

Deborah David
Week Four, *Living Mindfully*
January 25, 2016
“Inner Presence and the Outer World”



Welcome back. I'm Deborah, and this is the fourth week of Living Mindfully. In the first week, we talked about inner mindfulness, the practice individually that allows us to have a sense of being present in our lives. In the second week we talked about bringing mindfulness into our home. Third week, at work. This week, the world. And it sounds like it gets bigger and bigger, except for that actually you sort of come full circle again. Because the world, and who we, are and how we are, internally, are just separated by a very fine line. And staying present is the thing that binds the two together. So thinking about mindfulness in the world is really more a shift of perspective.

It's a broadening of the horizon that—where we start with mindfulness as an individual practice of paying attention and being mindful, for example, to my own breath, which is an inner invisible movement. When we pay attention to being mindful in the world, the breath is the fluid flux of the world. And it's this enormous existing thing, both within and outside of us. And yet it has its own breath. Paying attention to that single human breath, or to the movement of the world, is the scope. It's also an orientation from myself to everything else. And obviously everything else exists through the lens of my experience. So I'm still here. And in that way, this line between mindfulness with self and the world, it flips. Because when it's the inner practice of mindfulness, then the emphasis is on my own self-experience, my breath, my sound, my taste. And the world is what provides those stimuli, the air that I breathe, the sounds that I hear, the flavor that I taste.

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When we bring mindfulness into the world, it's the other things out there that we're paying attention to—but it's our attention, our awareness—and that's the self. So it's a reversal of emphasis. But you can't do one without the other. The progression is to begin with self and ultimately to bring mindfulness broadly into the world. And that's when we talk about applied mindfulness, when we talk about an orientation for our conduct, for our behavior, how we exist in the world. That mindfulness is a technique. It's a tool that allows us to exist, to live in the world in ways that contribute, that are constructive, and that try to mitigate for or minimize that which is destructive.

So there are three ways, three steps to mindfulness. Three ways that we orient our focus and our attention. We focus, we observe and we refocus. Focus on the breath, observe the quality of the breath and of the focusing on the breath. And then we refocus when we get distracted. And that works in the world as well. We focus on what occurs around us in the world and how we hold ourselves in position in that. We observe whether we're able to stay focused on it, and the quality of that focus. The experience of focusing on it. And then we refocus when we need to. And the world is so enormous and there is so much happening in the world that it is very easy to get distracted. Not because we get bored because there isn't enough, but because we get overwhelmed because there's too much. And the result is the same. That the mind loses its grip and slides.

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So frequently, when we look at the news or we look at what's happening when we walk down the street and we see things and there's so much stimulation. We are so surrounded by things that are happening and the meanings that we attach to those things. That mindfulness is what allows us to stay present so it's manageable. Because otherwise we get lost in the midst of it. So when the world seems to be too big, when there's too much violence, when there's too much beauty. When there's too much, so much of everything, come back with mindfulness into the present in your own experience so that you can quiet before you go back out again. So that you can be present with the taste of the feeling of what's out there before you go on to experience the next thing. Not to become dull or to shut it off. Not to reject it or refuse it. But to take just that break to allow your senses a gap so that they can come back into focus freshly.

Otherwise the tendency is simply we glaze over. It becomes too, too complicated. And this is true in the world of our emotions, the world of our relationships, or the vast external world that's out there. So if we pay attention and we apply mindfulness, things happen with our attention over time. The attention as a quality, as a mental skill, becomes much, much sharper. And we're able to focus the attention and keep it where we want to keep it for the length of time we want it to stay there. That's that single-pointed focus. We're able to be aware of losing focus, so that we can bring it back. Our awareness becomes deeper, not just when we lose focus, but how we lose focus, as early as possible, so that we catch it more quickly. And so not only do we lose focus less often, but we lose less ground when we lose focus. We don't go off as far. And so we stay present. It's a

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kind of on-and-off, and it gets closer and closer and closer so that eventually that attention is much more unwavering. And then when it wavers, we know it, and we're present with it and we ride it as well. It doesn't just take us off and carry us away. So we can apply that to the problems outside of ourselves. To having compassion not just for our own suffering, but for the suffering of all beings. We can try to engage in work in activities at whatever level is feasible in our lives and whatever we're suited for. That can try to bring that compassion into the world in ways that are productive. And then at some point we realize there is so much we can do and then there is so much that we can't do. That even all together, there is so much suffering that we can't somehow alter in this moment. And what then? And that's the abyss. And mindfulness in that moment as you stand on the edge of that abyss, mindfulness is what holds you to the edge. And if you fall over, it is what will carry you as you fall. And it will also be the thing that will catch you.

So that having fallen, you're able, somehow, somewhere, to recognize that falling and to be present with it and then the falling stops being the falling off the abyss but simply becomes movement. Some kind of movement. And it carries you someplace else. So in that moment when there's nothing left to do, or when you have nothing, it feels that you have nothing left to give, there is always one last experience, which is the being present in that moment. And that itself can be enough. And it's being present in that experience with kindness, with compassion. With a sense of fearlessness that you can stay present with it. The horror of war. The horror of natural disasters. The horror of realizing that there are people who are homeless. When the bottom falls out of your heart and you

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literally stop, because there's nothing to do. In that movement of falling into it, breathe. And allow the practice of mindfulness and mindfulness of breath, that very, very basic practice, allow it to bring you back to where you are with compassion, with kindness. You offer the kindness and the compassion because you can. And that allows you to be present in a way that doesn't destroy. And that's when we come back.

The same is absolutely true when somebody you love is dying. Because there's nothing in those last days or hours or moments, there's nothing to stop that process. You can't reverse it. It simply happens. There's nothing that fends off that loss. It simply is. And there's nothing that will bring that person back. Because when they're gone, they're gone. But if you can stay with it, with them in that process, then each instant is eternal. Because you're present in it and it becomes linked to the next present moment. And it's a way through. And the authenticity of the grief and the authenticity of the sadness is a way of staying present, and staying present is really all you have in those moments. Because there's nothing to change. If you can stay present with time, then things shift and they become somehow more bearable. There's a way to work with it. And in the moments when they're unbearable, being aware of that and recognizing that that's what you have too.

I've been thinking a lot about living with mindfulness recently. And as I watched in the last days of my father's life, I thought a lot about the years of practice, what I had the luxury of practicing, and if it was a good practice that was great, and if it was a bad

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practice, ah, okay, fine. I'll come back to it tomorrow. And I could practice with my cup of tea or I could practice in that nice, quiet place, or—it was all very sort of, you know, contrived. And it was wonderful, because it gave me a cushion of familiarity with a practice that I could bring most recently into that hospital room. Where there was no quiet and there was no comfort, and there was no cup of tea. And we all will lose people. And if you've lost them, you know what I'm talking about. And you will find it in the future too. But it's in that moment where there's nothing to hold on to that the practice emerges, and that's what living mindfully ultimately comes to be. The measure of the practice is how the practice informs your experience so that in those moments where there's nothing to hold onto, you can stay present anyway. And by staying present in that moment, then the moment itself is worthy. And somehow can contribute.

What I realized with living mindfully is that we bring life into the world and then we watch life go out of the world. We live mindfully with others as they go through their lives, the start and the stop. The only thing that matters in the end is whether we're able to be present and whether we're able to witness. And not witness from a distance, but witness intimately and fully and freshly within. So that we're there. And also so that we understand that it's ephemeral and it shifts. And there's tremendous beauty and tremendous sadness simultaneously, and the capacity to experience both is the nature of consciousness. It's open and vast and kind and compassionate. And somehow it carries us through.

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So this is a four-week retreat on living mindfully. What we're able to do in four weeks matters immensely. And what we do in a lifetime at a larger scale equally matters. The most important piece is being able to find ways to apply ourselves so that we can pay attention and we can deepen our awareness so that we can bring greater kindness and greater compassion into our lives. So that we can be more present, more fully in life, more vibrantly in life. So that we can contribute for the benefit of all beings. Not in a way that's offensive to anyone else, not in a way that is arrogant, not in a way that is about us and making ourselves feel good about who we are, but simply through being authentically. Through being mindful. Through living mindfully. And so I wish you all the best as you go forward from here. I thank you for the privilege of speaking to you and I thank you for taking the time to listen.