Introducing Mindfulness

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 31:52

Tonight we're going to talk about mindfulness, sati in Pali. The practice that we're doing is satipatthana, the establishing of mindfulness or cultivation of mindfulness or application of mindfulness. The core concept is mindfulness, so we need to get clear about it.

Mindfulness, of course, has become incredibly fashionable and now has spread like a cancer across the planet in the secular mindfulness worlds of psychology and psychotherapy and even management and business. There's a great deal of confusion in this secular mindfulness world. What I want to do first is to introduce and clarify what is meant by mindfulness.

I want to start by having a little mindfulness experiment. What I want you to do is hold your hands together like this. My question to you is: can you feel your hands? It's not a trick question, by the way.

You can feel your hands. Good. Are you making any particular effort? No? It's pretty straightforward?

If you put your hands together and you ask yourself the question, "Can I feel my hands?" and the answer is yes, that's awareness. Remember we were talking about awareness this morning. Awareness is the presence of what is present. I am aware of the touch of my hands. You notice there's no effort involved. It's just bleeding obvious.

Now I'd like to do a very similar exercise where we're going to do the same thing but we're going to do it for two minutes. What I want you to do is this: if at any time during those two minutes you suddenly realize that you have lost awareness of your hands, that your attention has gone somewhere else and therefore you've lost the hands, then raise your hand. Is that clear?

Let's not make it complicated. If your attention leaves your hands so that you've lost that feeling, raise your hand.

How many hands did we have up? It's a goodly number. I knew you were an experienced bunch. How many people maintained it for two minutes? How did you manage it? How did you do it?

One person said, "I'm not quite sure, but I was moving the hands a little bit to remind myself. I noticed that the attention varied in its intensity. So there would be a thought, but I never quite lost it."

Another mentioned, "I used my hands as a primary grounding object before. The field of awareness started at the whole hands and then gradually narrowed down to a point, just a little point, and then I moved the point around."

"I was deliberately renewing my attention," said someone else. "I just reminded myself."

Of course, the reason why we do this is simple: put your hands together, feel your hands—dead easy, no effort. But do it continuously for just two minutes and it's a much bigger job.

Someone raised the question, "Well, do you mean if attention slips away just for a moment?" The answer to that is: you've lost it. It's gone for a moment—it's gone.

It seems like you can hold other things like sounds at the same time and still feel you're in touch with the hands. So you haven't lost it then?

"Well, it feels like you can hold more than one thing at the same time if you have a broad sort of awareness."

Yeah, that's possible. Did you do that?

"With sound, it still felt like I had some contact with the hands."

So that's how you managed to keep it. You would accept other things coming in.

"Until there was a louder sound and then the elastic band snapped."

The difference between these two exercises is the difference between awareness and mindfulness. Some people confuse mindfulness with awareness. They think it's another way of saying the same thing. It isn't. It's different.

Mindfulness is the translation of the Pali word *sati*, which means literally memory. Mindfulness is not awareness. It's remembering awareness.

So those of you who were successful in maintaining it for two minutes did so by literally reminding yourself: I'm supposed to be aware of the hands. And there are different ways you can do it. One way is, in fact, by movement. If you keep things moving, that can help. Another way that some people use—some people managed to really squeeze their hands together tightly, other people stare at them fixedly. There are different techniques that people have developed.

But you see that even if you succeed, it's a much bigger job. To maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time is not easy. And this is mindfulness. It's remembering awareness. Remembering I am already aware. Remembering to be aware of this, my meditation object. These are the two flavors. And what we were practicing was the second one: Remember the hands. Don't forget the hands. The hands are something I'm supposed to remember.

Usually when I lose it—well, the most obvious place when I lose it when I'm doing this exercise—is at some point I look up to check how people are going and how many hands are up. Damn it! Inevitably, that's when I completely forget the hands.

This time I looked really slowly. I'm not going to do it this time. And I managed to check the hall and come back to the hands, and I was still with them. And then I congratulated myself. And they were gone.

Now when I congratulated you—when I said okay, I can see you're experienced meditators because so many hands went up—I'm not being ironic or sarcastic. I mean it.

In the world of secular mindfulness, one of the big problems they have is how to measure mindfulness. Because if you're doing a scientific study, you've got to measure your results. So there's all this debate in the social sciences about how do you measure mindfulness?

One of the standard ways, which is really dubious, is self-reports. People have created these questionnaires, and if you answer the questions appropriately, it shows you've attained a certain level of mindfulness. Some of the questions are really weird, but anyway, we won't go into that.

But it's the standard thing in mindfulness interventions. A standard pattern of behavior is you get a group of people—these are people who have never meditated. Then you give them the questionnaire to rate their mindfulness. And normally they'd score themselves up here. In other words: Yeah, yeah, I'm pretty mindful.

Then they start the mindfulness training and at some point down the line they do the same test and they rate themselves down here. The mindfulness level collapses dramatically.

Now the reason is because they're becoming more mindful and they're noticing that the mind slips away, whereas before they hadn't noticed. And that's one of the tricky things about doing this exercise. The more deeply you go into meditation practice, there's a sense in which the harder it is to do this—because you can see how the mind can flash away and come back.

and come back in less than a finger snap. It is so fast. So is that continuous or is that not continuous?

Usually when I do this exercise, I will ask people, especially if there's a large number of people who have not raised their hands, "Okay, how many of you are absolutely certain that not for a moment did the mind slip away?" And then it turns out that a lot of people who never raised their hands are now raising their hands and saying, "Well, well, you know, it could have been, but it was really quick."

So it's an interesting exercise because it shows you how the mind works and illustrates the nature of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is memory. You know those signs you see at the train stations? "Mind the Gap." The way they use the verb "to mind" is exactly what the Buddha is talking about when he's talking about sati. If you say "mind the gap," what are they asking you to do? They're asking you to remember that there's a gap between the train and the platform.

Now, when do they expect you to remember this? Are they asking you that when you go home, having a

quiet drink at night, you can reflect, "Yes, yes, there was a gap between the train and the platform"? No. They're asking you to remember it in the very act of stepping in and out of the train. In other words, they are asking you to remember the present, not the past.

And that is exactly the function and the meaning of mindfulness. It's all about memory, but it's about remembering the present, not the past. And the work of mindfulness is reminding ourselves. A couple of people have said it: "How did you manage it?" "Well, I kept reminding myself." That's exactly what we're doing in this retreat.

Our job for the next month is to remind ourselves of our awareness. As we said, we don't have to do anything to be aware. We are already aware, but we easily forget our awareness. We forget that we are aware, or we forget what we are aware of. Our job is to keep reminding ourselves of our awareness, reminding ourselves what we are aware of.

This morning we talked about the meditation method. You can direct, in terms of noting, directed attention. We direct ourselves to something. So we have a meditation object, and for the next thirty minutes, sixty minutes, whatever, I'm going to keep my awareness on this object. The job is to remind ourselves to be aware of this, my meditation object. So the mindfulness is directed along with the awareness.

Then we talked about noticing, which is receptive, where the things come to us. And this is in particular in daily activities. There, I'm reminding myself: I am already aware, I am already seeing, I am already hearing, I am already walking, I am already cold, I am already warm, I am already tired, I am already awake. Whatever the condition is. But it's reminding myself, this is what's happening.

So the work of mindfulness—and you notice that it does involve effort. Not a lot of effort, but it does mean we've got to be switched on. We've got to keep switching on again and again and again. And it's not a big deal when we do it, but we do have to do it. And we have to do it now.

So this is the job of mindfulness training: to remind myself of my awareness, to remind myself either this is what I'm aware of, or to remind myself I am already aware. Is that making any sense? Any questions? Comments?

One thing I'd like to point out or talk about is what we mean by the present. Because I think this can be, can lead to confusion. In our culture, when we—well, you notice that in Dharma talks and Dharma literature, people talk about the present a great deal. And years ago I noticed that, as a Dharma teacher, I talk about the present a lot. And I noticed that every time I would use the word "present," I would add the word "moment."

I realized I did this because I was so habituated to it—because when I read Dharma books, this is what people do. If they talk about the present, they talk about the present moment. Sometimes people will even drop the word present and just say "the moment." So if you're in a Dharma talk and someone says, "You

must be in the moment," does it occur to you to wonder—to put your hand up and say, "Which moment are you talking about? There are a lot of them." Because it's obvious, isn't it? It's the present moment.

What struck me was that the Buddha talks about the present, but I've never come across a reference where he adds the word moment. I wondered why. It's so obvious and natural to us—why doesn't he do it? It struck me that he must have had a very different relationship to time than we have.

Our relationship to time is basically conditioned by technology. It makes sense for someone to say, "I will meet you at 3:15." That's a coherent, meaningful statement. And if someone turns up at 3:18, it's coherent, although perhaps obsessive, to say "You're late." If you were on the receiving end of that, what you had just heard would be perfectly meaningful. It might be a bit weird, but it's perfectly meaningful.

But if you were talking like this in the Buddha's time, no one would know what you're talking about. "3:15? What? You're saying I was three minutes late? What the hell are you talking about?" They would literally not know what you were talking about because they didn't have these accurate measurements of time, so the whole relationship to time would have been very different.

When the Buddha talks about time, the time he is talking about is experienced time, not the measured time of the clock.

Here's a question: Do I experience the present as a moment? Well, sometimes I do—most commonly when I'm stressed, when I'm pushing to meet a deadline, or if I'm restless and agitated and just want to get to something else, or if the adrenaline is really flowing.

But when I come to meditate, what I find is the more I get into it, the more the present starts to expand. It gets bigger and bigger and bigger. In fact, one of the problems with a moment—using that concept—is a moment is a very short period of time which has two very clear borders. It begins and it ends.

What I would suggest to you as a meditation experiment is: see if you can find the border where the present becomes the future. Try doing it. I've tried. I've never found it. Or can you find the border where the past becomes the present? I've never managed that either. Whenever I look, all there is, is the present.

I find that when I get into the meditation, past and future actually drop away. They simply don't exist. And when I'm really intimate, the present also disappears. But the point here is that the present—the experienced present—is big.

This is one way in which it's possible to talk about remembering the present. Sometimes people resist this idea because they say, "Well, if I'm remembering, I'm just going back to the past. Aren't I supposed to be in the present?"

But the experienced present includes the past, or some aspects of the past. For example, it can be quite useful—let's say I'm meditating and I realize that I'm distracted—it can be very useful to, as it were, look back and ask: What happened just then? How did I lose it? How did the mind slip away from the

meditation object?

That's definitely remembering. But if you find it, if it's available, you're doing it in the present. There's a sense in which you are remembering the present. Of course, if you don't get it, well fine—you just drop it. You don't go chasing, you don't think about it.

But as we deepen into the practice, we begin to recognize that the present is actually quite expansive—it's a field within which we can dance. This is the present that we are remembering. Does that make sense?

Any questions or comments about that?

We're at the beginning of the retreat, and generally at the beginning we're more concerned with a general mindfulness—remembering I am already aware. So I am already seeing, I am already hearing, I am already thinking, I am already sitting. Just being present to whatever is happening.

Often it's best to start with seeing and hearing. Don't avoid seeing and hearing. You don't have to go around with your eyes glued to the ground, trying not to hear anything. You can be mindful with the senses wide open. When I see, I'm aware that I'm seeing. When I hear, I'm aware that I'm hearing. That's what's important.

Grounding yourself in the body is extremely useful. Stay with movement and touch—the movement of the body and the contact with the floor, and also particularly with the hands, whenever the body touches something.

When you move, move gracefully and quietly. Notice any clumsiness. Any time you're clumsy, when you fumble something, check the mind. Is the mind here, embodied in this particular time and place, or is it lost in some faraway fantasy? Often we notice that when we're distracted, that's when physical clumsiness occurs.

For example, when I'm opening and closing doors, I open the door and realize—bang!—I've just made an incredibly loud noise. I've opened this door really noisily. If I stop and check, where was the mind? Usually I discover, oh, I was thinking about something. I wasn't actually here. I wasn't actually present for opening the door. I didn't remember I was opening the door. And that's when I made the noise.

With the mind, don't fight thinking. Just be aware of it. The job is not to stop thinking. The job is to be aware of what the mind is doing, including thinking. What is the experience of thinking? How do I know that I'm thinking? What does thinking feel like? What's the energy of it? In other words, how fast is it? How slow is it?

This is becoming interested in what the mind does. And again, people were talking about the importance of being interested in the exercise of holding the hands. Be interested in what the mind is doing. It's not getting caught up with what I'm thinking about—the content of thought—but just the activity of thinking itself. When I'm thinking, I'm aware that I'm thinking. And I'm aware of what it's like.

And deeper down, what's the condition of the heart? What we would call the emotions. Is the heart disturbed? Does it shake or tremble? Is it restless? Is it resisting the experience? Is it grabbing onto something? Is it grasping after something? Is the heart at ease? Is it enjoying being here? Or not?

In the early stages of the retreat, it's a settling into present experience. Don't force it. Don't push it. Just let it settle. And what will allow it to settle is this practice of mindfulness, of reminding myself: this is what's happening. Oh, that's right, this is happening.

This is happening. There was something I was supposed to remember. Oh, that's right, this is happening. What was it I wrote? Ah, this is happening. That's the work of the practice, this reminding myself.

And the Buddha teaches that if mindfulness is continuous, concentration, samadhi, will naturally follow. It will just start to happen. But the crucial point is the mindfulness.

A student asked about the definition of meditation in the Buddhist context as a training of awareness and attention, noting that this could describe almost any skill, wondering what makes Buddhist meditation distinctive.

The Buddha distinguishes between the Eightfold Path and the Noble Eightfold Path, the Arya Eightfold Path. He distinguishes, for example, between mindfulness and right mindfulness. In the terms of the path, it would distinguish between right mindfulness, samma sati, and wrong mindfulness, miccha sati. This is all about direction.

So am I practicing mindfulness to send myself in the direction of enlightenment or awakening? Or am I cultivating mindfulness to send myself in another direction?

On the odd occasion that I see obsessive politicians on the media, these people must be quite mindful in terms of what they're doing because they work relentlessly hard. It's like the mindfulness of a sniper. It's mindfulness, but it's not what the Buddha would call right mindfulness because it's taking the citta in the wrong direction.

When asked whether one could have wrong mindfulness or wrong concentration about a wholesome object, I responded that you could. When you meditate, what you find is that a lot of the time you notice yourself losing the balance. You're pulling back into it. Then you lose it, you come back. You lose it, you come back.

Your understanding of right and wrong concentration, right and wrong mindfulness, becomes more refined. And so you can see yourself how it slides off into a wrong concentration or a wrong mindfulness very subtly. Then you correct it, it comes back to the right one. This is an ongoing process, cultivating a sensitivity to the balance.

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