Practising Mindfulness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 42:02

This morning we were playing with awareness, getting a sense of what that is all about. We played the awareness game. This afternoon we're going to continue from there, but move on to mindfulness.

We compared awareness to light. We know that there is light because the world is present. Awareness is not the world that appears; it's the appearance of the world. Where there is awareness, there is experience, and where there is experience, there is awareness. This gives us a dyad. When awareness arises, we have awareness on the one hand, and the world that we're aware of on the other, and they come and go together. We experience awareness and its object together as a spectrum, as a package.

So what we'll do now is a couple of meditation exercises, but we'll start by essentially going back over what we did this morning. This time we've got a meditation object: the touch of your hands when you hold them together.

Sit comfortably, settle your posture, hold your hands together, close your eyes, and ask yourself: Can I feel my hands? This is not a trick question. Don't overthink it. Just feel your hands. Can you feel your hands? And if the answer is yes, then ask yourself another question: Am I making any particular effort to feel my hands? Is this hard work? Keep it simple. Just feel your hands and check how hard you have to work to feel them.

I first came across this exercise the first time Sayadaw U Tejaniya came to teach in Australia. He gave us this orientation about what we were supposed to do. After we did the exercise, he said: when you're doing your meditation practice, you do not have to make any more effort than that. Whatever effort you made feeling your hands, that's the maximum effort you ever have to make in a meditation practice. I found it a bit alarming, coming from a more effort-oriented Burmese approach, but it was a very interesting comment.

The reason we're doing this exercise is to notice how awareness is built into experience. Is something happening? Then there's awareness. I don't have to do anything to be aware.

Effort is not involved in basic awareness, although effort does become involved if we choose some particular thing to be aware of. That might be the distinction—effort becomes involved in selection.

So this is awareness. But let's do the same exercise again, this time exploring mindfulness to see what the difference is.

Once more, sit comfortably, settle your posture, hold your hands together, close your eyes, and ask

yourself: can I feel my hands? Just feel your hands. This experience of feeling my hands is awareness—the awareness of feeling my hands.

Keep feeling your hands. Is your awareness of your hands continuous? Or do you notice any breaks in your awareness? When you look closely, is your awareness of your hands discontinuous? Is it continuous or discontinuous?

For example, you may notice thinking in the background of your mind and then suddenly realize that thinking has taken over. Did you lose the touch of your hands? You may be listening to my voice and suddenly realize you have lost the touch of your hands.

Just feel your hands. Check to see if there are any gaps in your awareness of your hands. Are there any gaps? Or is your awareness of the touch of your hands continuous?

So—was the awareness continuous or discontinuous? Discontinuous. It's a bit disappointing. Anyone would say continuous? No one? Very disappointing.

The first version of this exercise that I did years ago, I would add a bit extra to it. I would say, "As soon as you realize that you've lost the touch of your hands, raise your hand." Adding a little element of social humiliation to the exercise just to spice it up. What was interesting is that, as a general rule, the most experienced meditators in the room were the first to raise their hands, which is very interesting.

Years ago, when mindfulness became really popular, it started to be researched in social science. And of course, researchers had the problem of how to measure it. One way—one would hope they continue to do this—was through questionnaires. If you submit to a questionnaire devised by cunning psychologists and score highly, then you've got a good mindfulness score. If you score badly, you've got a poor mindfulness score.

A typical experiment would run like this: they would get a bunch of naive meditators who had never meditated before, have them do the test, and they would score quite reasonable mindfulness. Then they would go through mindfulness training, and after some time do another test—and their mindfulness score would collapse. Proving, apparently, that mindfulness training destroys mindfulness.

Then, if they could persist with the practice, after some time they would do the test again and the mindfulness score would begin to rise. But that initial crash is very interesting because what it seemed to show is that most of us assume our awareness is continuous. It's when we start to pay attention that we realize it isn't.

And this is where mindfulness comes in. Awareness is perfectly straightforward. Can I feel the touch of my hands? Yes, I can feel the touch of my hands.

What is mindfulness? The Pali word is *sati*. The English word "mindfulness" comes to us courtesy of T.W. Rhys Davids, who was one of the pioneer English translators of Pali into English. It's him and his

generation that actually gave us our standard Buddhist vocabulary.

Mindfulness for the Buddha is very important because he puts it right at the centre of his approach to meditation—especially the kind of meditation that we're doing here in our culture, which we tend to call insight meditation or mindfulness meditation, but which he called *satipaṭṭhāna*, the applications of mindfulness, or the foundations of mindfulness. He takes this quality, mindfulness, and puts it at the very centre of his whole approach to meditation practice.

Now, how does mindfulness present? Well, it's awareness. But the way it presents is as the felt continuity of awareness. Mindfulness is awareness over time. And what we discover when we start to pay attention to awareness is what we talked about this morning: we easily forget.

So we're aware, but we forget. And then we wake up—whoops, something happened. What was that? Back to feeling the hands, and then we forget, and we wake up somewhere else. We forget, we remember, we forget, we remember. This is the normal human condition.

Imagine standing at the edge of the water on a beach with a stick, drawing a line in the sand. A wave comes in and wipes it out. The wave recedes, you draw the line. The next wave comes in and wipes it out. The wave recedes, and so on. It's very easy to draw the line—no problem at all. But very quickly it vanishes, and we have to draw the line again. And then we have to draw it again, and then again, and then again.

So when we talk about effort, that's where it comes in. To do it again, and then to do it again, and then to do it again. And why do we have to do it again? Because we forget. And then we remember.

Awareness moves. It doesn't stay where we tell it to stay. It goes off somewhere else. Where does it move to? This is, of course, something we become interested in when we do this practice. But often where it moves to is wherever habit takes us. Each of us in the course of our lifetime has built up certain habits of mind, patterns of mental activity that take over if there's nothing in particular that we have to do. We could call it autopilot. We drop into deeply conditioned habits. And when we're in a deeply conditioned habit, we do not know what we are doing. When we're lost in habit, we are prisoners of our past conditioning. And for the Buddha, this is not good. Not a good situation at all.

So mindfulness is characterized by a felt continuity of awareness. When mindfulness is weak, awareness has a kind of strobe-like quality to it. I'm present and then I'm absent, present and then absent, and so on. But when I am mindful, I can feel the uninterrupted flow of awareness over time, and this feeling becomes very quickly strong and clear. Those of you who are experienced meditators have felt it.

But still, even when we're mindful, awareness moves. This is not a problem, provided we can stay aware of the movements. The fact that awareness goes on walkabout is not the problem. The problem is that when it goes off on walkabout, we don't know because we've forgotten. The walkabout is not the problem. The problem is the forgetting. Does that make sense?

So let's do one more little exercise on remembering awareness. Here we're going to change it slightly. What would happen if, on the one hand, we remember our awareness, but on the other hand we do not try to force it to stay on any one particular object? We allow it to move if it wants to.

We're going to start with the hands again. Sit comfortably, settle your posture. Hold your hands together and close your eyes. Feel your hands. Be aware of the touch of your hands, the different sensations that are playing out in your hands. Don't try to do this. Don't try to feel your hands. Don't make it into a special project.

You already know you are feeling your hands. Just notice what you already know.

Has your awareness moved? Do you find yourself being aware of other sensations in your body? Or the sounds around you? Or your thoughts sliding here and there? Don't try to stop any of this happening. Just watch and see what happens. Let your awareness move. Let what you are aware of change. Just be aware of these movements and changes.

Use the touch of your hands as a home base, somewhere you leave and return to. Do not try to cling exclusively to the touch of your hands. Let the touch of your hands come and go. Sometimes you are aware of it, sometimes not. Just watch whatever is happening. You are using the touch of your hands as your home base but not holding tightly to it. Just hold your mind steady. Let things come and go. Just be aware that things are coming and going.

What happens when we try to maintain our sense of awareness while allowing awareness to go wherever it wants? What happens when we do not care what we are aware of but just want to remember our awareness?

So how did it go? Did it make any sense? The idea of holding the mind steady and letting awareness do what it wants—does that make any sense?

Notice how we started with a meditation object, the touch of the hands, and then we backed off a bit, allowing the awareness to go wherever it wants to go. In terms of the dyad, we started with the object, then backed off, becoming more interested in the awareness. This illustrates the different possibilities that are available in any kind of meditation relationship.

I can see you're far too deeply in samādhi to be bothered with mere intellectual scuttlebutt, so we'll move on. But this is our introduction to what we're talking about when we talk about mindfulness. Mindfulness remembers awareness—that's its job, that's what it does—such that we can feel the continuity of our awareness. That's how mindfulness presents. But what we are acknowledging is that awareness in fact moves. The mind is very dynamic and very energetic, so it's hardly surprising that it's dashing from here to there and everywhere else.

In this practice our job is not to prevent awareness from moving. If we were doing a straight serenity

practice, that would be the job—mind is moving, and we want to coax it into being completely still. This is a pure samādhi approach, classically what we do in a serenity practice. But in a mindfulness practice, which is more insight-oriented, our job is not to prevent it, not to stop awareness from moving, but to track how it moves and where it moves.

A key aspect of mindfulness practice, and this is one thing which makes it unique perhaps, is that it is not restricted to any particular meditation object. If we ask the question, "What is my meditation object in mindfulness meditation?" the short answer is everything. Or anything. Or everything and anything. Basically any aspect of human experience can be a meditation object. This is what gives this style of practice its particular characteristic and perhaps its particular strength.

Fundamentally it does not matter what the object of awareness is. What matters is that we remember our object of awareness. This is something that becomes increasingly clear the deeper we go into this practice.

Now, while the object of awareness is not important, some objects are more useful than others. In particular, it can be very useful to use the body as our central point of focus, our home base. The practice begins by keeping our awareness in the body—by which we mean the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. But especially the fifth of the five senses, sensitivity to touch sensation. That is often the key meditation object in many meditation techniques.

So sensitivity to touch plays a particularly important role. But basically, one way of looking at what we're doing in this training is that we're learning to live in the physical world rather than in the world of our thoughts and concepts. What we've been training to do over a long period of time is to live in the world of our thoughts and concepts, and we're going to be talking a lot more about this as we go through the retreat.

So it's really important, especially now that we've arrived and we're settling in, that we learn to listen to the body. This is central. The body is really important in part because to the degree that our awareness is in the body, to that degree we are in the present and not caught up in past and future. Mind time-travels. Body is always in the present. So to be embodied is to be in the present.

If you're mindful of mind objects, mind states, emotions—can't you be also equally in the present? Absolutely. It's just harder to stay in the present. It is. So here, in the context in which we're speaking about, we're just getting started. Even if I'm an experienced meditator, still the engine's a bit rusty. Got to crank it up. So it's a good place to start, is in the body. And it's a good place to learn to come back to.

But again, it's not compulsory. One could just ignore the body, theoretically, and simply be aware of mind. But in practice, very few people could do that successfully. Most people, if they tried to do it, would just get lost. Because mind is too seductive, it's too powerful, it's too fast. The body helps stabilize us and keep us grounded. So in that sense, it's useful.

It's a good place to start, and a good place to come back to if nothing else is happening. And one good place

to start, which I think is what we're doing already, is holding awareness in our ordinary activity. This is everyday mindfulness where the meditation object is the normal flow of experience. Just as we're going about doing whatever we do, just staying aware of what's happening. Track your experience wherever your awareness naturally goes, but at least for the time being give priority to awareness of body, because that helps to ground awareness and to keep us in the present rather than drifting off to past and future.

Just a few tips to send you on your way. Number one: do not be in a hurry. There's no reason to hurry during this week. And if we say don't be in a hurry, then notice when you find yourself hurrying. Be particularly interested in that, because you may find some tension underneath the hurrying. Feel the tension and relax. And check how your posture is when you relax, because hurrying changes the posture. Tension in the body changes the posture. So don't be in a hurry.

Be graceful—which in practice means be committed to noticing those moments when you are clumsy. When you drop something or bump into something or trip over something or make a loud noise doing something, you may notice that a moment of clumsiness is conditioned by a momentary loss of mindfulness. A moment when you lost awareness of your body and dropped into habitual concepts. So be interested in those moments of clumsiness. Be graceful.

Remember awareness. In other words, do not try to be aware. Just remember that you are already aware, which is more subtle than trying.

And finally, ask yourself: What is clear now? What is obvious now?

Any questions? Any comments?

Very good. The lake of samādhi is deep and placid and still. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to remember awareness.

Thank you very much.

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