

Deborah David
Week Three, *Living Mindfully*
January 18, 2016
“Sustaining Mindfulness at Work”



Welcome back. I'm Deborah and this is the third week of our month-long retreat series on living mindfully. In the first session we talked about the development of mindfulness as an inner practice. Last week brought mindfulness home and we talked about mindfulness in the context of a physical place, which is our home and the relationships that we think of as being our home. This week we're focusing on mindfulness at work.

There tends to be this dichotomy between home and work. And, on some very basic level, it's just the way it is. It's real. Home is where we do what we want and work is where we do what we have to do. And for those of us who work in order to have enough money to pay our bills, because we live in a modern world and that's the reality of it, that's simply what we have to deal with. And that's fine. Part of mindfulness practice is being able to rest a little bit more easily with the things about life that seem, well, so inconvenient, like having to have a job or going to work, eating, sleeping—the things that, maybe, if we could re-organize somehow, we would try to squeeze out because there are other things that we value more.

I would encourage you when you start to have those kinds of thoughts to notice them and chuckle, be gentle with yourself, and then let them go, because they don't serve and they're not very helpful for us in the long run. We have jobs. Those of us who have jobs, have jobs. And if you have a job, you have one. And if you don't have one, you might want one. And if you don't have one and you don't need one, there are still things that

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you do that feel like work and, so, when I speak about work I speak about it much more broadly than simply the nine to five. Work refers to the things that we do because we have to.

Now, we do this to survive in the world and that's the nature of life. But what we do and how we do it is very much under our own control. And, so, the way that mindfulness can come into play at work begins with that inner sense of knowing what's happening right now, who I am, how I am in this moment, what's going on internally and externally around me. And it has to do with what the nature of my work is and *does that work somehow contribute in the world?*

This is not a value thing that there's a high work and a low work. That somehow if we work in a—I don't know—an education setting or a Dharma setting or medicine, it's high work. And if we clean houses or we make food or we care for children, it's low work, skilled or unskilled. Those are differentiations that are relevant in other arenas, but not this one. What matters here is the quality that we bring to doing that work and: Does it contribute? Does it somehow make the world a little bit easier, a little bit better? Is there a little bit more space for the virtues to come through? For generosity, for patience, for kindness?

Some of the greatest models of mindfulness are people who do work that is otherwise conceived of as invisible. They're the people who clean the windows, the people who

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make the dumplings, the people who wash the dishes—the people who do the repetitive things over and over and over again and they do it while staying present. Not zoning out. In the end, making those dumplings or washing those windows is qualitatively no different than creating the most marvelous invention. It’s the nature of the attention and the awareness in that present moment. So, whatever you do in that continuum, how you do it is what matters. And if it’s something that you’re doing that actually makes the world a rougher place to live, that doesn’t contribute constructively, then think about if you have choices. If you have other options for other kinds of jobs.

If you don’t like your job and it’s not a good job in the sense that it doesn’t make the world a little bit better, then try to find a different job. And if you can’t find a different job, then try to find a way in the job that you have to shift your understanding of it a little bit so that you can transform it, so that you can do good within something that otherwise would not normally seem to have so much potential. Because everything is fluid. And what we bring to it is what matters.

The quality of the work is also our commitment to it. If we dismiss something because we think it’s beneath us, or it’s too stupid, or it’s just unnecessary, and we don’t give it our full attention, then we actually withdraw from it. And, so, mindfulness is about coming back into it. It’s about going to a class that is mind-numbingly boring and sitting through it and trying to find something in it. And then when you can’t find anything in it,

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it's going to sleep and being present with your boredom and with sleeping. And when you start to criticize yourself for doing it, noticing what you're doing and coming back.

But it's also about putting the effort into doing little things and to doing them fully and to having the care, to invest in the care in what you do. So, if you sew, it's like putting into each stitch all of your wishes for the world, all of your aspirations, all of the blessings that you want to send out. And you stick it in every little stitch so the person who wears that garment carries it with them. It extends out into the world. That analogy applies no matter what you do. If you work with words, you put that care into every word. If you make something with your hands, let your hands be the expression of that care. That's an offering into the world. In that way, your work, which might seem so small and for many of us feels very inconsequential—and when we leave the job someone else takes it and it seems like what did I do? But it's what I do in each moment of it that matters and believing that that's the case. And taking the time—having the patience. Practicing the patience again and again to be able to do it.

We apply mindfulness to patience; we focus on patience. We observe whether we're able to sustain patience. We observe the experience of feeling patient or not. Then we re-focus more on patience. The same applies to kindness and to compassion, both of which are much needed in the workplace. It's not just saying thank you as a perfunctory thank you, but thank for the trueness of the gratitude and expressing it. It's recognizing the person who's never recognized. It's also recognizing the boss who's in a position that maybe none of the rest of us want to be in. Because it's a difficult position. It's recognizing the

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intern who just started who hasn't got a clue. It's recognizing the people who are doing jobs they shouldn't be doing and trying to help re-direct them, if they can, to find a better fit, for everyone's sake. So, mindfulness, again, is not a passive, relativistic sort of "Everything's fine; let me just see how it is" sort of practice. It's very engaged. It's about coming up for air so that you are vibrantly alive in the moment as it happens so that you can do something in that moment or refrain from doing something.

Last week we talked a lot about mindfulness and emotions and thoughts in relationships at home and the same applies in the workplace. In the workplace we have to deal with things that go over and over and over again, either the way we want them to go or not. And if we can recognize our investment in it, it makes it easier to work with the situation because the situation is not fixed and permanent the way it appears to be, but it's how we construct it. And if we can re-organize it or re-consider it, it might go easier. It might go differently. And when people in the workplace do things that are good, that are constructive, that are workable, being mindful of that and recognizing it and reinforcing it and helping them to take joy and pride in it so they'll do it again and again and again. That's so important.

At the same time, in the workplace when somebody comes in, the same client with the same question for the twentieth time in the same week and you feel like you want to lose it, be mindful of the desire to want to lose it and then refocus and shift it and work with it with your own patience. If the person needs to be told, "You've asked me twenty times and I'll answer it again and this is the last time I'm gonna answer," that's fine, too.

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Because compassion is not always warm and fuzzy. It's not about coddling and making people feel everything's okay. Compassion is about reducing suffering. And when we do things that cause suffering, sometimes we need support and re-direction and firmness so that we choose to make other choices, so we suffer less and we cause less suffering for others.

So, compassion and kindness have a place in the workplace. They come with firmness, they come with gentleness, they come with honesty, they come with fairness. And mindfulness—it's the technique, it's the basic technique; the musician's scales that are the warm up for the performance. The practices that we do at home are the things that train our mind that keep us sharp, so when it's real we can actually do it. And we do it with less effort. Because one of the most important pieces is not to force. Forcing is very different than having a structure. There is a structure for mindfulness practice: focus, observe, re-focus. But forcing is when we try to push things artificially hard and we try to create outcomes that aren't natural or apparent. Forcing usually leads to outcomes that aren't what we want or hope for and that don't contribute.

If a workplace environment requires that you force, then be mindful of that and question whether you have options. Can you do it differently or do you need to seek a different workplace? And if you can't find a different workplace and you can't do it differently because the nature of the job is to force, then find some place inside yourself that can be gentle and be present with it so that it isn't a forcing all the way down, deep down within.

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Mindfulness on the job is ultimately as mindfulness at home, and both come from that inner mindfulness, that inner awareness. It's a situational awareness. It's an awareness of what's happening inside me and around me in any given moment. And it's a dedication of that awareness and that heightened attention to living in a way that is constructive in the world, that benefits others. It's not just mindfulness without value.

One of things that in the past few years I've had the privilege to do is to teach mindfulness to people working in law enforcement and the military settings. And when I started to do that many people in the Dharma community sort of were confused and said, "Why would you want to do that?" Because these are people who are doing things that are so different from Dharma. But these are people. And how they do what they do in the world that we share matters to all of us intensely, immensely. And a person who is able to have so much power and who can be mindful in that position contributes so much more than the person who could do that same job with mindlessness. So, mindfulness on the job comes in all flavors and then it extends beyond the job into the world and that's where leadership comes in. And we hope that our leaders are mindful. And maybe they are and maybe they aren't, but we can be mindful of the desire to merge the two and to embody that as much as we can.

Next week in the last of these four sessions we're going to focus on mindfulness in the world, on how we live mindfully in the world, in service to others, not just for ourselves, but beyond ourselves, transforming, transcending, through ourselves. And as a bridge to get there during this week when you go to work or when you do the things that feel like

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work in your life, bring mindfulness into those activities and notice the experience. Be mindful of cultivating mindfulness and be mindful of how that mindfulness allows you to then do whatever it is your task happens to be, more fully, more freshly, more authentically and more constructively. We'll see you next week. Thank you.