

Mindfulness of Breathing (31) Wondrous Mind

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The topic for this week is what in Pali is called *citta saṅkhāra*. It's often translated as "mental formations," "mental dispositions," or "mental constructs." For this week, I have been using the expression "mental activities." These are activities of the mind, such as planning, creating, imagining, or actively thinking about things. A simple perception of something, like seeing a wall across the room, wouldn't necessarily be called an activity. It is an activity, but it's not one of the formations or constructions we make.

There are many fascinating things about mental formations, mental constructions, *saṅkhāras*. One is that some things we take to be inherent – or just the way things are – turn out to be an activity of the mind.

An example is boredom. When we're bored, it can feel like the thing that we're doing is boring. The event or the situation is boring. *It* is boring.

But, in fact, the mind's activity creates the feeling or the sense of boredom. It may even be a subliminal judgment or evaluation. It's holding oneself apart from experience. It can be resistance. It can be a loss of intimacy with experience. All these things are going on that construct or activate this feeling, the idea of boredom, in the mind.

The idea that we're constructing, forming, or making boredom in the mind gives us a very different orientation to boredom than if we see the situation as boring. Because if the situation is boring, the situation is to blame. So we had better just get away from the situation or change it.

But if we're responsible because it's an activity of the mind, then we can practice with it. One of the things we learn through meditation is how to practice with mental formations, mental activities. We practice so we're not caught in them. So they don't pull us around by the nose. We learn how to settle mental activities – become more expansive and freer of them – even when they're present.

With boredom, one would turn the attention around 180 degrees from the boring situation – whatever it might be, internal or external – and have the attention really look at the boredom itself. Look it right in the eye and say, "Boredom, I see you." And feel it, be with it, and experience it.

Learning how to dissipate boredom because you see it clearly is very empowering. It shows us that we don't have to be a victim of our own mental activities. One of the great pieces of good news in Buddhist teaching is that much of our suffering is related to the activities of our mind. While we can't always change the situation in the world, we can bring some care and attention to shifting how the mind constructs these ideas, concepts – and even ideas of self. It's phenomenally good news if we have the mindfulness, attention, and stability to see how this works.

To clearly see mental activities in this way – and learn to tranquilize, calm, and relax them. In the Buddhist tradition, a tranquil mind is considered to be beautiful. Tranquilizing the mind is not becoming numb or less than. It actually begins tapping into something wondrous and amazing about what's available inside. This can arise with a mind that is very tranquil, clean, transparent, smooth, and easy.

This points to one of the problems in the English language with translating the word *saṅkhāra* as 'formations' or 'activities,' because they seem uninspired. Mental formations – what is that? It's kind of an uninspired translation. Mental activities may mean a little bit more, but I don't think it has much inspiration value.

I believe that in ancient India, the word *saṅkhāra*, which we're translating as 'formations,' had very positive associations. It was used in pre-Buddhist Brahmanical traditions to describe sacred rituals. In fact, *saṅkhāra* sometimes is “a means to make something sacred.” At least that's how the dictionary sometimes defines it. This idea of something sacred, a ritual – which some people may have a heartwarming and deep connection to – is a very different idea than just mental activities.

Mental activities are qualities of the mind that make things, prepare things, or construct our sense of self, the universe, and ideas. As that gets quieter, the movement of mental activities can have a quality of sacredness, reverence, and wonder.

My favorite word is 'beauty,' which is a translation of the Pali word *kalyāṇa*. *Kalyāṇa* is also often translated as 'good.' One of the places where it's translated as 'good' is in discussions about karma. Karma means 'action.'

The primary action we're dealing with in meditation is mental action, mental karma.

Sometimes it's translated that there are two kinds of karma: good karma and bad karma. The word for 'good' is *kalyāṇa*, but its primary meaning is 'beautiful.' You get a very different feeling about actions if you refer to them as being either beautiful or not beautiful. The idea that we can have a potential in the mind or have mental activity become beautiful is much more inspiring than simply “calming the mental formations” or “experiencing the mental formations.”

The seventh step of *ānāpānasati* is:

*Breathing in experiencing the [mental formations]
mental activity. Breathing out experiencing mental
activity.*

This step happens after experiencing some modicum of joy, well-being, and happiness in meditation. It's important to remember that all these things are situational. These steps of meditation are contextual. We're not supposed to be in a hurry to get past them.

If you hear meditation instructions, and you're not there yet, just take it in. File it away for the future. There's no need to feel bad that you're not there. We're all cycling through the 16 steps. We will be at different stages on

different days, minutes, or weeks because of what's happening in our lives.

It's good to think that we're always beginning at step one. Do not be in a hurry. Don't feel like you have to always be following the steps I'm going through. I'm going through them sequentially. However, the trap of that is to assume you're supposed to be coming right along. I'm trying my best to make it come alive for you, so trust where you are.

Trusting where you are is part of the beauty that we're developing in this practice. Trust the appreciation, reverence, care, and love for oneself: "I can just be where I am, and practice there." Trust that this process will unfold. *Ānāpānasati* is a natural process, and it will unfold for you in its own way. There is no need to be in a rush or to hurry through it. This trust is part of the beauty of the mind.

Rather than seeing mental activity, mental formations as neutral, uninspired stuff in the mind, we're touching into a capacity of the mind to be beautiful and wondrous – something that may border on or feel sacred. The great value of this practice is to discover a rich, wondrous, beautiful inner life that can inform how we live in the world. I like to think that as we discover this wondrous inner life, we get turned inside out. What was inside is

no longer inside, but something we share with the world around us.

As we continue next week, maybe you'll keep in mind that we're working with this capacity we have for inner beauty. It's something wondrous that lives in us. Even though some of the mental activities you're living by, and are caught in the grip of – that you don't even know you're caught by – might be standing in the way for now of seeing how wondrous it is on the inside of you, the beauty that you have.

Thank you for today, and I look forward to continuing next week.