What Mindfulness Is and What It Isn't

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 58:42

Given the explosion of interest in mindfulness during these past few years, I thought it would be helpful to explore some of the nuances and subtleties of what mindfulness actually is and what it isn't. There's often some confusion about what mindfulness means, and it's important to understand the meaning or essence of it as a methodology for liberation. That's why we're practicing it.

As you know, the practice of mindfulness has its roots in the teachings of the Buddha 2,600 years ago, and it's quite amazing to see its relevance and application these thousands of years later. Clearly there's something of critical importance in understanding this mind state.

I was once asked to describe mindfulness in just a few words. That's a bit like asking someone to describe in a few words what art is, or what love is. It's not easy to break it down into just a few brief sentences. The first response that often comes to mind for most people when asked "What is mindfulness?" is "Well, it's living in the present moment—not being lost or carried away by our thoughts, not living in the past, not living in the future." This is a good place to start. That's the starting place for what mindfulness is: living in the present moment. But that by itself is not enough.

There's something I call "black lab consciousness." You're familiar with the dogs—Black Labs or Golden Retrievers. They're very friendly, very playful, really a delight to be with. But when you watch them, they are in the present moment. They're not in the past, they're not in the future. They're just engaged with their sense objects. What I'm about to say may be a projection, but I think it's true: they don't look very mindful. They're in the present, but there's something missing in terms of mindfulness.

So what is it that's missing? There's a Portuguese poet named Fernando Pessoa, and the first few lines of one of his poems really captured my attention in this regard. He said: "Live, you say, in the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality." This points to something essential—that living in the present is not sufficient. It's necessary, but not sufficient.

So what takes us from black lab consciousness to the quality of mind that actually leads us to awakening? One added element which we bring into living in the present is that observing power of the mind where we know that we're knowing. We're not just lost in different experiences; we actually know that we're knowing. We might call this metacognition—a kind of stepping back or understanding, being aware that we're aware.

One way of understanding this very clearly is seeing the difference in your experience between being lost in a thought and being aware that you're thinking. In both cases, thoughts are happening. Thoughts are

the object; that's what the experience of thinking is. But in the first situation, we're not aware that we're thinking—we're totally caught up in it. In the second, thinking is still there, but there's awareness: thinking, thinking. We know that we're thinking. This is that added observing power of the mind.

Sometimes this is easiest to experience in walking meditation or just walking about. Have you ever gone five or ten or fifteen steps without even knowing that you're walking, lost in some train of thought, some ideation? We can go for quite a distance—ten steps, fifteen steps later—and then: "Oh, I've been thinking." In all that time, we were not aware either that we were thinking or what our bodily experience was. We've just been subsumed in being lost.

This observing power of mindfulness, when we know that we're knowing what's there, opens up some really interesting possibilities of investigation. And one of my favorites, which has profound implications—

Is the simple inquiry, the question: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, not the content, but what is a thought as a phenomenon?

This is a question not very many people ask themselves. We go through our whole lives thinking, and maybe occasionally being aware that we're thinking, but how often do we really look at the thought and ask, "Well, what is it? What actually is happening?"

It's fascinating because when we ask that question—what is a thought?—we see that it's little more than nothing. It's just like an energy wisp in the mind that comes and goes, so insubstantial. And yet when we're not aware that we're thinking, thoughts have this tremendous power in our lives. They are dictating our lives. They're like little dictators in the mind: do this, do that, go here, go there, get married, get divorced, whatever. Our thoughts are running us, running our lives. They have all this power when we're unaware of what a thought is as a phenomenon.

And yet as soon as we drop in and look to see—okay, what is the nature of thought, not the content, not the story—we see that there's hardly anything there. To see this repeatedly and to understand it repeatedly begins to free us from being so dominated by this particular mental activity. We get much more familiar as different thoughts come, and many are very seductive; they pull us in. But we begin to know in a deeper and deeper way: this thought is completely insubstantial.

My first teacher, Anagarika Munindra-ji, had a wonderful line. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother—it's a thought." But we forget this. We have all these thoughts about people and things and events, and we think it's the thing itself or the person itself. Then we get all entangled in whatever our response is to that person or situation, forgetting that the thought of whatever is not the whatever. It's just a thought. And the thought in and of itself is completely insubstantial.

When we carry that awareness, then it becomes possible to really make wise choices. We can discern: Is this thought helpful? Should I act on it? Is it onward leading, or is it not? Is it just causing us trouble? As

we investigate this, we really open up a great space of freedom in our minds.

But even this—this knowing that we're knowing, even being aware of the very nature of thought—is not enough. We haven't yet quite come to the fullness of mindfulness. Because we can be observing our experience, present and knowing what's happening, but very often we're experiencing whatever is arising through various filters in the mind. It might be through the filter of wanting or desire. We're aware of what's there, but there's that greed or wanting in the mind. Or it might be aversion, resistance. Or it might be delusion.

The Buddha gave some very vivid similes for each of these filters. It would be interesting when you hear them to remember them or bring them into your practice, to actually get a sense of how the simile fits your own experience. The Buddha said: there is no fire like lust, no grip like anger, no net like delusion.

It's very interesting when we become aware of these mind states as they come—lust or desire, anger or aversion, the fog of delusion—to really get the felt sense. This is a fire. Anger, with the grip of it on our minds. Or the net of delusion.

A contemporary teaching describes it in slightly different language: greed is pulling in, aversion is pushing away, delusion is running around in circles. I find these similes helpful because they bring to the foreground the effect of these different mind states on our minds and experience. We really start paying attention: What does greed feel like? What's the effect of it in our minds? What's the effect in our minds of anger or delusion? Check this out and explore this for yourselves.

Very often, the filters through which we are observing experience are unconscious and can be so sneaky.

Just as an example, one time when I was practicing in Burma, I'd been there for a couple of months and the practice was going well. My body was very open, with a kind of free flow of energy, and I felt pretty good. But there was this one place in my neck that was like a tight knot, a contraction. I was trying to be mindful of it, and I went in to report to Sayadaw U Pandita. I described the state of openness in my body and said, "But there's this one block."

He got on my case for calling it a block. I hadn't realized that even in that conceptual framework for the experience, there was already aversion and desire. I didn't like this, and I wanted that. I thought I was describing it objectively—oh dear, there's a free flow of energy and there's a block. You see how subtle it can be, that even in the way we sometimes describe things to ourselves, embedded in that can be this pulling in or pushing away. So part of mindfulness is really starting to become aware of these filters.

Mindfulness as a component of the Eightfold Noble Path—called right mindfulness—means the observing power of mind is attentive to what's happening without greed, without aversion, without delusion. You see how mindfulness becomes a very special kind of observing.

There's one really helpful distinction to make where people often confuse things a bit, and that is

understanding the difference between recognition and mindfulness. Very often we have the sense that if we recognize what's there, then we're being mindful—that recognition implies mindfulness. But these are two very different qualities of mind. In Buddhist terminology, they're different mental factors.

Another example, a story—and this is one I've told many times over the years, but it illustrates the point so well. The most prevalent afflictive emotion, that's the jargon for unwholesome mind states—for me the most prevalent one over the years in my practice was the mind state of fear. At a certain point in practice it just started coming up so much, and not about anything in particular. There were times when I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It was completely irrational, but it was this kind of primal energy of fear coming up, very strong. I was noting it and I recognized it. I knew it was fear, fear, fear. But this kept coming. It was so deeply conditioned. It kept coming for years in my practice, and I really couldn't understand what kept feeding it.

Until one day I was doing walking meditation and fear was there, coming up. But something shifted in the way I was relating to it. At a certain point the shift was expressed in the thought: if this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay.

"It's okay" became the magic mantra. It's okay. And that was the first moment in all that time that I was really accepting of it. For those years of practice, when fear would come up and I would recognize it and note it, unbeknownst to my mindful mind, I was always observing it wanting it to go away. It's an unpleasant experience. Nobody likes the experience of fear, except maybe those of you who like horror movies.

It was just so interesting that it took that long to come to that place of acceptance, because nobody had pointed out to me this difference between recognition and mindfulness. I thought I had been being mindful, but it wasn't mindfulness—because I was looking through the filter of aversion, of not wanting.

I want to read something from Henry David Thoreau, who was very remarkable. When you hear this, you'll see what a remarkable mind he had. He died quite young—I think he was forty-four—of TB, which is not a pleasant experience. This is a friend of his writing about his friendship with Thoreau and being with him as he was going through this dying process:

"Henry was never affected, never reached by his illness. Very often I heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever." Then this sentence: "He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body."

Pretty remarkable, isn't it? There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, because the mind or awareness has the capacity to just be with what is in a free way.

"During his illness, I never heard the slightest wish expressed to remain with us. His perfect contentment was truly wonderful. Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves."

When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt."

So if we're not quarreling with God, with the Dharma, with awareness, that shows the liberating power of mindfulness. Because mindfulness is just that quality of being with phenomena, whatever it is—pleasant or unpleasant. We can rest in the awareness of it and actually rest in peace.

Of course, this takes practice. This just seems so remarkable to me. It's a remarkable place to land. But that's what we're practicing.

An indication to us that we may be in the space of recognition but not mindfulness is if, as we're going through the day and our various experiences, there's some sense of struggle. Do you know what that's like? Where things are just not flowing easily. We can feel the struggle—it's such an obvious experience. But one of the really powerful things to learn, and we can learn it and practice it being on retreat, is that struggle, the feeling of struggle, is not a problem. It's like a mindfulness bell.

When we're struggling, when we have that feeling of struggle, it's telling us something. It's telling us that something is happening, something is going on that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. So struggle is always just this immediate feedback to us that we've slipped out of that place of mindfulness, which is simply open to what's there without greed, without aversion, without delusion.

So next time struggle happens and you have that feeling, really welcome it. It is a mindfulness bell. It's waking us up to the fact that we're not being mindful, that we're not accepting of what's there.

Just a few examples of how we can apply this for ourselves. Maybe at different times you have the experience of just a lot of thoughts. The mind is on a thinking jag. And we have this whole idea that meditation means not thinking, so somehow we're failing as a yogi. All kinds of self-judgment and discouragement arise. We might recognize that this is happening—we know that it's happening. But if we're seeing it through the filter of aversion, then there's going to be struggle.

A very simple antidote to that is the simple recognition and noting: lots of thinking. That's what's going on. Why make a problem for yourselves? It's so easeful when we can take the sense of struggle as the feedback, see that it shows us we're not accepting something, and then settle back and open up to the reality of whatever it is that's happening. So this is a new note for you: lots of thinking. Lots of thinking, lots of thinking. And of course, every time you make that note, you're actually being mindful. The lots of thinking in and of itself is not the problem. It's the struggle against it that's the problem.

Another example: one time when I was practicing in Burma, the monastery was incredibly noisy. Just that one year, they were straightening these metal rebars for construction and straightening them by banging, just pounding metal on metal. This was all day long. All these thoughts in my head: "I came to Burma to get enlightened. This is in the monastery!" Of course, my aversion to it didn't make it go away. So I was

just in this sense of struggle, not feeling at ease at all.

And then I became aware—oh, this is complaining mind. My mind was just complaining about it to myself. But I hadn't picked that up. I was just lost in the aversion to it. As soon as I recognized, "Oh, complaining mind, complaining, complaining," the whole thing released. It just relaxed. The mind settled back. And it's quite amazing—even with something that on the surface would seem to be this massive distraction, as soon as I could actually become mindful, that is, recognizing it without the filter of aversion, I could just settle down. Complaining mind, hearing. It was no problem at all.

All day long the banging continued—banging, banging—but it was just hearing, hearing. It didn't matter.

There's an important lesson here, a really essential principle that we need to hear again and again because we so often forget it. In this meditation practice, it doesn't matter what the experience is. What matters is how we're relating to experience. That's what we're practicing. We're not practicing to have this or that experience, because whatever arises will be gone anyway. It's all part of a passing show. The liberating practice of mindfulness is not about what experience is happening—it's about how we're relating to that experience.

This is always what we have to check into. But it's so easy to fall into wanting this experience or that experience, and then becoming frustrated when reality doesn't meet our expectations. Yet the depth of practice has nothing to do with what's happening. It has everything to do with whether we're being mindful of it—aware without the wanting, without the aversion, without the delusion. Can we follow in Thoreau's footsteps, discovering that awareness can hold anything?

This is a critical point to remember, because most of the frustration people feel in practice arises from wanting some particular thing to be happening when it isn't. The resolution is wonderfully simple: be aware of what is happening. It's really very simple. As Munindraji would often say—and he said this a million times—"Be simple and easy. Be simple and easy about things." Whatever is arising, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, it doesn't matter. Can we simply settle back into the awareness of it?

There are a few simple techniques that support this dropping back into awareness rather than remaining caught up in reactivity. One tool, which has already been mentioned, is the method of mental noting—making a soft mental note or label for what's arising. In, out. Rising, falling. Thinking. Lots of thinking. Complaining mind. Hearing. Whatever it is, we just make a very soft mental note.

People have different relationships to this tool. Some find it really helpful and spend the whole day, moment after moment, with this soft, gentle noting, which can greatly support the continuity of practice. Others find it less helpful, perhaps feeling a little burdened by the thought of noting everything all day long. But I would suggest that you all experiment with using it at times, gaining some facility with it as a tool in the toolbox. Then when you're truly caught up in something, you have that tool available—you know what it is and how it works.

Spend some time in sitting, walking, and moving about practicing this. It need not be for an entire sitting or walking period. Perhaps take ten or fifteen minutes where you note fairly continuously. It will become a valuable resource for your practice.

The note is really about recognition. Noting is not yet mindfulness—it's recognizing what's arising. It's like putting a frame around a picture. The point isn't to look at the frame, but the frame focuses our attention so we can see the picture more clearly. That's the function of the note. We recognize, and as Kamala mentioned last night, perception and recognition are the proximate cause for mindfulness. When we frame experience with a note, it directs attention right into the awareness of the experience itself.

But then the question arises: we're recognizing, and the noting is helping us focus, but how do we move from recognition to mindfulness itself? This points to the need to recognize how we're relating. We make the note, but sometimes embedded within it can be desire or aversion.

One way to use the note as a vehicle for entering the arena of mindfulness is to pay close attention to the tone of the note. "Thinking, thinking, thinking"—well, that harshness is a good indication that it's not quite mindfulness yet. We want the thinking to go away. Or "desire, desire, desire" with a grasping quality—that's recognition but not mindfulness, because there's greed, there's wanting.

A very simple technique, when we happen to observe a tone that may not be skillful, is to soften that tone. If we recognize that there's harshness...

in the mental note, we just soften it, and that simple act of just softening the tone, the mental tone in the mind of the note—it's like magic. As soon as we soften the tone, you can feel it settle back into that place of acceptance rather than non-acceptance and struggle.

There's another tool for going from recognition to mindfulness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese monk who has taught in this country over quite a few years now, has a teaching that has been very helpful. He suggests frequently asking the question: What's the attitude in the mind now? This is like asking, what's the filter in the mind? Just by asking this question with various experiences—whether something in the body, a mental event, or external seeing—it will focus us on whether there actually is a filter or not. Sometimes the simple asking of the question is enough. We don't even need an answer.

As an example of this, one time I was sitting in normal meditation, feeling the breath go in and out. I thought everything was going along fine; there was no sense of struggle. But I remembered this instruction, and so I just asked that question to myself: What's the attitude in the mind? This was with something very simple, like the breath. And it was quite amazing. Just in the asking of the question, in that very moment, I could feel the mind relax back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there.

In reflecting on this, I saw that even when I was just with the breath, in a very subtle way, there was just a slight leaning into it with a wanting for more concentration or a wanting for calm—but very subtle, not obvious at all. Just by asking the question, "What's the attitude?" it settled back, which illuminated that

wanting that had not been obvious to me. So that question is very helpful. Periodically, several times or many times in a sitting, in a walking, going about, you might just ask: What's the attitude in the mind?

In this non-interfering, non-judgmental awareness, as it becomes steadier in us, as we're living more in that space of mindfulness—of mindful awareness, not simply recognition—we begin to see and experience the liberating power of this mind state.

I'll give you an example, something I talked about in my groups this morning. One arena of experience that is unfortunately underemphasized in practice is the whole sense sphere of seeing. For most of us who have our eyes in working order, seeing is probably the predominant sense field. We live in the world of what we're seeing, and yet it's very rare that we actually become mindful of the fact that we're seeing. We don't think to note "seeing, seeing, seeing." We're just in it. And being in it, what we're seeing is often the condition for a lot of reactivity.

I saw this super clearly. I was on retreat once at IMS, and I noticed that every time I went into the dining room, my mind had a comment and judgment about almost everyone. It was totally ridiculous. I didn't like what people were wearing, I didn't like how they moved, how much food they took—they took it too slowly, they took it too quickly—just on and on. Totally ridiculous. But I saw this; this is what was going on.

So I just became interested: What is happening here and why? Why is my mind doing this? I realized that all of those thoughts, all of those judgments, all of those comments were arising because I was not being mindful of seeing. They were all prompted by what I was seeing, and I wasn't mindful of it.

So I decided that every time I went into the dining room, that's all I noted. "Seeing, seeing, seeing"—on the line for food, seeing, seeing, taking the food, going to the table, seeing, seeing. It was amazing. Ninety-eight percent of all those judgments and comments were gone, because I was catching it right at the point of contact.

This is just one small example, but it was very powerful for me at the time—an illustration of just how mindfulness, the real quality of mindfulness, can free us from so many of our reactive patterns. We really can settle into a place of much greater ease and move through life with much greater ease.

As we refine our practice of mindfulness, understanding what mindfulness actually is—that it's more than just being in the present, more than simple recognition, more than just an observing power of mind—we discover it's a very special kind of observing power. Without greed, without wanting, without aversion, without delusion, we're just open and aware of whatever it is, pleasant or unpleasant, that's arising.

As we become steadier in this way of being, we see that it is a means for answering one of life's most basic questions: How can I be happy? In one way or another, that's what we're all looking for.

We like to be happy in our lives. John Lennon had something to say about this. He said, "When I was five

years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life." Five years old, and he had some understanding.

Another way of expressing that question might be: What do I learn from being mindful? Once we have an understanding of what mindfulness actually is and what it isn't, and we practice it and become a little steadier in it, then the important question becomes: What am I learning from this? Because mindfulness in itself is not the end. That's not the end point. We're practicing mindfulness in the service of wisdom. So the very relevant question is: Being mindful, what am I actually learning?

One of the first things we learn from being mindful—and this is of such critical importance—is that what we do matters. Actions have consequences, largely determined by the motivation behind the action. The Buddha talked of how actions motivated by greed or hatred or delusion bring the result of some kind of suffering in our lives, while actions motivated by generosity, by love, by wisdom, bring about happiness. But often we go through life doing what we do, acting out our habituated patterns, thinking that whatever we're doing ends just in that experience. It's not that often, I think, that many people really look to see what the consequences of these actions are—that our actions matter, that they bring about different kinds of results.

There's a very powerful teaching of the Buddha in this regard. He said that what we frequently think about or repeatedly practice, either knowingly or unknowingly, becomes the inclination of our minds. It's not just a singular event happening in the moment. Every time we act in a certain way, it reinforces—we might say it strengthens the neural pathway, or deepens the groove, whatever the right terminology is.

When we really understand this, it engenders a tremendous sense of care about what we're actually cultivating. Every time we get caught up in anger, we're strengthening anger. Every time we get caught up in greed, we're strengthening greed. Every time we are filled with love or kindness or compassion, we're strengthening those qualities. It's all part of a stream.

When we really realize this—that what's frequently practiced becomes the inclination of the mind—it deepens the understanding that meditation is not a hobby. It's not just, "Oh yes, this is a nice thing to do." It is, of course, and people could practice it as a hobby and get some benefit. But it has much more profound implications. It really has to do with the transformation of our minds, the transformation of our consciousness in a way that leads to greater peace, to greater happiness.

But we have to be paying attention. It's only through being mindful of what our experience is—what the filters are, what the patterns are in our minds—that we can then, in that place of mindfulness, settle back and discern: Is this skillful? Is it onward leading? Is it not skillful? Is it just leading to more suffering? Mindfulness opens up the place of choice for us, so we're not simply acting out the habituated patterns of our conditioning.

Do you see the liberating potential of this mind state? It opens up our whole lives. It's like we're artists and life is our medium. We're crafting, we're creating a life. How are we doing it? Without mindfulness, we're just swept along in old habit patterns.

Some very simple reflections can reinforce this. Just consider: What is it like, what does it feel like, when we're being generous? Or when we're being self-centered? Just pay attention, be mindful. When I'm being generous, it feels pretty good—there's an openheartedness. What does it feel like when we're being self-centered? You can feel the narrowing and the contraction.

What does it feel like when we're inclusive of everyone around us, or when we're excluding people? What's the difference in our own happiness in these different situations? How do we feel when we see and appreciate the good qualities in people rather than focusing on their faults—which is a very common tendency? It's so easy to see other people's faults. Of course, we don't have any, but it's easy to see them in others.

The whole underpinning of mettā practice emphasizes intentionally focusing on the good qualities in people, and that brings about a very beautiful mind and heart space. These are the kinds of things we can learn from being mindful, and they transform our lives. This practice also leads to more subtle levels of understanding and wisdom about what brings genuine happiness and what doesn't.

What's interesting is that we often confuse these two. We think what actually leads to suffering brings us happiness. That's a problem.

One way of exploring this for yourself—and with everything that's being said from any of us, you don't have to believe any of it. It's all an invitation to inquire and investigate for yourselves. It's simply pointing to possible avenues of investigation.

We might take a look at what it feels like, when we're being mindful, to be holding on and filled with desire versus experiencing a level of renunciation or non-addiction. It's very different. One of the things I really love to do is watch desires arising in the mind. In those times when I'm actually being mindful—just "desire, desire"—I'm feeling it. And then I notice what it feels like when the desire goes away, because it always will. It's just another impermanent state.

Desire comes because of something pleasant. Very few people desire the unpleasant. And so there's always some pleasure interwoven with the desire. But what does it feel like with the desire, and then when the desire goes away? For me, when I see that moment of the desire ending, it's always a sense of being let out of the grip of something. That's why we speak of the grip of desire. In the moment when it disappears, even though it might have been associated with something pleasant, the grip of it is suffering. That can become apparent when we contrast it with that moment the desire disappears. It's like being let out of the grip of that particular mind state.

In a similar way, one of the things we learn from being mindful is the suffering involved in anger. Even

though there are aspects of that mind state—and the reason it's so seductive is that people often experience it as energizing and giving us power—we're seduced by it. But the Buddha had some very telling words about this. He said, "Anger, with its poisoned source and honeyed tip." It does have a honeyed tip, a sweet tip, and that's the feeling of self-righteousness or apparent power or strength. That often seduces us, and we don't see underneath to the poisoned source—that it's really a very afflictive mindset, a source of suffering. But we have to see this for ourselves. It's not enough just to hear it and even to know it intellectually. That's where mindfulness is such a powerful tool of liberation—it's the faculty that actually lets us investigate and explore this.

Besides illuminating what's wholesome and leading to happiness and what's unwholesome and leading to suffering, mindfulness also opens the door to the highest peace, to liberation. Through a relaxed but attentive application of mindfulness throughout the day, we begin to see so clearly the changing nature of experience. Our experience is a flow—just one thing after another. Different appearances arising of thoughts and feelings, sensations, sights, sounds. Moment after moment, things are arising and passing away.

Mindfulness helps us be in that flow of experience without obstructing it, without damming it up with our wanting or with our aversion. We begin to understand very deeply—and it's interesting, this is so obvious, and yet not that many people really see it or apply it—that attachment and clinging to that which is impermanent is always a source of suffering. If we're holding on to something, wanting it to stay, but in its very nature it's changing, the more we hold on, the more we suffer. It's so obvious.

But we have to see it, we have to experience it. So pay attention. Really look to see when the mind is attached, and how it is obstructing just the easeful flow of changing experience.

There's a wonderful Native American writer, Louise Erdrich. She wrote, "These powerful moments of true knowledge which we paper over with daily life, but every so often something shatters like ice and we fall into the river of our own existence. We are aware."

And it's like that. It's like we're going along just caught up in everything, and it's like ice. We're not seeing the impermanence, we're not in the flow, we're just reactive to what's pleasant or unpleasant. But every so often there are these powerful moments of true knowledge. Something shatters like ice and we fall into the river, into the flow of our experience. We are aware. It's a state of great freedom and great peace and ease.

Mindfulness as a vehicle for liberation is just a very pithy teaching of the Buddha. It's very simple, very clear, but not so easy to practice—which is why we come on retreat.

The Buddha talked about how in seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. You know, when you're sitting by the side of a river watching it flow, do you try to hold on to the river to stop it? No. The flowing nature of it is so obvious. Our experience is exactly like that. It is a flow of changing phenomena. And

when we see that—which is what becomes obvious in our meditation practice, just this flow—when we see impermanence, the mind doesn't cling.

The Buddha went on: when it doesn't cling, it is not agitated. It's important to hear these words and then to check them out in your experience. Knowing it conceptually doesn't do much. But we can pay attention and look to see: when you're really seeing impermanence, just check out—is the mind clinging at that time? And I think you'll see that it's not, but you need to see it for yourselves. And then you can ask the question: when it's not clinging, is the mind agitated or not? It's very interesting to see that when the mind is not clinging, it is not agitated.

And the Buddha goes on to conclude: when not agitated, we personally experience Nibbana, the highest peace, liberation. All of this is what comes from this practice of mindfulness when we understand what mindfulness actually is—and also what it isn't.

I'll close with just two quotes. One is from Thich Nhat Hanh. I really love this. He said, "Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it." It is available. Suffering and happiness are all created by our own minds. And the practice is just exploring and investigating and understanding how this mind of ours is working. What leads to suffering? What leads to happiness? Then we have the choice. Happiness is available, and we can help ourselves to it.

I'll close now with a poem of sorts by a very accomplished Tibetan Dzogchen master. His name was Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, and I had over the years some opportunities to sit with him in practice. He was quite an extraordinary being. At this particular retreat, there were a lot of people who had been practicing mindfulness. Usually in Dzogchen teaching, mindfulness is not a word that comes up that often—they talk about the Dharma with a different vocabulary. But he knew who was on the retreat, so he wrote this poem for us:

Mindfulness is the root of Dharma.
Mindfulness is the body of practice.
Mindfulness is the fortress of the mind.
Mindfulness is the aid to the wisdom of innate wakefulness.

Lack of mindfulness will allow the negative forces to overcome you. Without mindfulness, you will be swept away by laziness. Lack of mindfulness is the creator of evil deeds. Without mindfulness and presence of mind, nothing can be accomplished. Without mindfulness, you are a heartless zombie, a walking corpse.

So remember that when you're moving about—without mindfulness, you are a heartless zombie.

Dear Dharma friends, please be mindful. By the aspiration of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, may all Dharma friends attain stable mindfulness and ascend the throne of perfect awakening.

That's what we're doing here—ascending the throne of perfect awakening.

So let's sit for just a couple of minutes.

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