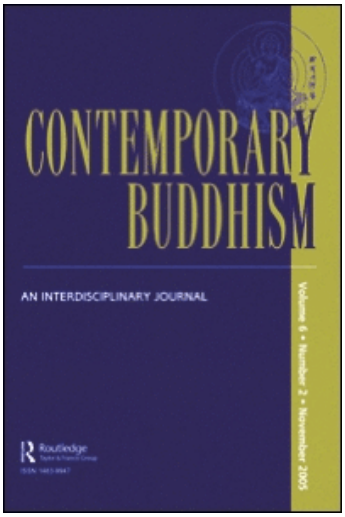

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MINDFULNESS AND LOVING-KINDNESS

Sharon Salzberg

Mindfulness, as the word is commonly used in contemporary meditation teaching, refers to both being aware of our present moment's experience, and relating to that experience without grasping, aversion or delusion. All three habitual tendencies distort our perception of what is happening, and lead us to futile and misguided efforts to deny or control our experience. Loving-kindness is a quality of the heart that recognizes how connected we all are. Loving-kindness is essentially a form of inclusiveness of caring, rather than categorizing others in terms of those whom we care for and those who can be easily excluded, ignored or disdained. Any reduction in our tendency to fall into attachment, aversion or delusion helps refine and expand the force of loving-kindness. A deepening of insight will inevitably include seeing how all of our lives are inextricably interconnected. The diminishing of grasping, aversion and delusion and the increase in insight are both reasons mindfulness naturally leads us to greater loving-kindness.

In contemporary meditation teaching, the word mindfulness is used in several different ways—as meaning the act of recollecting, as being present, and very commonly, as a kind of compound which in Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, would be *sati-sampajañña*, or awareness and clear comprehension combined.

One way of seeing this is to say that mindfulness is a relational process—mindfulness is not just knowing what is happening, such as 'In this moment I am hearing a sound.' Being mindful is knowing that we are hearing a sound in a certain way, that is, hearing it free of grasping, aversion and delusion. One of my early meditation teachers, Anagarika Munindra, often emphasized this aspect of mindfulness, saying that it is precisely because of this particular characteristic that we talk about living in a way that is never separated from mindfulness, living in a way that is always connected to mindfulness.

While simply being more aware in the moment that we are hearing a sound, or tasting a flavour, or feeling a sensation, certainly has great and important benefits, it is the fact that mindfulness is free of grasping (greed), aversion (anger), and delusion that means that it provides the platform for more sustained transformation and insight.

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We talk about finding a path leading away from greed and anger and delusion because they are forces that distort our perception of what is real and tie us to habits of old even if those habits repeatedly cause us suffering. The path away from those distortions also naturally leads us to greater loving-kindness.

Loving-kindness is a quality of the heart that recognizes how connected we all are. Sometimes it's described as extending friendship to ourselves and others—not in the sense of liking everyone, or dispensing universal approval, but more as an inner knowing that all our lives are inextricably interconnected. When we experience loving-kindness, we acknowledge that every one of us shares the same wish to be happy, and often a similar confusion as to how to achieve that happiness. We also recognize that we share the same vulnerability to change and suffering, which elicits a sense of caring.

Partly mindfulness leads to greater loving-kindness by the diminishing of those painful and habitual reactions like grasping, aversion and delusion in our minds, and partly because that very diminishing becomes the platform for more clearly seeing truths that are always present but may be hidden from our view, such as the interconnected nature of all of life.

Mindfulness is the way out of sheer reflexive reaction to our experience, and so is called the great protector. It works as a protection because it helps us break through the legends, the myths, the habits, the biases and the lies that can be woven around our lives. We can clear away the persistence of those distortions, and their familiarity, and come to much more clearly see for ourselves what is true. When we can see what is true, we can form our lives in a different way.

Let's go back to the moment of mindfully hearing a sound. There are so many ways to hear a sound. That moment of hearing can be an opening into understanding, into insight. Or we can hear a sound and be reactive to it, hear it only in the conventional way.

When I went to Burma to do intensive meditation in 1985, they were doing construction the entire time I was there, building a new dining room about 100 yards away, day after day, hour after hour, metal pounding into metal. It was an unimaginable barrage of noise.

I had gone there with a close friend who was living in the room next to mine. One day, I was out doing walking meditation, moving slowly, noticing the lifting, moving, placing of my leg, in the incredible din of the construction. I glanced up, and she was coming out of her room, with a tin of milk powder in her hand, hoisted behind her shoulder, ready to throw. I looked up, grabbed her arm and told her, 'Don't do it.'

There are so many ways to hear a sound. Do we hear the sound of construction and get filled with delight at the generosity of many donors, even very poor people, who gave to the effort? Do we hear the sound and celebrate the expansion of the monastery? Do we hear the sound and feel irate that the noise is infiltrating our quest for peace? Do we hear the sound and angrily blame the workmen, who are simply working so that they themselves can feed their families (and give to noble projects)?

Mindfulness tells us that there is a distinction between simply hearing the sound and the story we build around it, and when we can find that gap we can take a look at that story and see if we want to further it or not, act motivated by it or not. We can hear the sound and become more and more involved and reactive and upset; we can hear it and look to see what is the nature of this experience, what is actually going on. This doesn't mean that we never try to do something about irritating sounds. It does mean that we look at our reaction to try to understand it more fully, and to understand if in fact the action we are about to take is appropriate. No longer hurling cans at people would be a very good result!

In the Buddhist psychology, it is said every one of our experiences is felt by us to either be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Some people fear if they develop a lot of mindfulness, if they become proficient in the practice of meditation, everything will become a gray, neutral blob, and they won't feel anything any more as pleasant or painful. This is not so. This feeling tone is a part of everything we can know—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, thinking. What happens after we register the feeling tone of pleasantness, unpleasantness or neutrality is the place where we either relate with mindfulness and emerge into freedom, or we continue to suffer.

There are three main elements or ways of conditioning that we see quite clearly through mindfulness. We see, first of all, that we are conditioned to feel attachment toward pleasant objects—sounds, sights, sensations in the body, pleasant mind states. The quality of attachment in this particular sense is one of holding on, clinging, grasping. To hold on, to grasp, or to cling creates insecurity, dependency since what we are holding on to is fragile because of the constantly changing nature of things, the impermanent nature of all of life.

Winter is coming. What happens if we hold on to autumn? What happens when we hold on to youth? When we hold on to life itself? We can see that people consider it almost a personal humiliation to be sick, grow old, or to die, as if we should be able to determine not to, as though they had made a grave mistake somewhere. Yet, we cannot control it. How can we? The body has its own nature and it is continually changing. The mind has its own nature. If you think how many mind states you have experienced since you've begun reading, which one did not change? Which one was the real you in that sense? People change, outside of our command. How can we get that to stop happening?

Attachment or the greed of wanting things to be a certain way is not somehow bad or wrong, to be judged harshly or condemned. While it may not be useful to see attachment as bad or wrong, it is accurate to it see as the cause of much of the suffering in our lives. To be attached means we are out of harmony with the way things actually are, or out of harmony with the truth, so it is bound to be painful. It is bound to be conflicted somewhere, sometime.

To be attached means we think we should be able to be in control, that things should not change, that they should stay the way we want them to be. Because the happiness we experience while in the state of attachment is transient,

fragile, it is going to be shattered again and again. And whatever loving-kindness we might attempt is liable to be overtaken by the demands of attachment.

Loving-kindness is essentially a form of generosity, an offering of the heart, rather than categorizing others in terms of those whom we care for and those who can be easily excluded, ignored or disdained. Loving-kindness may or may not manifest as material generosity, but it is a kind of generosity of the spirit, moving us from our normal self- preoccupation to a completely inclusive attention toward all beings. Attachment will quickly laden loving-kindness with impatience, expectation, an urge to be thanked, a need to see results in someone's changed behaviour or attitude. Any reduction in our tendency to fall into attachment helps refine and expand the force of loving-kindness.

The next habitual conditioning we often see in the mind is aversion. Aversion includes anger, fear, vindictiveness, frustration, impatience, not liking, and corrosive guilt, which is a form of sometimes chronic aversion toward oneself. All of these habits of mind hurt us, they are damaging mental states. They are painful in the moment of experiencing them because there is a kind of burning that accompanies them.

Aversion is the mind state that dislikes the object we know in the moment, it strikes out against it. It is a state that desires separation from what is happening, the creation of distance, non-connection. It's a state that doesn't cling but rather searches for faults. It is a state of repulsion. If it becomes habitual, we tend to find unlikeable, unacceptable experiences everywhere; everywhere we look we see what is wrong. We do not like what that person is wearing, and we do not like who that person is with, and we don't like the wallpaper and so on.

When we react to unpleasant-feeling experiences with aversion, it means we strike out against them, we just do not want to be aware of that unpleasant feeling. We withdraw from the experience, we separate from it, or we are afraid of it, or we are impatient about it. Perhaps we take what is happening in the moment and we project it through time as though it were never going to change in any way. Or we spin out with manufactured associations with what is happening, '*This means I will be alone forever.*' '*It is because of this that I will never be happy.*'

What mindfulness teaches us is that there can be a big difference between pain and suffering. We can hear a painful sound, see a painful sight, have a painful experience in the body or mind, and we don't need to add to it the suffering of fear, anger, or mental anguish.

There is often a strong factor in aversion of expectations not being met. Expectations about ourselves, about a situation, about another person. It is important to understand that anger does not exist inherent in any painful or disappointing object. Rather, it exists in our relationship to it. In any situation there are many possible responses that run the gamut from anger to compassion and everything in between.

When anger is strong, it functions as a distorting lens so we cannot see clearly what is actually happening. When we feel anger with pain, loss, and change, that means we feel anger toward life itself because these are the

inevitable elements of existence. When aversion is repetitive, it becomes habitual and it leads to disharmony, suspiciousness, lack of trust and a lack of joy.

Clearly a mind filled with aversion is not inclining towards loving-kindness. While it is important to not condemn or hate the anger we see arising within us, mindfulness shows us its limiting, binding nature. For example, when was the last time you were very angry with yourself over something indiscreet and foolish you said one day, while you also recalled the 50 good things you had also done that very same day?

Not likely! More likely our sense of who we are and all that we will ever be collapses around that one unskillful comment. Loving-kindness does not insist that that particular comment was brilliant and witty—perhaps it was really foolish and that will have its own consequences—but that indiscreet moment is not the totality of who we are. It could never be. It is a characteristic of anger to foster that collapse, that tunnel vision.

If we do not get lost in the anger we feel, then we do not fall into the trap of concretizing or reifying a trait, a person, a situation, a thought. We do not see impermanence as permanent, or mistake a state that has the potential to change as one forever marking ourselves or others. Mindfulness, which frees us from the grip of aversive feeling, gives us flexibility of attention, buoyancy and spaciousness of attention. This allows us the suppleness to look at our experience from different angles, to see beyond rigid characterizations, like 'I'm so stupid and always will be,' and 'You're so bad, and that's all you'll be forever.' It opens up the door for loving-kindness and compassion to enter.

A third habitual conditioning that dominates our lives is delusion. The word delusion is used in several different ways in Buddhist teaching, as meaning ignorance, as not knowing, and as knowing wrongly. Here I am using delusion as disconnection, numbness, confusion as to what is actually happening right now. Especially when our experience is felt by us to be fairly neutral, not particularly pleasant or unpleasant, we have the tendency to effectively go to sleep by falling into delusion. We are conditioned to not be present, to not be fully awake when something is not striking us as highly pleasant or unpleasant. We space out, we get disconnected, we do not understand what is happening to us because we are not paying full attention.

We tend, by and large, to not be very tuned in to subtlety, and to depend on intensity in order to feel alive. In neutral terrain our attention dulls and slips away. This state of delusion is characterized by anxiety, uncertainty, perplexity, sloth and torpor.

When delusion becomes habitual, it spreads out beyond those times in which our experience is just neutral (which can be problematic enough.) When the mind is filled with delusion or when delusion is strong in us in a particular moment, we do not see grasping or aversion as they are operating. We might barely notice a sense of inner dissatisfaction, or the pain of confusion about what is going on, and to the extent we do notice it, not even care about it. There is complacency about our lives; we just do not care enough to affect change.

Lost in delusion, it is difficult to know what we are feeling, and thus it is harder to sense what others might be feeling, which is an essential foundation for both morality and empathy. If we live more or less in a fog, we tend to be cut off from our own emotional reactions and simply do not recognize how it feels when we are excluded, hurt, lied to, disdained. Without that sensitivity, we are without an important ingredient in the desire to help rather than harm, to include rather than exclude, to be truthful rather than duplicitous.

We also rely on that kind of sensitivity in the deepening of empathy. Recalling what it felt like to be humiliated helps us resonate with the one who seems to be in a humiliating position. Based on that building block, we can find our hearts moved, reach out a helping hand, be in some kind of solidarity with the person, rather looking from on-high distantly, as if our lives had never been touched by such an emotion or situation.

The clearer we are about our emotions and reactions, the more we create a foundation for responsiveness of conscience and caring. The greater our understanding of the nature of life, the more we see of how much we hold in common. We discover a much greater sense of connection to all.

The teachings of mindfulness invite us to be awake and present with balance and serenity and insight, when our experience is pleasant, when it is unpleasant, and when it is neutral. We see, and learn to be free of, the habits of grasping, aversion and delusion through the consistent cultivation of mindfulness. This freedom is the ground out of which much greater loving-kindness for ourselves and others emerges.

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