

Practicing with Mindfulness - Daylong Retreat

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 12/15/13.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha tells us to bring 4 qualities of mind to the four fields of mindfulness. These qualities are: Ardency; Clear Knowing; Being Mindful; and Being free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.

Two weeks ago I spoke of [mindfulness](#) as a practice of remembering. First, remembering to apply to each moment of experience the quality most often associated with mindfulness. It is called by a number of different names, including: bare attention, lucid awareness, not knowing, naked awareness, and presence. Joseph Goldstein says of this quality of mindfulness:

"It is naked and bare because it is simple, direct, noninterfering, and nonjudging. It's not making up stories about experience; it's just the simple awareness of things as they are."¹

This is the quality that I've referred to as the Three Bares of Attention: Bare of Judgment; Bare of Decision-Making; and Bare of Commentary or Storytelling.

Goldstein's phrase — "the simple awareness of things as they are" — points to our actual experience when mindfulness, in the sense of bare attention, is truly present. For example, as we're sitting in meditation, trying to concentrate on the breath, attention goes to the sound of the clock ticking. If there is bare attention of it, there is simply awareness of the sound "tick, tick, tick." Of course there may be irritation in response to the sound. And if we identify with that irritation, if we grab hold of it (either to hold on or to push it away), we can become more and more upset. We can spin off into a variety of stories related to the ticking sound. Or we can react to the upset by spinning off upset about some other thing. But if mindfulness arises, there would be the simple awareness, the clear knowing that irritation is present.

It is at this point, whether the experience is one of simple awareness of "tick, tick, tick" or simple awareness of irritation, that we need to remember the other facet of mindfulness. We need to remember what the Buddha's teachings tell us about how

to respond to what comes visiting our lives; or how to respond or work with what we find when we see with simple awareness.

In the Middle Length Discourses #28, the Venerable Sāriputta gives us a hint of the teaching that might be helpful. He said:

"Friends, just as the footprint of any living being that walks can be placed within an elephant's footprint, and so the elephant's footprint is declared the chief of them because of its great size; so too, all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths."²

One of the things that this means for us is that we can use the Four Noble Truths as a framework for understanding our experiences and how to respond to them.

The first noble truth is that there is what in the Pāli language is called *dukkha*. It is most commonly translated as suffering, but this is only one of the forms that *dukkha* can take. The word *dukkha* is derived from the idea of a hub of a wooden wheel that doesn't quite fit the axle, so that the ride is rough. There is a lot of friction and discomfort or dissatisfaction associated with it.³ So what the Buddha is pointing to in this word *dukkha* is that all of conditioned experience — everything that comes into awareness, into our lives because of causes and conditions — is inherently unsatisfactory because it is always changing. What is pleasant doesn't last even when we try to hold onto it. What is unpleasant comes into our lives even though we wish it wouldn't and try to keep it from arriving. When the Buddha first taught the First Noble Truth, he summed up *dukkha* in this way:

"birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, illness is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; union with what is displeasing is *dukkha*; separation from what is pleasing is *dukkha*; not to get what one wants is *dukkha*; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging [which is a way of referring to all of conditioned experience — the five aggregates subject to clinging] are *dukkha*."⁴

The Buddha also described how we should work with this truth of *dukkha*. He said "This noble truth of *dukkha* is to be fully understood."⁵ So, to use the previous examples: By meeting each moment of experience with the quality of bare attention or lucid awareness, we can clearly know whether *dukkha* is present or not. If we find that irritation is present, we can recognize that this is a painful, agitated state of mind and heart. We can know that it is unsatisfactory and therefore is clearly an

experience of *dukkha*. If we find that there is simply bare awareness of "tick, tick, tick", we may at first assume that this means there is no sense of unsatisfactoriness present. But at this point it is important to keep looking, to see if we can notice the impermanence of the "tick" sounds and whether they are unsatisfactory in a more subtle kind of way. Or we may notice that there is nothing except the lucid awareness of the "tick" sound coming and going and coming and going and so forth, without any grasping or resistance occurring at any level.

Now it usually isn't easy to see, to know, to feel that *dukkha* is present. Sometimes life drags us kicking and screaming into facing that *dukkha* is what is occurring right now. There is a story told in Tibetan Buddhism that I think gives a sense of how scary this might feel sometimes. It also points to the power of our practice of meeting *this moment* with lucid awareness.

This is a story about the great practitioner and teacher Milarepa, who was living and practicing in a cave up in the mountains. One day he went out, perhaps to gather firewood or maybe some nettles to make soup. When he returned he found his cave packed full of demons. Just like most of us his first response to these difficult visitors was to try to get them to go away. He asked them politely to leave. He begged them to leave. He tried to bargain with them so they would leave, saying things like "If I put up with you for five more minutes, then will you go away and leave me in peace?" And in frustration he screamed at them and ordered them to go away. But none of these things worked. The demons just kept hanging around and Milarepa was miserable.

Eventually he realized that these demons were here to stay for a while. He realized that they were part of his life. So he decided to become friends with them and to see what he could learn from them. He apologized to them for being such a rude host. He offered to make some tea and asked them to sit down so that they could have a nice chat and get to know each other. In other words, he turned to the practice of bare attention, of lucid awareness of what was present in the moment. As he did this, as he gave up his resistance to the demons and accepted that they were present, as he became willing to meet them as they were, all of the demons disappeared — except for one.

The remaining demon was huge. It was quite ferocious looking. It had big fangs dripping blood, huge bulging eyes that just kept staring at him. It had such a horrible stench that Milarepa could barely stand to breathe. The demon's presence was so unpleasant and overwhelming that Milarepa could hardly stand to be in the cave with it. So he realized that he still needed to find a way to deal with this scary, repulsive visitor.

First he began by sneaking peeks at it, and then after a while he began to get a little more curious and looked more closely, noticing the way the demon's hair looked, the kind of clothing it was wearing, and the dead bodies hanging from its belt. He began moving closer to the demon, but periodically would back away, until he got where he could be more comfortable being close to it.

Eventually he accepted that this demon was part of his life, that it was unavoidable. So holding nothing back, he told the demon "Eat me if you wish," and placed his head in the demon's mouth. As the story goes, at that moment the demon disappeared.

So this gives us a sense of what it sometimes feels like to open up to the *dukkha* in our lives. It is scary. It is difficult. It sometimes feels like we will be destroyed. And yet something urges us on to see, to know, to acknowledge what is true in our lives. This is where those qualities of *ardency* and *clear knowing* come in. If we have a strong intention to clearly know what is true in our lives from moment to moment, if we make a passionate, continual and balanced effort to know what is true, then this helps us to have the strength and the courage to face our demons. Meeting each moment of experience with mindfulness, ardent effort and the intention to clearly know what is true helps us to see what our problematic visitors can teach us about our own life and the lives of others. The more we get experience with meeting moments of *dukkha* in this way the more we know for ourselves that this is the way to freedom, just as Milarepa found in his cave.

Now, two more comments about this process of opening to our demons, opening to the thoughts, emotions, memories and people who are difficult for us. First I want to emphasize that what Milarepa went through with the demons was a gradual process of opening. He didn't immediately begin by trying to put his head in the

mouth of one of them. It is the same for us. As we go through this work with our own scary and difficult places, it is important to be gentle and respectful with ourselves. We have to trust and respect ourselves for going as far as we can go at any particular moment. That is good enough for that time. Eventually we will get another opportunity and then perhaps we can open a little more and a little more. And then if we maintain our commitment to the practice, at some point we will have the mindfulness, confidence, courage and goodwill to be able to open completely without any wish that our life would be different, with an acceptance that this is what our life is at this time.

As Milarepa found, there has to be true acceptance that this is what our life is before things can be transformed. We often try bargaining. But at the core, bargaining often still holds aversion towards an experience. It often involves the wish that it would go away and that our life would be other than it is. This is actually a lesson in the Second Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth says that what is referred to in the Pāli language as *taṇhā* is the origin of *dukkha*. *Taṇhā* is usually translated as "craving" though its literal translation refers to a quality of being thirsty. Donna has mentioned that Gregory Kramer sometimes refers to it as being like a hunger for something. So when we have a sense of being incomplete, of not having enough, of not being good enough, and we want something that we think will make us feel complete in some way, this is craving. Two of the most common forms of craving are the desire for something pleasant at one of the senses, including the mind; and the desire for something unpleasant to go away or be avoided.

Our work with the second noble truth is: "This noble truth of the origin of *dukkha* is to be abandoned."⁶ This work also begins with the application of bare attention. After recognizing and knowing experientially that *dukkha* is occurring, we also have to recognize and know experientially that there is some form of craving behind it or conditioning it. This is where the quality of acceptance, goodwill or, in the Pāli, *mettā* becomes important. As I've noted before, if we can't accept that something is present in our lives, then we can't see it clearly, we can't know it clearly. And if we don't know it clearly, it is very hard for us to respond in a really appropriate way. So like Milarepa with his demons, before we can respond skill-

fully we have to accept that the demons are here to stay, at least for a while. Then, since they are here for a while, our work is to find out what can we learn from them and about them. For instance, what is irritation like? Where do I feel it in the body and what is that like? When irritation is present how does that affect the mind and the heart? How does it affect my relationships with others?

Acceptance is one facet of this. We also talk about the practice of abandoning the cause of *dukkha* in terms of "letting go" or "surrender." Phillip Moffitt, a Spirit Rock Meditation Center teacher, has said:

"In studying the dharma, we are often instructed to surrender to the present, but what does it mean really? When we surrender, we are relinquishing our demand that the present be something other than it actually is and we are fostering a willingness to be present with what is. Surrendering to the present entails surrendering to our current limitations, both internal and external. The ability to surrender is essential not only for practicing the dharma, it is equally critical for living skillfully in daily life."⁷

When we let go or surrender to the present, when we accept the present, then, at least for that moment, we are letting go of the wish that this would make me feel better, that this would make me feel happier, that this would be more pleasant, that this pleasantness would not go away. We are letting go of the wish that our life would be other than the way it is. *This is quite powerful.*

When we let go, there is a simple willingness to know and to be our life as it is in this moment. *And*, it is through the power of mindfulness and concentration, through our ardent, passionate intention to clearly know things as they are, and the wisdom of the teachings and our own experience, that we find the courage to let go, the courage to face the demon, and even when necessary, the courage to make ourselves totally vulnerable to whatever it is.

When we are able to do this, it opens us up to the experience of the Third Noble Truth:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."⁸

Cessation isn't some super-extraordinary, mind-blowing experience. It is the nonreliance on craving, on wishing for a different life than the one that we have right now.

The Buddha tells us that our work is: "This noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha* is to be realized."⁹ So, with bare attention we notice when *dukkha* is present. Having noticed that, we remember to surrender our lives for this moment and to let go of whatever is being craved. And now, once we surrender, once we let go, we remember to look, with bare attention, to see what it is like when we let go. Sometimes what we notice will be that the particular demons go away — most often temporarily, but in time perhaps permanently. And when they go away, there can be a great sense of relief. And our confidence in the practice will grow.

As we see things as they are and surrender to the fact that this is what our life is at this moment, this also often creates a space for a more creative and more skillful response to our situation, one that is more likely to create changes in our lives and our relationships, changes that are more peaceful, respectful and harmonious with others and with ourselves. As this process continues over time, we may be surprised at some point to notice that the mind has become quite silent, that the heart has become quite open and responsive to others. And as we become more aware of these times of cessation, these times of silent mind-open heart, we may begin to notice that we are experiencing what the Buddha described in his instructions to Bahiya of the Barkcloth:

"Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: 'In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.' In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya.

"When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen... in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be 'with that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'with that,' then, Bahiya, you will not be 'in that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'in that,' then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."¹⁰

In this experience there is no grasping, no resistance, and no sense of "I" either, in terms of thoughts of being an observer or an owner. There is the simple experience of our lives at the phenomenal level: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, experiences of heaviness and lightness, coolness and heat, movement and stillness and of mental events coming and going. For most of us these experiences will be momentary. Sometimes they happen so quickly that we fail to see them clearly. Yet we do often begin to notice that our lives begin, slowly, to have a greater sense of lightness, of ease, even when the circumstances are difficult. This arises from applying both facets of mindfulness, bare attention and remembering the teachings of the Buddha as well as our own hard-earned wisdom.

These experiences of cessation arise from the consistent application of the four qualities that the Buddha tells us to bring to the fields of mindfulness. I've spoken about the ardent intention and effort to be mindful and to clearly know. But what about that last one, "being free of desires and discontent in regard to the world"?

It sounds kind of like the quality of cessation, doesn't it? But actually it is pointing to something else, something less advanced. This is a reference to the quality of *samādhi*, which is commonly translated as "concentration." As the mind becomes settled, collected, focused, the qualities of desire and discontent are temporarily suppressed, because they are simply incompatible with a mind that is collected, focused and settled. You can have agitation or calm, but not both at the same time.

This collected, calm, focused mind state develops from a continuity of mindfulness, whether attention is focused on one object—like a location where the sensations of breathing are being followed, or if it is focused on the parade of changing sensations and thoughts. The more we can string together moments of mindful attention, the more concentration develops. The more concentration there is, the easier it is to see things as they are. The more we see things as they are, the less we crave and cling and the more we let go, the more we surrender to our lives as they are. The more we let go in this way, our everyday default level of concentration becomes deeper or stronger, allowing us to live more peacefully, joyfully and skillfully. So from the ardent intention to be mindful and to see things clearly arises concentration, which increases our ability to see things clearly, which allows us to

respond more skillfully, which leads to more ability to be mindful, which leads to more concentration....

This practice and its result is expressed in some verses by the Buddha which I'd like to close with.

"Don't chase the past
 Or long for the future.
 The past is left behind,
 The future is not yet reached.

Right where it is, have insight
 Into whatever phenomena is present;
 Not faltering and not agitated,
 By knowing it one develops the mind.

Ardently do what should be done today—
 Who knows, death may come tomorrow.
 There is no bargaining with Mortality
 And his great army.

Whoever dwells thus ardent,
 —active day and night—
 Is, says the peaceful sage,
 One who has an auspicious day."¹¹

Notes

1. Goldstein, Joseph. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2013, p. 230.
2. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans. MN 28.2, *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*, The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 278.
3. Anālayo Bhikkhu. *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*. Birmingham, United Kingdom: Windhorse Publications: 2003, p. 244.

4. & 5. adapted from: Bhikkhu Bodhi. "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma," SN 56.11, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p.1844. The Pāli word *dukkha* has been used rather than the translation "suffering."
6. adapted from: Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p.1845. The Pāli word *dukkha* has been used rather than the translation "suffering."
7. Ascribed to Phillip Moffitt on the Spirit Rock Meditation Center FaceBook page, posted ~10:40 a.m. CST, 12/05/2013 - Accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/spiritrock>, 12:43 p.m. CST, 12/05/2013
8. adapted from: Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p.1844. The Pāli word *dukkha* has been used rather than the translation "suffering."
9. adapted from: Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p.1845. The Pāli word *dukkha* has been used rather than the translation "suffering."
10. Ireland, John, trans. Udāna 1.10, *The Udāna and The Itivuttaka*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997, p. 21.
11. MN 131, Bhaddekaratta Sutta, trans. Gil Fronsdal