial but deep. In the Buddhist scriptures, it's said to have the characteristic of not wobbling, of sinking into the

object. What do I mean by deep? Mindfulness is not satisfied with a breath as a concept but is actually about experiencing the breath directly.

The four kinds of breath we were talking about this morning—it's interesting how the Buddha laid them out, because you could say that the first one is the lightest level of mindfulness, just knowing if we're breathing in or out. There's some concept there, right? The conceptual level of "Oh, I'm breathing in and out." But then by the time you get to the third breath, experiencing the full body of the breath, that's the level of bare attention, of deeper mindfulness. You're actually feeling the breath.

At first, when I was thinking about this, the first three seemed like deepening mindfulness, and then I wondered about the fourth one, calming the breath body. But I realized that fits too, because the deepest seeing comes out of relaxation, the deepest relaxation. So calming the breath body—the purpose is so that we can see clearly from that place of relaxation and calm. When we say that mindfulness is a deep kind of awareness, it's dropping from conceptual to lived experience, from conceptual to direct sense experience.

With this interest in mindfulness, we're learning to see with fresh eyes. We assume so much about the things we experience, and it actually leads to a kind of blindness. This story really hit home for me a number of years ago. I used to work quite a bit in a community mental health center in the inner city—I'm a psychotherapist also. Because I speak Spanish and there's a very large Puerto Rican population where I worked, most of my clients were Puerto Rican, and some of them hadn't been in the country very long.

So one day I was talking to one of the people I worked with, and she was looking out the window. All of a sudden she says, "Rebecca, there's this beautiful bird out there!" She was just amazed. So I go over and look out the window and I said, "Oh, that's just a blue jay. They're common." I was really struck by my response afterward. I thought about it—who saw the bird? She saw the bird, because she was looking with fresh eyes. I didn't see the bird. I saw my idea of a blue jay.

This is how we live a lot. We live in our assumptions that we know what an experience is because of our past knowledge about it. With mindfulness, we're trying to bring in enough freshness and a willingness to not know what an experience is, so we can actually experience it. I knew so much that I didn't experience that blue jay.

So we come to a breath, right? We assume that we know a breath. How much do we actually experience the breath when we think we already know it? Check it out for yourself. We're trying to develop what we call beginner's mind.

I like to look at birds, which is also interesting given what I said about the blue jay. My partner and I like to go bird watching and identify birds. When I met him, he'd already been doing it for a while, so he was showing me the tricks of the trade. A number of times in our early time together looking at birds, he would see a bird and assume he knew what it was, that it wasn't any big deal. Me being a beginner, I was still curious. I would want to look a little more.

On a number of occasions, it would actually be a different bird than he thought—and a less common bird than he thought. But I was seeing with beginner's eyes, so I could see it. He was seeing with eyes that already knew, so he didn't see it.

This is what we're trying to cultivate: seeing with beginner's eyes.

A number of years ago, I went to an exhibit of paintings by Monet in Boston. He's an impressionist painter, as most of you probably know. He painted the same pond with lilies in it for thirty-five years, and they had a sequence of these paintings on display. It was just fascinating to watch how the lilies changed over the years. In the first paintings, they look like lilies—it's like he was painting his idea of lilies at first. But as the years go along, they look less and less like lilies and more and more like what he was actually, really seeing. It's fascinating. It's like watching the development of mindfulness in someone over the years. And the wonderful thing is that he was curious—he just kept being curious for thirty-five years, painting the same pond, though not the same lilies, obviously.

Can we be that curious with our breath? Even if we've been meditating twenty or thirty years, can we still be curious? What is a breath? What is a breath, really, rather than our ideas about it?

We tend to live in our thoughts and ideas and concepts about life, somewhat removed from direct experience. With mindfulness, we're learning to connect to the experience that is new in each moment. Wei Wu Wei says we worship the teapot instead of drinking the tea. Rumi said, "Sell your cleverness and purchase bewilderment." We're all a bit too clever. There's a way that to really drop into the mystery of meditation, we have to give up knowing.

So with mindfulness, with this interest, we become deeply interested in experience—very inclusive of whatever experience arises.

I've spent several Januarys at the Chanmyay Monastery in Upper Burma, where both Andrea and Greg have also been many times and taught. I've been there both as a teacher and a yogi. The first year I was there, the Burmese Sayadaw U Lakkhana gave two talks—an hour and fifteen minutes long each—on working with the pain in your buttocks when you sit for a long time. I thought perhaps he made us sit that long because he wanted us to know what he was talking about. But I found it fascinating that he could talk that long about working with the pain in your buttocks. That's interest.

Then he trumped it the next time I was there. I believe it was six talks on half of a step. That's interest. Can we get that interested?

So in RAIN, the N is for non-identification and non-clinging. Bhante Ji says mindfulness is a non-egotistic awareness—we don't add the "I."

This quality is about noticing and learning about attachment and stickiness, about how we appropriate experiences and make them "me" and "mine." Usually when an experience arises, we say things like,

"That's my knee, and my knee hurts," or "I'm angry—I'm an angry person." We take experience that's arising and appropriate it as "me." In that way, it becomes sticky. That's what I call the attachment—it's sticky.

For example, anger that arises becomes "I am angry" and "I'm an angry person." But what happens with mindfulness and wisdom is that we start to change that from "I am angry and I'm an angry person" to "Oh, anger has arisen due to circumstances and will pass away when circumstances change."

Non-identification is understanding impermanence, understanding that everything arises due to circumstances and then passes away when circumstances change. It's not me or mine. It's not some solid "me" that it's happening to. It's all flowing and changing.

Obviously we need much more discussion on this subject—this is just a taste here. But when we can start to let go of identification, we find there's so much more space in the mind, so much more ease. We don't freeze the passing show. We don't make it solid.

We unfreeze reality. We let it flow.

So R-A-I-N: recognition, acceptance, interest, and non-identification.

Mindfulness has many benefits. First of all, it makes transformation possible. Without mindfulness, our conditioning just rolls on in its own usual way, and it keeps rolling and rolling. Mindfulness gives us the chance to make different choices, to learn, to develop wisdom. Out of all of this, transformation arises.

It's said in the scriptures that the function of mindfulness is the absence of madness or confusion. So it's the ultimate recipe for sanity, mindfulness. Sometimes it's said that it manifests as protection. The analogy often used is that of a security guard, or in the scriptures, it's a gatekeeper at the city. The gatekeeper decides what should be able to come in, what should go out, and kind of keeps an eye on what's going on in the city as a form of protection. Or another analogy I've heard is that of a nanny. A nanny keeps the children out of trouble, right? So mindfulness keeps us out of trouble, protects us.

But ultimately, mindfulness is so powerful, and its greatest benefit is that it allows us to see life as it is—not as we think it is, but as it actually is. We can read about how life is and we can read about transformation, but true transformation has to come from that ability to connect with our direct experience and to learn for ourselves. And mindfulness lets us do that.

In the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, they talk about the proximate cause of different conditions to arise. The proximate cause is the condition or the circumstances that make another thing happen or arise. So the proximate cause of mindfulness is mindfulness. What that means is that each moment of mindfulness conditions further moments of mindfulness. Each time—and this is very good news—each time you have a moment of mindfulness, you are conditioning and encouraging future moments of mindfulness.

This is great, too, because sometimes when we are lost for a long time, feeling like we haven't been the best meditator in the world, we wake up and come back, and we think, "Oh, I'm such a bad meditator, I've been gone so long," and we can kind of berate ourselves. Actually, that's a moment to be really happy about, that moment when you woke up. Because that's a moment of mindfulness. You know what's happening. And that's going to condition further moments of mindfulness. So try that kind of switch in your mind rather than getting down on yourself when you wake up after being gone a long time. It's like, "Oh yeah, mindfulness, great! I'm creating the circumstances for more mindfulness."

Another proximate cause given for mindfulness, for the arising of mindfulness, is hanging out with mindful people. And so here we are—there's about eighty of us plus the staff, so we have over a hundred mindful people, or people committed to developing mindfulness, and we're all here together. Now that's pretty rare. But what it means is that our presence together is supporting each other's mindfulness. We're supporting each other's mindfulness by practicing this together, by our commitment together. So in some way, each moment of mindfulness we each have is like a gift to our entire community. We have that powerful support and help.

Mindfulness is also supported by slowing down. I read an interesting quote a while ago. It was by a poet named Jim Harrison, and he said that a Native American friend told him, "Life is actually seven times slower than the way we live it," which I find intriguing. So here we get to slow down, right? Perhaps live life at the pace he was talking about—I don't know. But I do know that slowing down does help us to be mindful.

You'll notice that even though you don't have that much you need to do here, at times there's going to be that urgency, right? You're going to be walking along and think, "Oh, why do I have to get there?" There will be that kind of leaning forward—we're so used to that habit. So we can notice when that arises and say, "Ah, this is like a mindfulness bell. I don't need to do this." Settle back. Here. What's happening? Just this moment. Instead of working on the gross national product here—somebody said that in meditation we're working on the subtle national product. So slow down and work on the subtle national product.

Ultimately, mindfulness helps us develop wisdom and love.

It gives us the possibility of learning to live with love instead of learning to live with judgment and aversion. The possibility of developing connection instead of living in disconnection. The possibility of learning freedom instead of living in bondage. And the possibility of spreading peace in this world instead of spreading greed and hatred.

I'd like to end with a short story that I found and enjoy. It's from a book called *Buddhist Acts of Compassion*.

There's a story about Khenpo Rinpoche and his first time in the United States at a beach. It must have been the first time Khenpo had seen the beach and observed exactly what Westerners do there. When he came

back to the monastery, he began to give dharma teachings about the eight worldly pitfalls—pleasure and pain, loss and gain, fame and shame, praise and blame. And then suddenly he started talking about the ocean and the beach, and how he and Tuko had gone to the very edge of the ocean.

"It was so big," he said in almost childlike awe, calling it something like "King Trident's house, the house of the king of the ocean."

And then he excitedly described what he had seen. "There were these people there, and instead of sitting and meditating or doing yoga, these people were just lying there, almost naked, and doing nothing. And when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. And then they lay there again for another few hours."

Khenpo was truly, genuinely perplexed. "Why were they doing that?" he asked over and over. Though he couldn't understand it, he had so much compassion for them. "How could they waste their precious human existence," he continued, "this life that is so short, so tenuous, so precious, so valuable, so necessary—a life not to be squandered but to be used impeccably and usefully for the benefit and welfare of all—not just to lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard."

Khenpo was sincerely impassioned now. "I just wanted to go wake them up." Then he noticed that there was a big white chair about fifty meters away, obviously the lifeguard's post. "But there were two young people sitting there," he said, "so I couldn't go up there. But I wanted badly to, because I wanted to climb up there and announce to everyone that it was time to wake up."

So you wouldn't really be at the beach right now anyway—not in Massachusetts—but Khenpo would be proud of you.

Let's sit for a minute.

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