Mindfulness, Wisdom, and Compassion: Exploring the Nature of Experience

Week 4: Applying the Practice to Everyday Life
With John Dunne

In this session, we're going to explore how we apply these practices in our daily life. How do we bring mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion into each moment of our experience? That might be asking a lot, but we can certainly do a lot to bring it in a practical way into our lives. Let's begin again with one of our brief practices, finding that position, relaxed but alert, dropping down into the body, simply aware.

And here, let's add something new that's actually very important for practice, but also for application in daily life, and that's intention. What's our intention in practicing? What's our intention in this session?

As we come out of this brief practice—again, “many sessions, short time” can be very good as we explore a beginner's mind approach to our practice. This way of practicing can be very helpful. Another way of thinking about practice—like, how does practice relate to our lives—is a very famous sort of triad in Tibetan Buddhism, that's called view, meditation, and conduct.

Meditation is, in a sense, what we've been doing: the kinds of practices, cultivation of mindfulness, cultivation of compassion. Those are practices that are meditation. The view is more about wisdom. What is the nature of our identity, for example? What is the nature of reality itself? We haven't said too much about that. We did explore the idea, for example, that our sense of self is more than just the story of ourselves, and perhaps even our sense of being the one that's perceiving, maybe even that is something we need to examine more carefully. This is heading into the view.

Another key aspect of the view, especially for the Tibetan traditions, is the idea that we all fundamentally have the capacity to attain awakening. Each of our minds is actually already, in a sense, the nature of a Buddha's mind. This is a key aspect, also of the view.

Then we have conduct. Another translation of conduct is application, in other words, bringing all of this into daily life. The key aspect of conduct is actually the kind of conduct that enables us to cultivate wisdom and compassion, the kind of conduct that enables us to cultivate that tranquility of mind. You remember that from our first session, the tranquility of mind and the insight that comes with it? So what kind of lifestyle leads to that? It's a lifestyle that at least does not produce harm. And so we say that the basis, the foundation, of the ethical life for Buddhist practice, is *ahimsa*, that is to say, nonharm. But more than nonharm, we actually want to cultivate something positive. Actually, we want to bring flourishing into our lives and other people's lives. So this, too, is an aspect of application, day to day. And when we talk about intention, one of our baseline intentions is this: When we come into a meeting, when we meet somebody, when we wake up in the morning, that we aspire to enhance flourishing, or at least not to cause harm. This is a way of not just kind of living our lives, but it's also a way of

establishing a foundation for our practice, because if we're leading lives that are unethical, that are causing harm, that leads to a chaotic mind. And if we have a chaotic mind, we're not going to be able to practice effectively. We won't be able to cultivate tranquility and insight. We won't be able to cultivate wisdom and compassion. The more chaotic our mind is, the less effective our practice will be.

So leading a life of that kind of ethical basis is actually a key foundation for our meditation practice. So view meditation and application, these are a key way of thinking about how practice comes into daily life.

One way to do this is actually to touch into mindfulness as we're going about our day. If you're like many people these days, we lead very busy, highly scheduled lives, and when one thing's about to end, we're already headed into the next meeting, a class, whatever it might be. This is ending, now we move on to the next thing. We've checked off this on the to do list. Now we're headed to the next thing. In the space between those we are often completely distracted. We're distracted about what we're doing next. We're not thinking about what our motivation is. We're not focused on kindness or compassion or mindfulness or anything else. We're just going to willy-nilly heading to the next thing.

So one practice that we can do is just to be where we are now in a great practice that one of our collaborators here at the University of Wisconsin has cultivated, Chad McGehee. Chad has this practice of just being where your feet are. So try that right now: Just be where your body is. If you're sitting on a chair, *be where your feet are*. If you're sitting on a cushion, just *be where the cushion is*.

I think you can see how what you're doing is you're coming into the present moment, because remember, sensation experience only happens in the present moment. So this is a trick, a very helpful trick, to cultivate a moment of mindfulness in a busy day. The more you can do this, the better it is, and the easier it will become. Just be where your body is.

Now, another aspect of our practice, especially in the context of ethics, is, in a sense, you might say, being able to deal with situations where something maybe needs to be corrected, so to speak, in our behavior. Where we're starting to get overwrought, we're about to maybe cause harm. The great Buddhist poet and philosopher practitioner Shantideva, from the seventh century, has a very interesting phrase: As a last resort, remain like a piece of wood. It may sound kind of strange, but it's actually a very interesting as a practice, because it also is, in a way, tapping into mindfulness, the way we've been describing it—especially the kind of mindfulness that enables us to notice our emotions. So here's a key thing to understand: there's a way, as I'm focused on something, I can still have emotions and be aware of those emotions without having to change my focus and look at the emotions. For example, if I see a beautiful sunset, and you're with me, and you know, we turn around and walk back to the house, or whatever it is, and I say to you, “What did you feel while you were watching the sunset?” Do you say to me, “Oh, I don't know. I was totally absorbed in the sunset, and I have no idea how I was feeling”? I doubt it. Do you say, “I need to go back and look at the sunset, and then I'll check

inward to see what my emotions are”? Or let's say, you know, you almost get hit by a car. May it not be so, but let's say you almost get hit by a car. And I pull you aside and say, “Wow, you're OK. Is everything OK? And I ask you, how did you feel while the car was rushing at you? Do you say, “Oh, I don't know how I felt. Let me go back out in the street and have a car rush at me, and then I'll look inward to see what my emotions are”? I don't think you're going to say that. I hope not.

So what is it that is happening here? We're actually able to notice our emotions even while we're focused on something. This is an aspect of mindfulness that we've discussed before: that idea of meta-awareness and awareness of awareness that is present even while we're focused on something.

Let's experiment with that right now. Now, let's settle the mind. I invite you to attend to the breath, or, if you're uncomfortable with that, some other anchor for the attention, like a sound. Let's just sustain awareness, sustain undistracted attention on the breath.

As thoughts come and go, simply notice them as thoughts. No need to jump on the train of thought. Bring the mind back to the breath in the present moment, fresh, open.

And now, even while your attention is on the breath, see how you are aware of much more. There is awareness of much more.

How are you feeling? Don't look in. Keep the mind on the breath and notice how you can be aware of how you're feeling, even while you're focused on the breath and if you’re having trouble with this, try to loosen your attention on the breath. Don't fix it. Just sort of sit back a little bit, so to speak. Keep the mind on the breath, but open up to the background, to everything else and perhaps you've noticed we can be aware. We can have the attention on an object, and yet we can be aware of how we're feeling at the same time. It's not multitasking. We're not going in out, in out. We're focused on the object, but we're also aware of our feelings. This is meta-awareness, that awareness of the feelings. It's really important in daily life.

If I'm having an intense conversation with someone, you know, for example, I'm having a debate with a friend, I'm really focused on the debate. That's what my object of attention is. I'm really focused on it. If I don't, if I'm sort of totally focused and fixated, and there's not enough cognitive mojo, so to speak, to be aware also of my feelings… If I'm totally fixated, there's a chance I'm not going to have much meta-awareness. So I might win the debate, but because I got so much more and more worked up after winning the debate, I've also lost a friend. So the ability to sort of notice in the middle of a conversation that I am getting worked up, I'm getting reactive in some way, that actually depends upon this meta-awareness. And a key to that, that's an aspect of mindfulness, is not constantly looking in. It's not being so fixated that we don't have this space, so to speak, to allow more to occur in our awareness.

Now this can be especially powerful with emotions. In fact, this is theoretically, according to many Buddhist authors, how we notice emotions. We don't notice emotions by turning in. We

first notice emotions by them being presented in this way, almost like our background. And then we can turn in and look at them. And when we turn in and look at them, we often categorize our emotions. We say, “Oh, I'm this, I'm that.” And this is another very interesting way in which we can use these practices to alter our experience in a day-to-day way, in a very practical way. Actually, it involves what in cognitive sciences called *emotional granularity*. It's the ability to really pay attention to how we're feeling and not get caught in our habitual ways of categorizing our feelings.

An interesting example of this is the idea of being hangry. You may have heard of this, where actually what I'm experiencing is coming from hunger. But because of the context, I interpret it as being angry. I start to talk to somebody, I notice certain sensations, and then I turn in and say, “Oh, I'm feeling x,” and the x turns out to be, “Oh, I'm feeling angry.” But I could have said I'm feeling hungry. And these ways of interpreting my own experience, how I'm feeling, have really different outcomes. If I'm feeling angry, that might motivate me to try to respond in an angry way to somebody. If I'm feeling hungry, then that probably motivates me to go eat. It's time to eat. So this way of noticing our experience, emotional granularity, can be very helpful, where we're able to re-interpret our experience in various ways. It's related to traditional practices, but in some ways, this is a sort of updated practice that is really focusing on our ability to reinterpret our experience.

So here's an invitation right now. Let's just drop in again.

Noticing what you're feeling now, even turn in and look what word first comes to mind, and your mind-body feeling, your mind-body experience. How would you describe it with a word? Now see if you can describe it with a different word. What other way can you describe your experience? Now describe how you're feeling with yet another word. One more time, another word.

Now finally, here's an invitation to describe your feeling just as a mind to body event, an event in consciousness and again, it is really critically important to recognize that the way we categorize our experiences affects what we do next, affects those experiences themselves.

You might see in particular that when you just assess what you're feeling as simply an event in consciousness, what is that like? How does that change the experience? How does that change what you want to do next? This can be very helpful in the context of stress, for example. We know that when people are feeling stressed a lot of the time, the reason they feel that is that they feel that something is exceeding their resources. And when they interpret that something as a threat, then it really produces a lot of stress, and often anxiety. And so the feeling one can have in that moment is a feeling of kind of activation in the body, a feeling of getting ready for something difficult. And if we interpret that as a threat, then anxiety is much more likely to be the way we describe our feelings. But what if we interpret that as a challenge instead of a threat? Then, instead of understanding ourselves as if the very same mental and physical state, instead of calling it anxiety, maybe what we call it is like, I'm activated, I'm ready to go. I'm up for it. I'm ready for the challenge. Our same experience, because of reinterpreting the context, but also

especially reinterpreting the way we're feeling, calling it something different, that can have a tremendous impact on how things work out in the situation.

We can always come back to, in a very interesting way, that moment of simply recognizing this is another mind-body event, another event in consciousness.

So now I'd like to end with another practice that can be very useful for meditation fitness. As we practice meditation, sometimes, especially if we try to force it too much, or we meditate in ways that are, you could say, sort of unbalanced, we can start to feel a little out of sorts. It's totally natural to have times when you're practicing something like mindfulness meditation, where there are things that are difficult, just like an ordinary life. That doesn't mean you're meditating wrong, but there are practices that we can do that can be helpful for us to kind of, in a sense, manage some of this and maintain our meditation fitness. So what I'd like to invite you to do is do a practice that you can really kind of do any time.

Many of the practices we've been talking about you can do as you're walking around. You don't have to be doing sitting meditation, especially mindfulness style practices. As you know, walking is one of the traditional types of practices, and one of the traditional positions, and I invite you to try to maintain the same kind of mindfulness we've been doing, of breathing, as you walk.

But here, this is a practice that we especially would do in a seated pose. It's a visualization practice coming from the Tibetan tradition, a bit modified, but I think it will still be useful. In visualization practices, you don't need to visualize perfectly. It doesn't need to be crystal clear. You just need to have a certain sense of the visualization. So probably best with your eyes closed. I'd like you to visualize in the space above your head a globe of light, not too large, not too small. There, in a sense, is the essence of enlightenment, the essence of awakening, the essence of wisdom and compassion. They are present above your head and and then, with the motivation to enhance your capacity for compassion for beings, you invite this light to grant you a blessing you and slowly, a kind of nectar of light descends from that ball of light and enters into the top of your head and almost like a French press coffee, it begins to gently push down all of the mental, physical, emotional gunk, the difficulties, pushing it gently down from the top of the head, moving down into the neck, down to the shoulders. And as it does this, it leaves behind the glowing light of awakening. The body and mind relaxed, pushing down into the arms, to the torso, moving down, relaxed and easy, purifying body and mind. As it reaches places which may have special tension or difficulty, just feel that the light gently absorbs these and pushes them downward. The light continues down beyond the torso into the legs, and as it reaches down all the way down to the feet, and the soles of the feet, just feel all of those impurities simply leave from the bottom of the body, and are pushed down into the center of the earth, where they are dissolved and transformed into the elements.

Now this light descends into the top of the head and moves gently down to the heart, and all difficulties are transformed into the awakened mind and the light fills the whole body.

All negativity, stress, and difficulties are transformed into the light of awakening, and now your glowing body slowly transforms back into your ordinary self, refreshed and ready to go.

I hope you'll be able to use some of these practices effectively, and I really look forward to engaging with you all. Thank you.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.