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

Week 2: Developing Wisdom

With John Dunne

This session, we're going to explore wisdom together on the basis of our practice of mindfulness. So first, let's just again briefly settle the mind. Find that position: we are relaxed, but alert. Just allow the attention to drop down into the body and settle the mind. If you like, you can invite the mind to attend to breathing or simply be present as you wish. One method for settling the mind that you may find helpful is to actually count the breaths with an inhalation in and then exhalation out. That's one, inhalation in, exhalation out. That's two. Count up to three, and back down. It's no problem if you lose count. Just start again.

All right, so as you're practicing, you may notice a couple of things. If we bring that fresh, open attention to our experience, sometimes what happens is, actually it seems like we're thinking more, that more distractions, more thoughts, occur. This is a very common effect of starting this kind of practice. Many people will experience this. But it's not that you're actually thinking more, that you're having more thoughts. It's that you're finally noticing how many thoughts you've already been having. This is the way we are in our sort of ordinary state. Very often, many of us are just thinking, thinking, thinking, distracted, distracted, distracted. So as you first practice, you may feel like there's so much going on. The key here is that we're not trying to stop all that. We're developing a different relationship to it, where we're not caught by the thoughts, not caught by distraction. Attention capture isn't happening. Even if thoughts are coming and going, they're like clouds in the sky. This is what we can call the aspect of mindfulness that cultivates tranquility, which is one of the two main ways of talking about Buddhist practices.

You may have heard the Sanskrit word *shamatha* in this connection: tranquility. So sometimes we think tranquility means no thoughts. The mind is completely still, and that's true, that can happen. But in this style of practice, tranquility doesn't necessarily mean that there are no thoughts. It just means that the thoughts are not disturbing. They're not capturing us. We're able to sustain an awareness without being lost, even when there are thoughts. So when you practice in this fashion, don't try to make thoughts stop. Don't try to stop distractions. All we need to do is just remain naturally aware. That's tranquility.

Let's drop down into that again for a moment. Again, with this idea of practicing in many sessions for a short time. So just drop down into that sense of simply being present and aware, perhaps inviting the mind to rest on the breath as an anchor for the attention. Noticing with a fresh, curious kind open mind.No need to push anything away. No need to make anything happen.

Perhaps you get some glimpse of tranquility practicing in this way: fresh, open, present, centered awareness. There's another aspect of meditation. Many Buddhist meditations are characterized as either being about tranquility primarily, or being about what we call insight. And insight really has to do with the cultivation of wisdom. And one of the interesting things about

mindfulness-style practices is that they're really about both. They're about cultivating that kind of tranquility where we're not distracted, we're not caught by distractions, or at least if we are distracted, it's not so deep. We're able to easily, in a sense, stop being lost, to become aware again. So that's tranquility. The Insight aspect of mindfulness practices, is where we're seeing what's really happening, what's actually going on. Not what we think is going on, not what we want to be going on, but what is actually going on, what is happening right now. This is a key aspect of Buddha's practice overall, because it's this cultivation of wisdom that is said to be the pathway to the relief of suffering—for ourselves and for others. And there are many aspects of wisdom. But here's a key aspect that also is very helpful for us to cultivate mindfulness as tranquility, which is the kind of wisdom that recognizes what's going on with thoughts. So when we're distracted, very often, we're distracted by thoughts. We're thinking about something. Let's see what happens when we do that. Let's just go into our practice and allow your thoughts to happen. If somehow you don't have any thoughts, then maybe deliberately bring up a thought, like, thinking about whatever, your to do list.

So let's settle first again. We're using the breath. Just allow the mind to ride on the breath. No need to fixate. Notice thoughts. Even bring them up. What is it like to think about what you have to do next? What is it like to think about something memorable from yesterday or this morning?

I think you'll find the results of this little experiment with our experience is that when we're thinking in this way, pretty much every time we're distracted by thoughts, we're distracted by thoughts that are in the past or in the future. Cognitive scientists will call this mental time travel, where we are all time travelers. How we time travel is in our minds, in our experience, in our thoughts. So when we go to what's happening in the past, that means we're not in the present. When we're thinking about what's going to happen in the future, that means we're not in the present. And one of the reasons that we actually use present moment experience for cultivating mindfulness is that, especially as beginners, anchoring our attention in the present moment enables us to step back from that mental time traveling. So what do we use to anchor our experience in the present? We use something that only happens in the present, which is sensation—the sensation of breathing, the sensation of hearing something, even the sensation of seeing. These things only happen now in the present moment. That's why we use these kinds of experiences that are sensory experiences, as objects for our mindfulness practice, at least in the beginning. So present moment, present centered awareness, is really helpful because it can help us to step back from being caught in that mental time traveling.

So again, let's practice for a few moments to really see if we can settle into the now, into the present moment, but not by fixating on the breath, not by pushing anything away, but just by allowing the mind to settle on the sensations of breathing, or, if you prefer, on some sound in your environment. Just allow the mind to settle and be with the mind now, fresh and open, kind and curious, right now.

Now, I know it's easy to talk about remaining in the now. It's easy to talk about it, but maybe not easy to experience it. And one reason is that thoughts, especially perhaps for us humans, we have a certain amazing degree of capacity for mental time travel. We can think all the way back

for centuries and learn from what's happened in the past, our own past, and the past of others, through reading and so on, and we can think about the future, make elaborate plans together and do amazing things through that kind of planning, like building the pyramids or flying to the moon. So we have amazing capacity for mental time travel. But it's also a kind of two-edged sword, because part of the way this works is that we experience our thoughts of the past and the future often as fullbodied simulations, where we feel like we're actually experiencing them. This is a particular kind of mental time travel that really captures our attention. And it does this because somehow we're remembering something that we feel is very important, or we're anticipating something that we feel is very important.

Let's say I'm thinking about a difficult conversation I have to have tomorrow. I start to think about that again and again, and then it starts to become, in a sense, real to me. I start to experience that as if it's actually happening. And when I do that, then what happens? Well, that's a stressful conversation. I'm experiencing it now, and hence I have a stress response. And one of the reasons that mindfulness and its secular uses has been. So effective for dealing with stress is that it helps us to step back from that kind of mental time travel, where we are, in a sense, living the difficult experiences from the past or the future and giving ourselves a stress response. Again, it seems like humans may be the only creatures that can really do this to such a great extent, this is why the anthropologist Robert Sapolsky wrote his book, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. They can't sit on the couch and think about how terrible tomorrow is going to be.

So how can we work with this? Well, one way to do this is to really experience what it is. What is it like when thoughts capture our attention in that way, where they become like a fullbodied simulation of experience? Let's try to actually do that. I'm going to invite you to visualize something. It’s probably easiest to close your eyes. And I'd like you to visualize a beautiful bowl of strawberries, freshly washed, glistening in the morning sun, that amazing red color, freshly picked, organic, so ready to be eaten. Maybe there's a little sugar for dusting, chocolate sauce. Mmm, so delicious. Just see that in your mind's eye. If you're like me and you like strawberries, and I use this example quite a lot, and even though I've done it many times, almost every time, like this time, I managed to make my mouth water. Did your mouth water? If it did, then I rest my case. That is to say that we can experience our thoughts as real in such a way that our bodies react to them as if they were real. But of course, you can't eat the thought strawberry, right? I suppose that could be convenient if you wanted to have a quick bowl of strawberries or whatever else. You just think about it, and then you eat it, and then you've actually eaten strawberries. Unfortunately, things don't work that way, or maybe fortunately, but in any case, those strawberries, the thought of a strawberry, is not a strawberry. It's not real as a strawberry. It's a thought, but it's not a strawberry. Our system thinks that those thought strawberries are real strawberries, and therefore reacts to them and our mouth water.

So now we're going to do this again. We’re going to try to bring up that full visualization, but then I'm going to ask you to do a kind of pivot. I'm going to ask you to and this involves that sort of meta-awareness we were talking about before we're going to become aware of the thought as a thought. We're going to see it as a thought, experience the thought of a strawberry, not as a strawberry, but as a thought. Let's see what happens when we do that. All right, let's come back

to our visualization. See if we can make it even better. Now, beautiful, delicious strawberries, just waiting there with that amazing red color. Perhaps you can smell the scent, some of them cut in half, so delicious and inviting. See the strawberries clearly in your mind, and now see it as a thought.

What happens when you do that? For many people, what happens is the thought just goes, poof, disappears. You might try doing that a few times. Experiment with that. What's it like to see something like to imagine something like strawberries, then really see it as a thought? Sometimes it just goes poof. Other times what happens is that it kind of gets a picture frame around it, or it becomes a thought bubble in a comic book, or sometimes it fades into the distance. Some combination of these things may happen, but all of these are signs of something that we could say. Seeing the thought as a thought. We're taking the reality out of the thought. We're taking the reality out of the thought in the sense that we're not seeing it as a strawberry anymore. We're experiencing what's actually going on, which is a thought. So that's a kind of wisdom.

Remember, wisdom is seeing what's actually going on, and the kinds of thoughts where this can be very powerful is actually with thoughts about ourselves. Because one of the ways in which we cause ourselves suffering is we get stuck in the story of ourselves. We get stuck in the model, you could say, of who we are, who we think we are, instead of who we actually are. So let's try this now with a thought about ourselves. I just want you to bring up a thought of yourself, to think about yourself, some feature of yourself, who you think you are, see yourself that way. Maybe there are some things you don't like. Maybe there are some things you think are wonderful. Just see that person yourself like a character.See that person very clearly and focus in on some characteristic. Oh, they are so and so. They're like this. They're like that, see it clearly, and now see it as a thought.

A lot of our distraction when we're focusing in meditation, when we're cultivating mindfulness, is distraction about ourselves. When you're distracted about yourself, it can be really helpful to really see that self model, to see who you think you are, and to see that who you think you are is not who you are, just like the thought of a strawberry is not a strawberry. The thought of you is not you. Who are you? One way to speak about that is what's happening right now, that fresh kind open awareness. Bring that to experience itself.

Finally, another aspect of our experience is the sense that the one seeing out of your eyes is who you are. So the thought of ourself we know is not ourselves, just like the thought of a strawberry is not a strawberry, the story we tell about ourselves is never fully ourselves. But likewise, even that sense of being the one seeing is a way in which that also is perhaps a little misleading.

One way to experience that is to move into a slightly different kind of mindfulness. That's mindfulness without an object. To have a small taste of that, I'm going to invite you to again, find your position, drop down into the body, and allow the mind to settle on the breath. No need to fixate on the breath. Just allow the mind to lightly ride on the breath. The breath is like an

anchor for the attention. It'd be like a buoy floating in the water. Here's an invitation. Just like taking your hand gently away from that buoy, see if you can gently drop your attention on the breath without becoming distracted, to be just undistracted and mindful, gently withdrawing attention from the breath. What happens when we're aware, without focusing on an object who's aware? What is aware? That's a taste, perhaps, of a certain kind of wisdom. I invite you to continue practicing as you wish, many sessions, for a short time, and we'll see you next time, when we'll explore compassion.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.