

Introduction to Mindfulness (1 of 25)

Beginning with Breathing

January 8, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *Paṭacārā*, lucid awareness, clarity, awareness, consciousness, freedom, distraction, hurricane, waterfall, fountain, chaos, activated, likes, dislikes, judging, recognizing, stability, posture, present, children, diapers, uprightness, alertness, relaxed, tension, attentiveness, preoccupations, planning, reviewing, justifying, reactivity, filter, current, branch

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Hello again. With this talk, I am beginning a week on mindfulness of breathing as part of a five-week series introducing the basic elements of mindfulness meditation as taught at IMC (Insight Meditation Center). By spending five days on each of these five topics – breathing, body, emotions, thinking, and bringing the practice into our life – I’m hoping that over the five days,

we can lay down a foundation for moving into a fuller experience of mindfulness practice. I hope that this will be appreciated by people who are well-experienced in practice as well. For those of you who've had basic instructions in mindfulness before, I hope that I can offer a different perspective that might go a little bit further into the potentiality of this wonderful practice that we do.

So we're here to practice mindfulness. The synonym I use for mindfulness is awareness. But we are developing a lucid awareness or a clarity of awareness where we are really present for our experience. We know it, we feel it, we see it, and we're there with the experience in a way that feels a little bit like a miracle. Maybe it's not a miracle exactly (who knows what a miracle is?) But what a marvel, what a special thing it is to be conscious, to be aware, and to feel that awareness, to know that we're here and present.

I mean, we're not going to be around in life for that long. This is the special time for us to be conscious, to be aware, to be present with the spark of life, the spark of consciousness that will, soon enough pass, and someone else will have it. There have been many

people over thousands of years who have had their time to be present. Now we have our time.

We need to use that time well. We can discover the miracle of being aware. We can discover how it leads us to freedom and also, how it can be a catalyst for the emergence of the beautiful potential that comes with freedom.

The instructions in mindfulness begin very simply. I would like to suggest that mindfulness starts with just becoming aware that we're not aware, that we're distracted. We recognize clearly that we are distracted when we are distracted. When we sit down to meditate, the basic instruction is to meditate with breathing – be mindful of your breathing. But we can be aware of being distracted rather than thinking that we're supposed to stay focused on the breath and we're doing something wrong if our mind loses touch with breathing.

Some people can barely be aware of one full breath before the mind wanders off. Then they get upset that the mind wanders off and think they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing. The beginning instructions are to use the breathing as a basis or a

foundation but not to be undistracted – rather, to have the breathing help you see how distracted you are.

Sometimes when we sit down to meditate we discover that the mind is a hurricane, a cascading waterfall of thoughts, a fountain spewing out things, or just chaos. Rather than thinking that you're not meditating or you're doing it wrong, the first insight of mindfulness meditation is discovering that the mind is out of control. Wow, the mind has a mind of its own. It's just thinking, and fantasizing, and remembering, and planning, and arguing, and complaining, and wow, it's doing all this stuff.

And *that's* what's happening. That's the moment we're not distracted. Paradoxically, when we know that we're distracted, at that moment we're not, because we know what's going on. Then we're doing the mindfulness practice.

This is a very important point, because if you don't understand this and you think the point is to stay focused continuously with the breathing and you get upset when you're distracted, then you're just agitating yourself more. You're getting even more distracted by

the upset. Not getting upset by a distracted mind is part of the training of mindfulness. We learn how to not be activated or reactivated by our likes and dislikes, by what we think should be happening and not happening, or by how we judge ourselves for what's happening. We simply learn the art of clearly seeing, clearly recognizing: *that's* what's happening.

Take a meditation posture that gives you some stability so the posture itself expresses a sense of being really present. I'm inspired by children in diapers who can't even walk yet. I've seen them sitting upright on the floor sometimes with a bare torso on a warm day. The uprightness of those spines, the alertness, and the presence are so beautiful to see. Their bodies are completely relaxed. They're sometimes too young to carry a lot of tension. In the beauty and alertness of the posture of their bodies, it's clear that they're attentive and present.

Or like a dog – when it's standing at attention in a relaxed way, it's clear the dog is really attending.

The idea is to find a posture that can be relaxed, not tense. If there's a lot of tension then we want to emphasize a relaxing posture. But sooner or later it's

not only about relaxing. It's also about a sense of strong, alert, attentiveness through the body. So take some care with the posture. Then relax, soften, and take some deep breaths to help you relax further, but also to begin becoming familiar with what breathing is like.

Let the breathing return to normal after a while. Then notice how you're distracted. Notice how the mind wanders off. Notice the preoccupations. Once you have clarity of knowing that, ideally this comes without judgment. If you're judging it that's just one more distraction that you can be aware of. “Oh, judging, judging. Thinking.”

Just see clearly what's going on. See the tricks of the mind. See how you get pulled away from the present moment into other times and places. Or see how you're judging so much, or so reactive to what's happening in the present moment that the quality of attention is not fully present. The awareness is arising through a filter of reactivity, pulling away, or wanting something different.

The idea is that we're starting to become familiar with all the ways that we are not fully present – without

judgment about that, without criticism about it, and learning to appreciate that that is a moment of attention. Seeing how we're distracted is a moment of mindfulness. Then after a few moments of that clarity – “Oh boy, I'm really spending a lot of time planning my day. This is planning my day.” Or, “I'm reviewing that conversation yesterday, complaining.” Or “I'm coming up with a better response than I did.” Or, “I'm just living in my regrets, reviewing over and over again the terrible things I did. That's what's happening.”

Instead of judging: “Oh, that is terrible. I'm a terrible person,” or justifying: “I need to plan. I'm supposed to plan,” and coming up with all the different reasons why we're supposed to be doing it, the idea is to find that place where we can very matter-of-factly, simply, and directly know: “I'm distracted. I'm caught up. This is how I'm caught up.” We're starting to become familiar with the tricks of the mind, how the mind takes us away from a qualitatively rich way of being present here and now.

So do that for a few moments and then come back to the breathing. At this beginning point in the practice, the purpose of the breathing is not something to stay focused on. That's certainly nice if you can do it. Its

function is to help us see clearly how much we're wandering off. It gives us a reference point to see the movements of the mind. If we don't have a reference point, then it's too easy to be pulled into the currents of the mind and not even know that we're being pulled down the river of the mind because we're so in it.

Imagine it's as if you don't even know you're floating in the current of the river, but you grab onto a branch from a tree hanging over the river. You hold on there for a few minutes and you're not being pulled along in the current anymore. Then you can feel the strength of the current – wow, it's a strong current. Or maybe it's a weak current. Then you let go, and you're in the current for a while. You don't even know you're in it until another branch comes along.

In mindfulness meditation, the branch for us is breathing. When we hold on we see more clearly what's happening. We do it again and again, seeing how our mind is distracted. In this way, distraction is not proof that you're meditating wrong. Seeing distractions is how you know you're meditating. “Oh, this is what's happening. This is what's happening. Oh, now I see. This is what's happening.”

Over the next few days, we'll talk more about getting focused on breathing and staying more continuous with it. But this exercise lays the foundation for our ability to do that in a productive, useful way. So, if you'd like homework, you could do this in your daily life as well as in meditation. Become aware of how you are distracted in everyday life, and how you get pulled into your thoughts and preoccupations so the attention is not qualitatively rich and not fully present here with what's happening. This can be done with conversations with another person, activities in the kitchen, cleaning, driving, or whatever you're doing. Start noticing how you are. See the tricks of the mind. I look forward to being with you. I hope that you appreciate the nun *Paṭacārā*, whose sitting posture is such a wonderfully good model for an alert, dignified way of being really present – just here, now, relaxed, and aware. Thank you very much.