

Exploring Meditation

2. Why Mindfulness? by Bhante Dhammika

Good afternoon again and welcome.

We're going to continue our talks about meditation, and you will recall that last time we asked you to consider the place where you meditate, the posture you adopt when you begin your meditation, we talked about the actual procedure: what to do, how to do it, and some possible small problems that you might encounter. We also asked you to take this approach: for the first week to meditate just for 15 minutes. So, in the last week you would have been meditating for 15 minutes. And we asked you to try your best to do it at least once a day. So, for the last week hopefully you have been sitting in a comfortable posture, nestling your hands in your lap or on your knees, closing your eyes and for 15 minutes just becoming aware of, being mindful of the movement of your breath as it goes in and out. And if you have been doing that then you've already laid the foundations for good, solid meditation practice which in time will mature into a very good practice, which will start to have effects that you will notice very shortly.

Now, today I'd like to talk about the very centre of meditation, which is mindfulness or awareness.

Last week we talked about focusing your attention on your breath and inevitably the question will be: why ... and why the breath? What is the purpose of this? So, to answer that question, we have go back to what we spoke last week, which is: why are you meditating? What do you hope to achieve as result of meditation? As we said, the best goal, the most realistic goal for meditation is to use meditation to help me to become more calm, more relaxed, more able to deal with various *knocks and blows* of ordinary life. So, for the time being, that is the goal of meditation. To learn to relax to be calm within how we are living our ordinary daily life. So, then how can fixing our attention on the breath do that? And that's the good question, and I hope to be able to answer this best I can. Our understanding is this that one of the major causes or distresses and difficulties, confusion and self-created problems in ordinary life is that we're sort of not aware of many of the thing that we do and say, of many of our reactions. Quite often we think, we're doing something for this reason, whereas in fact it actually might be that we are doing for another reason altogether. In short, the average person, the ordinary person only has a peripheral awareness of themselves and their surroundings.

So, what meditation hopes to do, is to increase the amount of awareness we have, to increase our ability to be mindful from moment to moment, so that we are aware of what we are doing; we are aware of how we feel, we are aware of what we are saying at the time we are saying it - not later, when it is come out with offended people we find that we've created problem for ourselves and now we regret it, not after but as we actually do it.

So, perhaps to go back a little bit then we have to explain: what is mindfulness. The English word in a sense is a good one: *m i n d f u l n e s s* – being full of mind. The Chinese character for mindfulness is „ heart now” - how your heart is or how your mind is at any one moment. And

in classical Buddhism the term is: *sati* or *smṛti* in sanskrit, which really means „ self-remembering” . And it's interesting to note that the great russian mystic, Gurdjieff, he used the same principle in his teachings and he actually called it: „ self-remembering” - knowing, being aware of oneself from moment to moment. Or being in the present moment. Or awareness in the present moment. Now, we have periods in our daily life when we are aware. So, for example when somebody takes out a camera and points at you and says: be natural. Suddenly, you become very self-aware, usually in awkward sense, but very self-aware.

But under normal circumstances the input from our senses: sights, sounds, smells and whatever and our mental reaction to them: liking and disliking, daydream and fantasizing is so overwhelming. It's such a large part of our ordinary consciousness, that the possibilities of awareness are limited. And when we are lacking in awareness, when we lacking in mindfulness – as we said - we tend to create problems for ourselves because in a sense we are reacting automatically and half-consciously almost mechanically you may say to the situations that we encounter in life.

How to change this situation? What can we do to become more aware, to increase the quality and the duration of awareness in our daily life? So, now we come back to meditation. So, what we do is: we sit in a quiet place, so this is limited amount of distractions, we sit in a comfortable posture and we take a very ordinary experience: the in and out movement in the breath. And we choose to become if not aware of anything else, at least aware of the fact that we are breathing. Now, all of us have been breathing since the moment we are born, but we are almost never aware of it. So, what we do is - we take this one experience for the time being disregarding any other experiences and we make the resolution -from the time I sit down and close my eyes till the time the alarm goes in 15 minutes or 20 minutes- I'm going to make a resolution to be as mindful as I can be of my breath. Now, inevitably what will happen is -simply because of habit- very soon our mind will grow bored of that object, of that in and out movement, it will become bored with the feeling of cool as the breath moves in the nostrils or the feeling of warm as the breath moves out of the nostrils. It will no longer be interested in feeling the belt around your abdomen, becoming tight as you breath in, becoming loose as you breath out, it will no longer be interested in even the sound of the breath: in sound and out sound, and it will want to, your attention will want to go to something else. You'll start thinking about „ what you were doing before” , you will start fantasizing about „ what you are going to do later” . You will deliberately create some sort of day-dream to escape from the boredom. In fact, the ordinary mind will try to do anything other than simply to be aware now. And if you have been doing the practice for 15 minutes for the last week, you will notice that this is a very well-established habit in your mind.

But this is the good news: the only reason that your mind wanders, the only reason why all these discursive thoughts come in, is simply because of habit, it's simply because you've never done it before. The habit that we have established is overwhelming our consciousness, our awareness, our tensions to wonder wherever want it. If we've been, if we are 20 or 30 or 40 years old, then our consciousness has been doing it for 20 or 30 or 40 years. It may take some time to change, but it will. Just as unhelpful or negative habits are developed simply by doing that frequently, by acting upon them frequently, more wholesome, more helpful, more skillful habits can be developed by doing it more, practising it more frequently - and this is why I asked you to meditate at least once a day. So, the reason that we are focusing our attention on our breath is as

the first step in increasing our degree of mindfulness. Now, when you are sitting and meditating, you will notice that it's not just that our attention goes to thoughts and images, ideas of the past or future, day-dreams or fantasies, it is that we, as it were, get involved in them; it's almost that we lose ourselves in them. And in fact, it sometimes happens when a meditator, is meditating he or she sits down resolving to keep their attention on the breath, a few minutes later the attention goes away, some interesting day-dream or fantasy or memory, re-living some pleasant experience and a few seconds later the alarm bell goes. Without knowing it, they have been carried away, as the term we use, carried away for 15 minutes without even being aware of it.

Mindfulness helps us to gradually break that negative habit and establish a positive one. How do we deal with these very persistent day-dreams, fantasies and discursive thoughts? Imagine, that you are working in an office on the third floor of a building in the middle of the city and that your desk happens to be right next to the window and you are working on your computer there. And then you hear a bang downstairs, out in the street. And you look down and you see a car accident: one car has knocked into the back of another car. And while you are doing on your computer (working on your computer) you look down at this and you observe – you see that one car has knocked into the another one; you see the first driver, the driver in the first car gets out and then the driver of the second car gets out. You can't hear them, but you can see them: the first driver looks very angry, they are gesticulating, they are arguing with each other – the first driver punches the second one. Then you see a crowd of people gathered around. You are observing this, but you are completely detached. You are not involved. It's an interesting incident for you, but nothing more.

Those people on the other hand they are hot under the collar; they're angry. The people observing are taking one side or the other. They're very, very involved in what is happening, but you, you're observing them from a distance, it's nothing to you. It's just an interesting incident; you observe it for some time, you may even smile, and then you get back to your computer. This is the attitude of the detached onlooker – *ajjhupekkhati*. If you can gradually develop the attitude of the detached onlooker, then your meditation will be successful – so, when you're sitting down, focusing your attention on your breath, being a detached onlooker to that experience and then you cease to be detached onlooker, but rather you get involved in, carried away by some intriguing thought or feeling, some day-dream, re-living some past experience. As soon as you notice that this has happened, as soon as you notice that you are involved in this, pull out. Observe it as if from a distance, be a detached onlooker to that experience. And return to your breath. And when you notice that you have been involved in that thought or that day-dream (whatever it is), because you are a detached onlooker and because you really don't have any goal other than this one simple goal: to be aware. You don't have to get angry, you don't have to get frustrated, you don't have to get annoyed, you don't have to feel that your mind has defeated you. All you have to do is: act to develop this attitude of the detached onlooker. So, you see that experience as if from a distance - no need to comment, no need to get emotionally involved, you just return to your breath.

Now, this is very important to remember: the purpose of the practice for the time being is to develop this mindfulness, awareness, this being in the present moment. Now, what inevitably happens in this is that people think that the purpose of this particular practice is not to be aware, but to concentrate, the word being: *samadhi*. But I would ask you to put that idea aside for the time being. Because when you're trying to concentrate, you see every experience of not

concentrating as a failure. And in order to continue concentrating, you have to resolutely push aside anything that takes your... that prevents you from concentrating. So, as you work, you have divided your experience into two: a good experience (being able to concentrate) – negative experiences (not concentrated).

And quite often the result of this is a great deal of tension and frustration, anything but tranquillity and calm. Now, concentration has a role-play in meditation (perhaps we can talk about that later), but for the time being we are talking about *anapanasati*. *Sati* – mindfulness at the in and out breath. So, what is happening in this practice is, you're mindful of whatever happens; whatever experience happens – you're mindful of it. But giving precedence to the experience of breathing, giving more attention to the experience of breathing. So, if your attention goes away to some thought or some day-dream and you become aware of that, if you are able to observe this – the attitude of the detached onlooker – there's no problem. It is simply another experience that you have been able to be aware of. To make a mental note of it and aware of that experience and then come back to your breath. And if you do that, you will succeed. Your meditation will be fruitful; and within a very short time. That is the reason, why this practice involves: sitting – being aware of the in and out movement of the breath. In time, in a few weeks from now, we will start explaining: how that awareness of the breath can be gradually expanded, become more pervasive, so that we are able to be aware of other aspects of our experience. But for the time being, be mindful and aware of the breath.

Now, I'd like to talk about one other point. Many people start meditation, many give up within a very short time. And not just meditation – I'm told the people who go to weight-loss clinics. The number of people who actually finish the course is very, very small. Many people buy a membership of a gym and the number of people who use it regularly is really very, very small. In present day, with various distractions and things being so easily available, the tendency is to have a desire, respond to it, but within a very short period being distracted by another desire... As with weight-loss programmes and exercise regimes – so with meditation. So, we need to know what we have to do, to avoid dropping out, giving up or just losing interest. And the main reason why people do this, is because they think it is very difficult. So, they will tell you, there's too much noise. They will tell you that they don't have the time. But most of all, the real reason for most people is – they find the distracting thoughts very frustrating. But I would like to give you the good news and the good news is this: noise really isn't a problem, if you're interested – you'll find the time, and the discursive, the distracting thoughts shouldn't be a problem. All you need is one thing: and if you have this one, simple thing, I assure you – your meditation will succeed, it will mature and you will reap all the benefits from it. And what is that one thing? It's simply to develop the habit to sit and do the practice every day. That's all you have to do. If you do it every day, then you will succeed. So, you may think: oh, I didn't do sitting today, but it was so difficult, there was so many distractions and so on, doesn't matter, that's a small matter. If you sat for that whole 15 minutes, or for next week-if you sat for that whole 20 minutes and you did it every day, there is absolutely no doubt that your practice will develop, it will mature, and you will reap all the rewards from it. So, I would like to encourage you to very quickly develop the habit of doing it perhaps, doing it at the same time every day. So if you do that, you adjust your schedule to fit in. Just the same way as you find time to shower every day, just the same as you find the time to eat every day, just as you find the time, you always find the time to sleep every day, because this is a part of your routine. Likewise, if you do it every day, within a very short time it will become a regular part of your routine and it will be so easy to do. It's not unity that

helps you succeed in meditation. It's not lack of thoughts – that's not what will help you succeed in meditation. Simply – making a resolution to sit for that full period of time every week and I assure you – you will succeed.

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