

Harmony of Zen and Vipassana (5 of 5)

Prescriptive and Descriptive

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My friends, we have come to the end of the week. I have been presenting the basic, simplest way that we teach mindfulness here at Insight Meditation Center and in parts of the Western vipassana world. The so-called instructions are to be mindful of breathing, body, emotions, and thoughts. The instructions are also to be aware of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: the body, feelings, mind states, and what are called *dhammas* – the inner processes that lead either to suffering or to freedom.

There is another kind of instruction: “This is what you do.” “Focus here.” “Focus your attention this way.” It can give the idea that we are engaged in *doing* – that this is

a doing practice – that we are doing something with awareness, directing our attention someplace. It is a fine instruction to follow. To be engaged and fully involved in a task is wonderful. It can be wonderful for meditation as well.

But doing sometimes comes with extra baggage. Doing – even just bringing awareness to something – can involve a lot of self. We may be checking ourselves out as we do it: “Am I doing it the right way? Am I doing it well enough?” Or: “I can’t do this. The person next to me is probably doing it better.” Or, “I’m the best one.” These little attitudes can be very subtle, almost subconscious, thinking that meditation is too difficult for me.

When I was a young student, I had the idea that if something was happening to me, it was not the right experience. Because I had that subtle, almost subconscious idea, I could never get it right. And that was painful for me. It is even painful to say I used to be that way. I also had the subtle idea that there was always somewhere else to be – somewhere that was the *It*, the experience, to have. There was always a kind of dissatisfaction with what was happening – and it came along with doing.

At other times, I discovered that there was such pristine purity or simplicity in doing. I forgot myself while doing

activities, like gardening and cooking. It was the same with mindfulness of breathing. I gave myself over to it completely, and any sense of me being the doer dropped away. It was simple, and there was so little attitude.

But still, there are instructions for where to bring your attention and what to do. In this sense, mindfulness instructions can be seen as prescriptive. This is what you do.

Another way of understanding mindfulness instructions is that they are not prescriptive, but rather, descriptive. The instructions describe what awareness is noticing. There is no active searching for something, no trying to do or get something, nor trying to make something happen.

Rather, it is like settling back in a nice easy chair and just noticing – being aware of what comes into awareness. So we are sitting quietly; a loud sound happens outside, and that arises in awareness. Mindfulness describes what we are aware of, “Oh, that’s what it is.”

It is not that we are actively describing. It is more like the instructions are describing. It is like, “Oh, okay. When an inhale arises, we know an inhale.” This happens not because we are practicing mindfulness of

breathing as an intentional act per se, but rather, we just know this is what is being known. We know this is what has arisen.

The description of mindfulness as being all-encompassing means there is openness in our awareness, in our sense of presence. You could say awareness is receptive. Awareness receives whatever is coming and going, arising and happening.

But to say awareness is receptive may be a bit too prescriptive – like, “Okay, now I have to be receptive.” It is more like the windows have been opened, and you may hear the sounds of birds or feel a breeze coming into the house. You are not intending to feel a breeze or to hear the sounds of birds. It is just that this is what arises.

We have eyes, ears, a nose, a tongue, and sensations of our body. As we sit, what is known here? What are we aware of? What comes into awareness? This way of practicing – where mindfulness is more a description of what we know rather than a prescription of what to do – is how things begin to shift in practice. Awareness shifts when there is enough stability – enough ability to not wander off in thought with a scattered mind.

It may take a long time to settle down and learn to recognize the forces of distraction, the hindrances, and

the power of the desiring mind. To let all that come to rest – to soften, let go, and become quiet. To be able to be fully here in the present moment in a simple, very ordinary way – nothing special. We are not trying to do anything, except allow ourselves to be here and to be open.

The practice has, at some point, more of a descriptive than a prescriptive quality. What helps us to get there is to know ourselves well. One of the strengths of mindfulness practice is that we are learning to pay careful attention and recognize the many different dimensions of what is happening in the present moment.

If the Buddha popped into modern society – teleported somehow from ancient India to New York City – he would not be prepared for the experience. However, he would know how to be present for the experience. He would feel the experience, know the experience, and know himself well. The Buddha was a walker – he had walked all over India. So, if he started walking through New York City, he would not know the difference between a curb and a road, what the lines on the road meant, or what traffic lights were. He could not read English so he would not know what a one-way street was. He would not know a lot. He would get into trouble pretty quickly walking the streets of New York.

That may be a silly example, but it is the same way with our minds. If we do not know aspects of our mind, then we do not even know what we do not know.

When I was a new practitioner, I did not have an image of myself as being an angry person. I did not recognize when I was angry. That was outside of my blinders – outside of what I would notice. I did not recognize a whole range of emotions or know how to bring them into awareness. When I received instructions for mindfulness of emotions, I realized: “Oh, look at that. All these things I did not know.”

My ability to be aware – in a descriptive way, in a way of choiceless awareness, just aware of what is here – expanded now into a new realm. The world of what I was aware of was no longer so narrow.

When I used to focus only on my breathing in meditation, I sometimes felt quite present, wonderful, and free in good ways. But it was all within a narrow domain. I have learned throughout my life to open up and see more and more. I do not actively or intentionally practice with all these realms. Rather, they are just there as part of the territory.

It is like if you are driving through New York City, you are not consciously or actively studying the lines on the

road to interpret what they are. You are not looking at a red six-sided stop sign thinking, “What is that?”

To see a stop sign while driving is second nature for you – and the same is true for practice. As we learn the territory – the vocabulary, letters, and map of our experience – then the freedom we receive, in the awareness of all things, starts becoming more and more inclusive.

There is a balance between practicing to discover what is here and practicing to allow what is here. These two practices go together well. They are mutually supportive. Sometimes it seems like I am doing more of one; sometimes I am doing more of the other. The discovery practice is a little more prescriptive, “This is what I am doing.” The allowing practice – just being free in the middle of stuff – is more descriptive, “This is what is happening in my experience.”

I hope what I have said gives you something to think about and explore and that it adds some richness to your practice of meditation, your practice of awareness. I hope it does not make you busy and that you have a sense of the mind as awake, clear, resting in an easy chair, and aware of what is happening.

Thank you all very much.