

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation

Week 5: Daily Life Practice

What does it mean to practice in daily life?

Often we are told that we can apply our mindfulness in our daily life, but we are not really given very clear instructions about how to do that. I find it helps to have some specific techniques for our practice in daily life, much as we do for sitting meditation. Specific techniques I have worked with throughout my practice are the main subject for this week.

Occasionally someone asks me: Why are we doing this? Why should we work to bring mindfulness into our daily lives? In our usual state of mind, we operate out of our habitual tendencies, our habits and patterns of mind, in a seemingly unconscious way. We often aren't aware of why we do things, or what motivates us.

The more I explore the mind through awareness, the more I think of the unconscious as things that are simply not yet in awareness, that there is not really a barrier between consciousness and the unconscious. The mind can go very deep into what we would call the unconscious. We can see our deeper motivations arising in the moment. We can witness what we would normally think of as an unconscious impulse.

Through mindfulness and awareness, we can begin to uncover those habits and motivations that seem to arise from our unconscious. You might have experienced for yourself that habitual tendencies lead you into stress or suffering, over and over again. Daily life provides an ideal ground for exploring these tendencies with mindfulness, since daily life provides so much of the friction that triggers these tendencies. Mindfulness is a tool through which we can uncover these habitual tendencies, and the conditioning that we carry around with us like baggage. By observing these habitual tendencies with mindfulness, we can begin to let them go. Actually, they begin to let go of themselves.

Through this letting go, we experience more peace, more ease, more calm, and less suffering in our lives. The whole point of our mindfulness practice is to free ourselves from suffering, which is often caused by our habitual tendencies. The tendencies go very deep, they are very strong, so it takes a lot of patience, dedication, resolve and persistence to keep working at it.

Daily Life Practice and Sitting Practice

In sitting meditation, we have several things that remind us to pay attention. The sitting posture itself reminds us to be mindful. We sit still with our eyes closed: when we wake up in the midst of thinking, the stillness of the body reminds us of what we are doing!

In addition, in sitting meditation, we often use an anchor for our attention by cultivating awareness on some particular aspect of our experience, such as the awareness of breathing. The anchor helps us notice when we're not paying attention to it, which is part of the point of having an anchor for the attention. We set our intention to pay attention to our breathing, and we notice when we've forgotten to pay attention to the breathing. Noticing that we've forgotten is not a problem. It's actually part of the way the practice works. An anchor for our attention serves as a reference point that supports our ability to know how mindful we are. It can give us a sense of how long we can stay in the present moment, connected to the experience of breathing, before the mind wanders off. So the anchor serves as a point of reference for our sitting meditation.

In our daily lives, we lose these reminders: we don't have the stillness of the body to remind us to pay attention; instead, the busyness of our day often draws us away from remembering! We also don't usually have any point of reference for knowing whether we've been paying attention or not. So, in our daily lives, it is helpful to pick some things to serve as a reference point, as an anchor for our attention.

Choosing a Reference Point for Daily Life

A main practice for daily life that helps to provide this reference point is to pick an activity that occurs regularly throughout your day to serve as a reference point in daily life. The activity you chose can be any mundane task,

preferably one that you take an action to initiate. The key is that it should be something that happens pretty frequently during the bulk of your day, say at least three or four times an hour. This task essentially becomes your reference point.

There are many activities you could choose as a reference point. For example, you could choose the action of standing up or sitting down, perhaps walking through doorways, or picking something up. A more challenging project might be reaching for something, the act of extending your arm. That happens many, many times during a day. If you use a computer a lot, you might choose clicking send for email, closing a window, or switching between applications. Be creative!

When you first start working with a reference point task, standing up for example, probably you will stand up many times before you remember! You might remember only when you go to bed at night. The fact that you haven't remembered all day long is not a problem. That moment of remembering is equivalent to the moment in sitting meditation when you remember that your mind has wandered off of the breathing. In that moment we know: "Here I am now, and I've forgotten to do what I set my mind to do." That moment is not an indication that you can't do this practice, in fact it is just the opposite.

The first time you remember that you have not noticed your reference point is the moment that the practice can begin! So, in that moment of remembering, take stock of what is happening right then and there, because mindfulness has returned. Notice what is happening, in a very light, simple way. Notice how your body is situated, perhaps notice whether the mind is agitated or calm. Just notice some simple things about what is going on. And, in that moment, also *resolve to try again* to remember your chosen task.

Over the course of a few days, you might notice more frequently during the day that you haven't been noticing your task. If you notice four or five times during the day, that is four or five moments of mindfulness you probably would not have had. Increasing the number of moments of mindfulness in the day is mostly the point of this practice. There is no need to judge yourself for not remembering the actual task. The task is a reference point to help you remember, so you can begin to know how mindful you actually are during the day.

At some point you will notice your reference point right after it happens, right have stood up, for example. So, the remembering, the mindfulness is getting closer to the experience. At some point you will be completely aware right as you are standing up. At that point, this task might start to serve as a mindfulness bell for you: the action itself begins to trigger the mindfulness.

The tasks I'm suggesting as a reference point are quite brief, often lasting only a few seconds. There is no need to try to hold on to the mindfulness past those few seconds. For instance, in the moment of standing, just know that you are standing. In the moment of walking through a doorway, just know that you are walking through the door. The mindfulness might spill over from those few seconds, but don't try to hold on to it. Just go about your day. Allow the rest of the day to be easy. Let the mindfulness come as it does – if it comes in at other times of the day, great.

See if you can hold this practice with a really light touch. It is not meant to feel burdensome on your day. With this emphasis on picking a mindfulness project, keep in mind that the task is not so much about the project itself, it is more about waking up, and remembering to be mindful.

Intention

As you pay attention to your reference point, at some point, you will start to notice that you are about to do it, before you actually do it. For example, if you have chosen standing up as your task, as you become more attuned to the standing process, you will start to recognize that you're going to stand up before you stand up.

That moment of knowing that you're about to do something before you do is seeing intention, which we sometimes call the "about to" moment. Intention is the mental factor that sets action into motion. Intention precedes any action, whether of body, of speech, or of mind. Exploring intention, you start to see the interrelationship between the mind and the body.

In and of itself, intention is a neutral event – it is simply an energetic impulse, sometimes felt in the body, sometimes felt as a thought or leaning in the mind – it is the sense of knowing something is going to happen. Sometimes teachers call it the “about to” moment. We know something is about to happen. Accompanying that about to moment, there is always a reason for the action: the motivation behind the action.

In that place of knowing that something is going to happen before it actually occurs, we have a chance to see what our motivation is. We may be motivated out of compassion, or anger or greed, or perhaps out of simply necessity.

One of the most powerful places to practice with this is in the area of speech. Paying attention to speech can be a very challenging practice. Much of the time, we speak automatically, without noticing first what we are going to say, or even that we are going to speak. And much less often do we take a moment to contemplate the effect our speech will have on the person we are talking to.

A great exercise to try is to simply pause before you speak. Just pause. Even remembering to pause can be hard! But that pause allows you to recollect that you are going to say something, that there is an intention to speak, and if you pay attention in that pause, you have the possibility of noticing, first, what you are going to say, and second, what the motivation is behind saying it.

Seeing that our intentions and motivations are often less than skillful can be distressing, at times. This practice is not to be a source of self-judgement, but rather one that helps you to learn from your experience. When you find that particular motivations lead to pain and suffering, for yourself or for others, you have the choice to let go *before* you take action, if you are keeping track of your motivations.

The present moment is the only place where we can make a choice about how to respond to what life presents us with. The past is gone, it doesn't exist, except as memories in our mind in the present moment. The future doesn't exist, except as thoughts in the present moment. All that exists is this very moment, brought about by a whole mix of causes and conditions, most of which were out of our control. How we respond to this very moment is our choice, it is actually the only thing we have a choice about, ever.

The Buddha taught that this choice point is the key to happiness. If we can see this choice point, we have a higher likelihood of choosing to respond in ways that will lead to happiness. One of the aspects of this teaching, though, is that while we have some control over our choice in the present moment, the results of our actions are out of our control. We need to let go of needing specific outcomes from our actions. We can't control the way others will respond to our actions, be they skillful or unskillful. Yet we can take refuge in knowing that we are responding to the world in the most skillful way that we can.

When you start to become aware of your reference point before it actually happens, in that moment, you can check in: “Why am I about to do this?” Since you have already seen that you are going to do it before you do it, the reason why will might be clear to you. You often don't have to look too hard. Seeing the intention and motivation behind our actions is powerful tool, in both our daily lives and in our sitting practice. It gives us a window into how our minds function; and they way our minds are motivated by patterns and habits.

Additional ways to support daily life mindfulness

In addition to the reference point, there are many other things you could do to help yourself be mindful. Be creative! You might try:

- Waiting three rings of the telephone before answering it
- Setting up mindfulness bells on your computer.
- Connecting with friends and texting a “be aware” message randomly each day.
- Being mindful of the whole several-minute process of going to the rest room
- Being mindful of an emotion that is strong or difficult for you
- Being mindful of any chore: making your bed, doing the dishes, brushing your teeth.

Another way I helped myself to pay attention was by putting mindfulness reminders around my house, choosing strategic places to put a small note about a particular quality of mind: Truthfulness on the telephone, giving on the door to the outside, patience at my bathroom sink, equanimity on the computer.

Patience and resolve: two key factors that support daily life practice.

It takes energy and it dedicated resolve to actually bring the mindfulness practice into our daily lives. It is quite challenging! But it is not a lesser practice. The degree of awakening that we can come to through our daily life practice is quite profound.

Since it is such a challenging practice, we need to bring patience to the process. We will recognize that we've forgotten over and over again. We need to cultivate patience with the gradual nature of the process, and with how hard it is to remember to keep doing this practice. Be compassionate with yourself about how difficult it is. The quality of resolve supports the practice also: Every time you remember and feel like giving up, resolve to just keep trying. Keep trying to pay attention, no matter how hopeless it feels. That resolve begins to break down the barriers of the unconscious habits and patterns of mind that keep us lost, and not in the present moment.