

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

### **Week 1: Practicing Mindfulness**

With John Dunne

This month, we're going to be exploring mindfulness and two other aspects of Buddhist practice that are closely related: wisdom and compassion. We'll also see how we can apply all of this in our daily lives.

This first session is going to focus on mindfulness. Let's start by actually doing a little meditation. One of the things about meditation practice is that it's a mind body practice, so it's not just about the mind; it's also about the body, and it really helps to find a position that is conducive to cultivating mindfulness. Traditionally, there are said to be four postures. You can meditate lying down, standing, walking, or sitting, and they all have their advantages and in some ways, disadvantages. But we're going to focus for the most part on sitting practice. And when you sit, really you can sit any way you like. But traditionally, you can sit in full lotus posture with the legs completely crossed (something I'm not going to attempt at my age). You can also sit in half lotus, where you just have one leg up, like this. You could just be regular, cross legged, in this way. Or you can do what's sometimes called the Burmese posture, with the feet flat in this way, along the floor or the cushion. You could also certainly sit in a chair. And when you sit in a chair, it's good to have your feet flat on the floor, and to find a way in a position in which it's easy to be both relaxed and alert. So whether you're sitting in a chair or sitting on a cushion, in some fashion, you want to have enough elevation so that it's easy for you to feel relaxed and alert, where the spine is erect but flexible. Just settle down into that position. Now allow your awareness to settle down into the body. If you like, you can close your eyes. You can keep them open. For this style of practice, if you have the eyes open, it's often good to sort of direct the gaze downward a bit and simply be present, just noticing what it's like to sit here quietly.

So how were those few moments of practice? One of the things that's great about Meditation Month is we really try to take the attitude of meditating as beginners. So whether you've been practicing for a long time, or you're just a beginner, there's likely something that happened when you were just told to sit quietly, and, in a sense, not do anything. The mind wants to do things. The mind—sometimes we speak about the monkey mind—is jumping around trying to do this and that, paying attention to something. It's just paying attention to anything. And in fact, that's part of what we're harnessing when we practice mindfulness. We're trying to harness that fundamental capacity for attention, but we're doing that in a way that is not just willy-nilly, is not simply swept away by the waves of our capricious attentions, or what we call distraction. So more specifically, what is distraction? How do we experience it? What is it like? Well, let's try. Let's sit again, just for a moment. Here. Simply sit.

Hey! So what happens when, let's say, I hear “hey,” or even before that, if I hear a sound in another room, or I start to think about something. What happens is what we call *attention capture*, where the mind suddenly is captured by some other object. We might be trying to focus

on one thing, and then suddenly we find ourselves thinking about something else. That's what distraction is, and mindfulness is all about dealing with distraction. It's for that reason that mindfulness is one of the most fundamental aspects of all Buddhist meditations. In fact, it's often defined as that which prevents us from being distracted. That's it. That's the fundamental definition of mindfulness. It's that which prevents us from being distracted.

So again, what is distraction like? It's that sense of being captured when our attention is captured by something else, whether it's a thought, a sensation, a sound, or what have you, that's a moment of distraction. So in the original language that is used by many Buddhist traditions, which is Sanskrit (and this is closely related to another language called Pali, used by some other Buddhist traditions), the word for that we translate as mindfulness actually means literally memory, or remembering. In Sanskrit, it's *smriti*. In Pali, it's *sati*.

So in what sense is mindfulness remembering? It's remembering, in the sense, you could say, of not forgetting. What does it mean for us to be trying to pay attention to something and then suddenly we're distracted, our attention is captured? That's when we're forgetting. So to be mindful is to not forget. You could say it is to remember what it is we're paying attention to.

So let's come back again to our practice, and this time, we're going to use an object, what you can call an anchor for the attention. Let's try to settle the attention on the sensations of breathing for a few moments. You don't need to do this for very long. Let's just try this for a while again. Find your position, allow the mind to settle into the body, your eyes closed or your gaze directed downward, just bring the attention to the sensations of breathing, perhaps at the abdomen, just the rise and fall of the abdomen. There's no need to fixate on the breath. Just notice it.

So even in this short practice, in that very short time, it's quite likely that there was a moment of distraction, something pulled our attention away from the sensations of breathing. How do we notice that that has happened? This is another feature of mindfulness: when we're cultivating it as a practice, a key aspect of what we're focusing on is, of course, the object. But at the same time as we're focusing on the object, we need to notice the quality of the awareness on that object. We need to notice whether we have become distracted and are now paying attention to something else. You may have had this experience many times, I certainly have. I'm trying to read something, for example, and I realize that the last two paragraphs I've read in some way, but I have no idea what they say. And in that sense, I've become distracted, or maybe I'm even trying to meditate. And then suddenly I realize I'm having a daydream about being on the beach in some lovely place. So the moment of meta awareness, a key moment of meta awareness. Awareness of awareness is when I notice that distraction. This is another key aspect of mindfulness to notice when I'm distracted. So again. Let's come back. Bring the attention back to the breath and simply notice distraction. Invite the mind back to the breath again and again and.

All right, so distraction happened, I'm going to guess, and yet, we are able to notice the distraction. That moment of noticing actually is a moment of mindfulness. It's a moment of no

longer being lost, of no longer forgetting. And this then points to a third aspect of mindfulness that's key, again, across all Buddhist traditions: the word mindfulness itself means not forgetting, remembering that it involves meta awareness, noticing the quality of awareness, noticing when we're distracted. And then finally, this third element is that mindfulness involves remembering another kind of remembering: remembering, in a sense, what is our task? What is it that we are doing? But here's a key aspect of this, and this is going to be very important for the style of mindfulness that we're especially going to be examining over the course of this month of meditation. And that is that we can remember, in a sense, keep track of what we're trying to do without having to explicitly think about it. So for example, as we're practicing, trying to recall that we're settling the mind on the breath, we're aware that our task is to maintain attention on the breath. But if we start to think about that, oh, I'm supposed to be maintaining attention on the breath, well, we're not paying attention to the breath anymore, are we? Now we're thinking about what we're supposed to be doing, and yet we can keep that task, the awareness of that task, of what we're trying to do. We can keep that in the background of our awareness, even while we're focused on the object. So this is a key aspect, especially of certain form of mindfulness, that we can be aware of much more than just what we're focusing on. We are aware. We know what we're intending to do, what our task is, but we don't have to think about what that task is. We can attend to the object of our attention even while we know what we are meant to be doing, so to speak. So this is a key aspect of mindfulness, the third aspect, what is sometimes called heedfulness. So let's now practice again with all three of these elements, again, just a short practice. Just allow the mind to settle on the breath.

Notice distraction, invite the mind back to the breath. This is our simple task. Alright, so in these, again, short moments, just allowing the mind to settle on the breath in a mindful way, to notice distraction. There are some key features of mindfulness that you may have already noticed and that are really helpful to enhance and sustain our practice. So one of these features, actually, is a sort of freshness to our experience, bringing a certain attitude to the way in which we are experiencing the breath. This is going to be as we see, especially in the context of wisdom, which we'll talk about next time, a very important aspect of mindfulness. It's not that we've ever had the breath we're having right now. We've never had that before, and we'll never have it again. This breath is only happening now. It's completely new. Sometimes when we think we're paying attention to something, we're not really fully attentive, we have an idea of what it is. And in a way, we're just paying attention to the idea instead of the thing itself. So instead of paying attention to the breath as well, it's the breath again, I know what that is. We try to bring what we call a beginner's mind, which is a term used in the Zen tradition, or a fresh mind, which is a term used in the non-dual Tibetan traditions. And that fresh beginner's mind, the mind, which is said to be like a child wandering into a cathedral for the first time, each moment is fresh and new. Each moment, in a sense, can even be surprising. So this is one key element that we can bring to what we are paying attention to when we're practicing. So let's now come back to the practice again, just going to practice for a few moments, see if we can bring this sense of attention with freshness, with beginner's mind, even with a kind of amazement that each moment of experience is so unique, it was never before, and will be never again. Just right now, settling the mind on the breath. Each moment is fresh and new, never before, never again.

All right, so maybe that worked for you. Some sense of that freshness, the amazement, really, of the present moment and attention in the present moment is a very key aspect of cultivating mindfulness. It's not always necessary. Actually, there is a kind of mindfulness which is not really about the present moment in a broader sense, but as a practice, and especially if we're approaching this practice as a beginner, staying in the present moment is key, and we'll learn more about why that is the case next time. But let's talk now about some other features of mindfulness.

First of all, you may think that to be mindful means that I have to be sitting in meditation for a long period of time, but as you've seen, we've been meditating for a very short period. That's because in the tradition that I'm coming from, which I'll tell you more about next time and which is connected to the non-dual traditions of Tibet, it's often said that it's good to meditate many times in very short sessions. Or in Tibetan, we say, "*Thun thung, drang mang.*" So this sense of many times in short sessions, part of what that helps us to cultivate is that freshness—to bring a freshness to our experience. So I invite you, as you're practicing mindfulness, don't push it. There's no need to sit there in deep meditation for long periods of time. That's not how we're practicing right now. Just allow the mind to settle.

But here is another feature that is very important for us, which is that as we are approaching the present moment experience as fresh and new, it's also really helpful to bring a certain sense of kindness, of openness, to that experience—of not pushing that experience away. And that is true also for all of the Buddhist traditions that teach mindfulness. Why is that? Because actually, if we're averse to our own experience, if we don't like it, we don't like the thoughts we're having, we don't like the feelings we're having, then we're not going to be able to examine them, we're not going to be able to see what's really happening. This is going to be a key feature of the wisdom that comes from mindfulness, which we'll talk about next time.

So let's again bring our attention to the breath with that sense of freshness, but also a sense of open curiosity, a sense, even, of kindness, of being ready to accept whatever is happening, not to endorse it, not to push it away, but just to be with it without rejecting it. So whatever thoughts come up, whatever feelings come up, we just be there with it, that sense of kindness, freshness, and openness. So again, let's practice,

Bring the attention to the breath. As thoughts arise, memories, sensations, no need to push it away, no need to cling on to it. Just notice, let go, invite the mind back to the breath. Alright, you're welcome to take a break or keep practicing as this recording ends. Let's remember to appreciate this time that we have. How fortunate we are to be able to practice in this way. So I'll see you again for our next session, where we will explore wisdom together.

*This transcript has been edited for clarity.*