

Introduction to Mindfulness (3 of 25)

Simplicity and How We Know

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Hello, and welcome to the third talk on meditation, which follows the 30-minute guided meditations supporting what we're doing each day. During this course on the instructions in mindfulness meditation, we're slowly putting down the foundations of the different elements that are useful to take into account when we do mindfulness practice. There will be 25 talks.

We will go deeper and deeper, and find fuller applications in our life of this path to freedom and

greater goodwill. If all of it was compressed into a 15-minute talk, it would seem extremely complicated. But I'm hoping that stretching it out over 25 days will support you in staying very simple, because simplicity is one of the hallmarks of mindfulness practice. Even though your life and life experience might be multifaceted, the idea is to find a way to stay simple and easeful as we know, show up, and are present for our experience.

Maybe this next point is for the purpose of teaching. But one way of appreciating this simplicity is to recognize that there are always only two things happening. There is what is happening, and there is how we're aware of it, the knowing of it.

What we're aware of could be many different things, of course. But the way we know it is simple. Everything is known through the lens of knowing. Everything is known through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. Everything passes through the lens of recognition, of awareness. Once we recognize or know something, it might get complicated again with memories, thoughts, values, expectations, desires, or fears. All kinds of things might happen.

Imagine an hourglass where the sand goes through a narrow neck. If that neck is very narrow, every particle of sand can be seen as it goes through. But if there was

no narrowing of the glass, all the sand would fall very quickly and you wouldn't see what's going on. (Maybe the image of narrowing and tightening up is an unfortunate metaphor.)

But the idea is that everything in our experience does go through a simple area of just being known in the most simple possible way. Before it is known, the world out there might be quite broad and multifaceted. After we know it, experience gets picked up by the mind, and memory, desires, fantasies, and projections come into play.

But in between there's this wonderful doorway of simple knowing. That's where the domain of mindfulness is. Whether we know what's in the world or we know what's going on within us, the idea is to have these two areas.

We know something, and how we know it is important. The how is a big part of what we're exploring here. We don't just know unconsciously or matter-of-factly. If we don't pay attention to how we know, how we're aware, and how we're attentive, it's too easy to bring along a lot of our attitudes, our emotions, our desires, our agendas, and our fears. These can color the way that we know.

That's okay. We don't have to be troubled by anything when we do mindfulness. That's the simplicity of it. The idea is to know that too – “Oh, *that's* how it is. That's how I'm knowing. When I know, I identify. I identify with

the breathing, with what's happening. When I know something, I immediately measure it, judge it, or evaluate it in relation to myself as a doer, myself as a victim, myself as a consumer, myself as trying to get something or prove myself. Oh, that's how it is.”

When we sit down to meditate with mindfulness, the idea is to keep it very simple and not complicate it immediately with ideas of getting concentrated. Because then the knowing is already biased in a certain way. There's a leaning-in and identification. We are looking for the concentration. Even the idea that we are supposed to be continuously aware and not be distracted can be another source of cloudiness or agitation in the knowing. The idea is to step back, relax enough, and then be content just to know what you can know.

The breathing is an anchor. The breathing is always there. Breathing is always in the present moment. Breathing always occurs now. So keep an eye out for the breathing, not so that you get focused on the breathing, but as a reference point for the present. Every time you come back to the breathing and be with it, this can help you to see more clearly how you are – you're distracted, you're irritated, you're sad, you're happy, you're relaxed, or you're tense.

Part of the function of awareness is to see that. For the purpose of meditation, none of it is wrong. In ordinary life, we come with all these attitudes about what we know. If we're happy, we might feel proud or hopeful. We add those things to feeling happy. If we feel kind of lousy or tense, we might feel like, "Oh, I'm a failure, I'm wrong or embarrassed" or something.

So keep it really simple. This is why some people find mindfulness meditation to be extremely forgiving or accepting as if there's breathing room to be who you are. No matter how you are, there's breathing room for it. Part of that breathing room, that spaciousness, is how we know it. "Oh, this is how it is." When you know this is how it is now, you are being mindful.

The paradox is that if you're distracted, and you know you're distracted, you're no longer distracted, even if the thoughts or distractions are still going on. If you are caught up in some emotion, and you know that you're caught up, then you're no longer quite caught up anymore. Part of you might be. So notice how you are.

In the guided meditation we just did, we took another step with the breathing. We did not only use the breathing as a reference point for distractibility or learning where we could relax more. We can also search for where the breathing is pleasant. It took me a long time to learn that it was okay and actually

supportive of meditation to find where meditation was pleasant and enjoyable and let that be a support for staying present.

This doesn't mean being attached to pleasantness or prioritizing it too much. But just look for where it is. Where is breathing pleasant? It might be just a moment at the end of the out-breath. Part of the end of the out-breath is letting go and relaxing. For some people that's not pleasant. It might be the beginning of the in-breath or the smooth feeling of expansion with the in-breath. Pleasant feelings might be present with the sensations of air going in and out through the nostrils. There is a nice tingling and sharpness there. There might be a softness in the belly at some point as the belly relaxes with the breath.

It might be possible to slightly adjust the rhythm, the speed, or the depth of breathing. You can make the breathing a little more shallow, a little deeper, a little longer, or a little shorter. It's still normal, but how you're breathing is a little more pleasant.

The value of touching into the pleasantness of breathing is not to feel more pleasure. Rather, the pleasantness is also a reference point to help you see better where the tensions, the challenges, and the discomforts are so that you can relax further and soften the body and the mind. Then you might be able to know

with the simplicity of knowing, "Oh, I'm feeling sad. Look at that." But the knowing of sadness is not sad. "Look at that. I'm irritated. I'm afraid. I'm agitated." The knowing of those things is not defined by the sadness, the irritation, the agitation. It's just knowing.

I believe I've used a lot of words and a lot of ideas. Trying to remember what I said might lend itself to becoming complicated. But I'm hoping that you will somehow take it all in with this message to keep it simple. Let the breathing support you to be very simple and recognize how you are and what's happening with you. Because how you are is the compost, the material, and the basis for greater clarity of awareness. Don't bypass how you are, but recognize how you are. How you know is one of the central things we're doing here. It's half the picture. There is what you know and how you know it.

As you go about your day today with different activities, whatever you're doing, check in with yourself periodically and ask yourself, "How do I know my environment? How am I taking it in? How am I relating to it? How is it being known? Is it being known through the filter of emotions, agendas, and beliefs? Is it being known simply? What would it mean to know simply right now without all the baggage I carry with me? Just to know."

I think that would be a wonderful exercise and I would love to hear from all of you what you learn from that. I know that's not possible. Thank you very much for today, and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.