

Dharmette: The Three Steps of Mindfulness (Part Two)

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 27, 2013

In the practice of mindfulness, there are three useful steps. The first is to include a substantial amount of acknowledgement of what's happening. Then it's useful to add into mindfulness practice a substantial amount of time to feel what's happening. And then it's helpful to spend some time softening with what's happening. These three aspects of mindfulness are to acknowledge, to feel, and to soften.

Mindfulness has a lot to do with acknowledging what is happening. For some people it goes beyond acknowledging to being very honest about what is happening – this is what I'm feeling; this is what I'm thinking; this is what's going on for me. For me, the word 'acknowledgement' carries with it a certain respect. No matter what you are acknowledging, you are doing so with respect, even if what you are acknowledging is not good news about yourself. There is something very mature, respectful, and non-conflictive about the acknowledgement of: "This is how it is – this is what's happening now."

For some people it is really radical to no longer be in conflict mode, desire mode, fix-it mode, or running away mode about what is happening. To actually stop, make space, and just simply acknowledge can dramatically change the ecology of the mind. Ease can come just by respectfully focusing on and acknowledging what is there. No matter what we are experiencing, it warrants our attention. It deserves to be seen, acknowledged and recognized. It is very easy for people to be at war with different parts of themselves. Sometimes the split between the good side and the bad side can be quite dramatic when the two sides are at war. The practice of mindfulness is meant to heal the inner conflicts that we carry with us. A big part of this happens by just acknowledging what is there: acknowledging the war and the different sides. The acknowledgement is that it's ok. We are not in conflict with what is, not trying to fix or judge what is, but seeing it for what it is, and seeing it clearly. So acknowledgement is an important part of practice.

The second part is the feeling. Once you've acknowledged something, in a sense you want to get closer to it, and allow it to move through you, and to show itself in a fuller or deeper way. The acknowledgement is cognitive in that the mind is recognizing what is happening. This can be helpful in creating a certain separation from the experience so that you're not lost or caught up in it. But feeling it brings you back into it and ensures that in observing it, you're not aloof from it. You're not resisting it, or staying up in your head, but you are also including the physical and the emotional body. How do you feel? How is the body experiencing the moment?

We think of feeling as being emotional, but it doesn't have to be emotional. When I was meditating in Burma during the monsoon season, it might not be raining one moment but then suddenly there would be this loud, dramatic downpouring of rain. I could not believe how much rain could come out of the sky. The roofs were tin so suddenly there would be this crashing. One practice I had was that as soon as it started raining, I would tune into my body and see how it was experiencing the weather shifts in humidity or atmospheric pressure. I knew it was raining and that I was dry, but what did it feel like to be in that rain? What shifted inside me? It wasn't an emotional feeling but rather sensations.

So, what are the sensations? What are the feelings in your body, in your mind, in your heart in response to whatever it is you're acknowledging? Take time to get to know that so that it's not just cognitive – not just thinking, judging or making stories about it. It's part of this respectful making

space for the experience, and time for the experience to be fully there. Do not be in a hurry. I think being in a hurry interferes with mindfulness almost more than anything else. Take your time to really get to know it: “What is this?”

The same is true with the breath. When you're with your breathing, you feel your breathing. Are you really present for the feeling of what breathing is like in your body? What is the impact? What resonates? How is the body impacted by the experience of breathing? Come back into the body. The body is not a story. The body is a way of helping us be in the present moment. It is always in the present moment. So acknowledge what is there; take time acknowledging it. Be honest and respectful of what is there. Try to simplify how you are and just acknowledge without being reactive. And then – when you're ready – feel it more fully. Make space to feel it. One thing about feeling in this respectful, open-handed way is that all experiences, feelings, and emotions in the body are not things but processes. As we feel more fully, the processes can then unfold as they need to unfold. If we don't fully feel, or are not present for it, then it is too easy to interrupt what needs to unfold. So to feel is to allow something to unfold.

The third part is softening. It can also mean letting go. Once you have acknowledged and fully felt something, then it makes sense to let go of it. But because there is an emphasis in Buddhism on letting go, some people let go too early, too quickly. You don't want to be in a hurry to let go. It isn't healthy to let go so quickly that you haven't really seen, understood, or felt what you are letting go of. You want to give yourself time. Even if you can let go of something, make sure that, for a while, you've really been with it, seen it, and understood it. Sometimes it's letting go.

But sometimes softening just means softening. Softening may mean that the tension or the holding can be relaxed just a little bit. Sometimes the thing that can be softened is not what we are acknowledging, but rather our relationship to it. We might be riding it very close, or pulling back from it, or afraid of it. Perhaps how we hold it in awareness can be softened. Some people like the expression to make “breathing room” for their experience. Make room. Softening can mean making room. Open up around it. It's also very respectful to make room for something. For example, I am angry, and how upset I am is pretty ugly in my mind. So I'll acknowledge that I'm angry and it doesn't look good. And I can feel it – how hot and tense it is in there – and then I see if I can make space for the anger, make it ok to be angry, or make lots of room for my anger. Or maybe I can soften the tension around the anger.

These three steps can be used in a systematic way – as a way of giving the mind something to do to help it get settled. Sometimes the mind needs to rally around something so that it is not so scattered and jumping around so much. So acknowledge what's happening right now, and don't settle for a simple acknowledgement. Spend more time with it. What's the feeling of what needs to be acknowledged? Respectful acknowledgement means listening to it. And then take the time to feel it. Spend time really getting to know it, not being in a hurry. And then when the time is right, is there some way of softening, softening the mind around it, or how you pay attention to it? Softening how you are with it. Softening the thing itself, and settling in. And then once you've gone through that process, start over. Do it again.

This three-step process is one of the ways of not allowing the wandering, reactive, and busy mind to have the upper hand. Let the practice get the upper hand so that the wandering, busy mind is not always be fed and fueled, and can begin to settle down. You can use intention to change your inner ecology by intending to something with your attention: intend to acknowledge; intend to feel; intend to soften. Really relax in a soft way.

This morning someone told me a wonderful thing about another meditation teacher. Whenever they gave instructions for meditation practice, they would always say, “Do it the best you can.” I love that. I think we should always end that way. So if this instruction today makes sense, do it the best you can.