

Satipaṭṭhāna (40) Benefiting the Mind Through Knowing

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

contracted, scattered, restlessness, dullness, simplicity, liberating, unwholesome, delusion, greed, settle, aversion, third foundation, recognition, knowing

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The third foundation of mindfulness has eight exercises or practices. They are divided into two groups of four. In each of them, the verb used and the activity referred to is “to know” – to simply know the mind states or ways the mind can be.

The first four exercises have to do with a mind that is either caught in the world of suffering or not: an unwholesome mind or a wholesome mind. The last four are about how the mind in meditation grows, matures, and becomes free in the dharma.

We begin with the first three exercises. We know a mind that has greed as a mind with greed and a mind without greed as a mind without greed or desire. We know a mind with ill will or aversion as such and a mind without

aversion as a mind without aversion. We know a mind with delusion or confusion as such, and a mind that is without delusion or confusion as a mind without delusion or confusion.

The fourth practice is often translated as knowing a contracted, shrunken, shriveled mind as a contracted, shrunken, shriveled mind, and a scattered mind as a scattered mind. Sometimes this is associated with the third and fourth hindrances – to know a mind that is sinking into sloth and torpor, into dullness, as such, and to know a mind that is scattered from restlessness and anxiety as such. Another possible translation is to know a collected mind and a scattered mind as such.

However it is translated, the art of this practice is to simply know, “This is how the mind is.” A mind that is afraid can be either contracted or scattered. It can be so afraid that it shrinks into itself, or it can be scattered because it is so restless. It runs around, so we are not really present for ourselves. These can be very difficult mind states to have.

Here, rather than these qualities being part of the mind – a mind with greed, aversion, and delusion – we are talking about a shrunken, contracted mind, a mind that is globally scattered, dispersed, distracted, jumping around, and restless. Sometimes minds are that way.

Fear, in particular, can have this effect on the mind. All the hindrances can have this effect on the mind.

I find it fascinating to look at my mind. When I see I have gotten caught up in some mental preoccupation or thought train, I then notice what has happened to my state of mind. It is as if the mind has gotten obscure, dark, and contracted. My world has gotten narrow and small. I am totally pulled into my concern.

When I am restless, uncertain, or anxious about something, I can feel the mind spinning and jumping around. It cannot sit still. It jumps around like water on a sizzling hot frying pan. It is hard to rein it in or settle the mind in this state.

The fascinating thing about the third foundation of mindfulness is that it does not give us advice about what to do with minds like this, which can be quite uncomfortable. All it says is, “The meditator knows a contracted mind as a contracted mind, and knows a dispersed, scattered mind, as a scattered mind.”

The practice of just knowing is so radically simple that it is hard to trust. It is hard to have confidence that it is worthwhile doing. We think: “Of course, aren’t we supposed to fix it, get away from it, make it better, and have a different kind of mind? We’re not really meditating if the mind is scattered. We have to get

advice about how to breathe deeply or use an antidote. We need to do something to fix it.”

There is no fixing in this exercise. It is about simply recognizing the mind as it is. Knowing, “Right now, this is how the mind is.” If the mind is somewhat settled, or one has had previous experience in the practice, this helps us begin to appreciate the power and simplicity of knowing: “Oh, this is how it is. This is a contracted mind. This is a scattered mind. Human beings have had contracted and scattered minds for tens of thousands of years. I am just one more in a long line of people who had minds like this. I have had many minds like this. This is how it is now. This is my turn. Maybe everyone has to have a turn with a scattered and distracted mind – this is my turn. Okay. Now my job is to just know it, to see it.”

We fall back on the simplicity of knowing and recognizing, “This is how it is.” As we progress in the practice, over time we begin to appreciate more and more how powerful and significant it is to know in this way – to just know that this is how it is.

We find that the practice of simply knowing helps free the mind from its stickiness. We are no longer so caught and involved in wanting it to be different. Remarkably, as the mind becomes less sticky, it becomes more settled and calm. That kind of knowing changes the

inner ecology, the inner landscape, and begins moving us towards freedom.

The second half of the third foundation of mindfulness is a set of four exercises that describes liberating states of mind that begin to open up in meditation. They help us on the path to freedom and liberation. They grow out of this radically simple act of knowing. It is phenomenal to watch this process happen – to be present, to know the mind state, and then see how the mind changes in the wake of that clear and simple knowing.

The primary thing I want to emphasize today is how powerful and significant the simplest act of knowing can be. For the next 24 hours, I would like to encourage you to experiment with knowing things as they occur in the simplicity of the moment. Not impatient for the next moment, not needing it to be different, not trying to run away, and not having a big agenda. See how complete, free, clarifying, liberating, and brightening it can be to simply know, “This is how it is.”

This also means that you allow the knowing to sink in – to register. Make room for the knowing. Give yourself time to know. This might sound silly, but it is as simple as coming to a door and knowing, “That is a door.” While driving your car – knowing, “The light is red.” Standing in the line in the supermarket – knowing, “I’m standing in a line.” Experiment in all kinds of places,

and see what effect this has on you. See the impact of practicing this radical simplicity that allows time for recognition.

Tomorrow and the next day we will discuss the liberating states of mind in the third foundation. Thank you very much.