

Sati (5 of 5) Abiding in Lucid Awareness + Q&A

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 3, 2020

This morning will be the last talk of the five-part series on the faculty of mindfulness. Over these weeks, I've been going through each of the five faculties, discussing one faculty per week. I've done three now: faith, effort, and mindfulness. Those of you who've been following along might have picked up that these five talks are progressive. I've been talking about these faculties from the perspective of different points on the path of practice as it deepens or strengthens.

For the discussion of mindfulness, the first day was about what I called initiating mindfulness -- the practice of simply coming back, waking up, reconnecting to what's here. This takes a certain kind of effort and engagement -- a commitment to keep coming back, waking up and recognizing that we're here. As we begin to get more in the flow of the present moment, the recognition factor grows stronger. Clearly recognizing what's happening -- recognizing sounds and sensations for what they are -- is a very important part of mindfulness practice.

Part of the art of mindfulness practice is simply this recognition, without our preferences, desires, aversions, complex associations, thoughts, and interpretations. Just let the recognition be very plain and simple, very clear, a clear acknowledgement of what's happening. As we learn to do this, it's possible to have more continuity with mindfulness and awareness in the present moment. Then, it's possible to observe, to simply settle back and observe, over time, how things are going. It's possible to observe breathing, to observe sounds, to observe thinking as it passes.

You sit and watch as if observing train cars going down the track or boats going down the river. You don't jump onto the train or the boat, you just watch them go by. As observing gets stronger, it has more continuity. Then, it's possible to see how things exist in the course of time -- brief moments of time. In particular, what I mean is that it's possible to see how things are inconstant. There's a flow of life and change, a constant coming and going, an arising and passing. Mindfulness enables us to see change, inconstancy, and impermanence.

One of the functions of this seeing is abiding in observation. As the practice develops and we see the impermanence of things, it helps us loosen the grip of our attachments, our preoccupations, our resistance to things. Then, that quality of abiding becomes stronger. Perhaps even the sense of the observer falls away and there's just a sense of awareness. Some people describe this as a field with things simply existing within it. Things arise and pass, and there's a strong sense of a quality of awareness, or clarity, space, beingness, or restful presence. Things happen, but that sense of awareness doesn't change.

In the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness, he calls this *paṭisati*. It's a rare word in the suttas. I think of it as lucid awareness. The renowned translator, Bhikkhu Bodhi, sometimes translates *sati* as lucid awareness. But I think that this really clear awareness, in which we know we're aware, has a reflexive quality of, "Yes. I'm resting. I'm here. There's awareness." The sense of clarity, awareness, and knowing, is so clear, peaceful and spacious, that it's almost like its own thing, independent of what's known. This idea of knowing something that is independent of what's known, is getting close to the idea of how mindfulness brings freedom. In talking about how it's possible to abide in *paṭisati*, the Buddha talked about this abiding as synonymous with not being dependent on anything in the world, not clinging to or grasping anything in the world.

So, regardless of how we understand abiding in awareness, lucid awareness, abiding in presence or beingness -- we know we are in its territory when we can feel that whatever arises in the moment is not something the mind or consciousness is in any way dependent on or caught in. It doesn't rest on it. The mind rests and abides in awareness. There is no grasping of anything. The awareness that's present, when there's no grasping, no dependence on anything, when you're not being influenced by anything -- just *here* -- is a profound state of peace.

In this way, I've talked about mindfulness as a progression. There's beginning mindfulness, intermediate mindfulness, and more developed mindfulness. It might be easy to assume that people at the beginning stage are simply beginners. Those who've been practicing for some time are into the intermediate stage. Then, there are people who've been practicing for a long time who are at a more advanced stage. But I think that even those

who are mature in the practice are beginners most of the time. There's no fixed number here, but for the sake of discussion, probably sixty percent of the time they're a beginner. They're initiating mindfulness, coming back and waking up. They might be an intermediate practitioner about thirty to thirty-five percent of the time. Perhaps they're at the stage I discussed on Wednesday – just being able to observe in a clear way, not interfering with things too much. Four or five percent of the time, there might be some higher quality of awareness – abiding in or dwelling in awareness without much clinging or attachment. And, perhaps one percent of the time, there's a really high-quality feeling of peace and expansiveness. Whether or not these numbers are accurate is not the point.

The point is that we're all beginners at times. The essence of practice is to be at the stage where you are. Practice with how you are. What I've seen in mature practitioners is a sense of ease, a willingness, and an acceptance of practicing where they are. Practicing as a beginner is just fine. It's the practice of that moment.

There's a wonderful saying about mindfulness meditation: "The fastest way to go from point A to point B, is to *fully* be at point A." Wherever you are, whatever circumstances you're in, mindfulness is practicing with what you have. Really do that.

And if you find yourself as a beginner over and over again, then that's your spot to practice. That's the place to find your ease. Keep showing up. Keep waking up. If you're able to return to recognizing, and you're able to find some freedom in that recognition, that's your place. If you're able to rest back and observe, that's your place. If you're able to see the inconstancy of phenomena, that's your place. If you're able to tap into the mind's capacity to abide in awareness, to have lucid awareness with very little clinging, attachment, or dependency on anything, that's your place. Wherever your place is, it's your place.

I will end with what is, for me, a lovely and inspiring story, an analogy that the Buddha gives about mindfulness practice. He talks about ~~the~~ monkeys who live in the forests, in the jungles of northern India, somewhere in the interface between the foothills of the Himalayas and the plains of the Ganges. The Buddha said that if the monkeys go further up into the mountains where there are steep cliffs and crevices, it's dangerous for them up there. If they come out of the forests into the plains where there are no trees, then they're susceptible to being caught by hunters. But if they stay in their home country, their native land, in the zone between the high mountains and the plains, then they're safe. In the same way, the Buddha said, the practice of mindfulness is a person's native home, their home country. His original language is "ancestral lands." If you stay there, then you're safe.

The faculty of mindfulness is your native land, your birth place, the place where you most belong. It's a home you can take with you wherever you go. If you stay close to it, there's safety there. If you don't stay in it, then you'll encounter dangers.

Next week we'll talk about the fourth faculty, which is concentration or *samādhi*. The last faculty we'll do is wisdom.

If you'd like to ask questions now, I'll stay and try to answer them.

Q1: "Does this abiding include the breath focus or can it release even that?" Thank you. "How can you work on returning to not grasping in the breath or the pleasant feelings of abiding?"

One of the very important principles in Buddhist practice is that we don't focus so much on 'doing' the ideals that are presented, ideals such as not grasping at anything. It's a bit dangerous to try directly to live up to an ideal, to hold ourselves in that position. In mindfulness practice, we use the practice to see what's actually going on. If what's going on is that we're grasping, then that becomes what we pay attention to. The way to come to non-grasping is to understand grasping well. It might be grasping the breath, or grasping pleasant feelings, or even grasping the idea of abiding. That's suffering. That's beginning to cause tightness or contraction or stress. The recognition factor – recognizing grasping, clinging, resistance – doesn't mean that we're trying to dismiss what's there. Rather, we turn toward it to recognize it and see it clearly. Then we learn the stress and discomfort of grasping. We become wise about what we're grasping, and wise to the trickery of grasping. Over time, as we become wise, we begin to grasp less. Then, as we grasp less, what emerges is the ability to abide in awareness more. We're not forcing ourselves into abiding. We're patient and we take our time. We grow into seeing clearly what's going on and how we operate.

Q2: Can you say more about staying motivated, especially in the beginning and intermediate stages of practice?

Great question. There are two sides of practice. There is the path that is onward-leading, the path that takes us to freedom from suffering. Buddhism has a lot to do with going from suffering to the absence of suffering. There is the path, but at the same time, mindfulness can help take us on that path. There's something about mindfulness – that moment of recognition of being aware of something – that has, inherently, qualities of peace, qualities of freedom, and qualities of non-reactivity. I'd like for people to learn, right from the beginning, to look for and experiment with how a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom, or a moment of peace. It doesn't have to be dramatic. How can it be useful and valuable, so that you'll never regret having been mindful, so, if you're a beginner for the rest of your life, you'll say to yourself: "That was a life well spent – all those moments"? Each moment of mindfulness is, in a sense, complete in itself. That's the idea of going from point A to point B by being fully at point A. For a beginner, or for anyone, I greatly value really exploring, really finding out for yourself, how a moment of clear mindfulness is something you'll never regret having. Find out for yourself how this moment was valuable to see and be present for. If you do that exercise, you'll probably be much more at ease with where you are at any stage of practice.

Q3: "Aversion to aging, illness, and death, and judgments about things happening in the world right now make it difficult to find a place of calm abiding. How can you find this abiding out in the world?"

It's a very good question, one that I think many people share with you right now. There's a lot of uncertainty, stress, fear, and distress about what's happening the world. This is the time to practice, more than any other time, I think. We want to bring a lot of compassion to studying our distress, our difficulties and our challenges with what's happening right now.

Begin looking at how you're reacting to it. What's going on and what are you doing? Maybe first, it's important, in certain situations, to allow your heart to break. These are difficult times. There's a lot of pain and suffering. People are dying. People are up against really difficult and distressing circumstances – in hospitals and elsewhere. There's a lot of distress in families, and sometimes home is not a safe place to be. People are cooped up with each other in ways that they usually don't have to be.

There's a way of practicing in which we radically allow ourselves to be how we are. Let the heart break. Allow ourselves to feel how difficult it is in the wake of all this. Feel it in your body. Use all the skills of mindfulness you have. Do it in small doses. Touch in. Sometimes I like to give the instruction that when things are really hard inside, with a lot of difficult emotions, imagine that mindfulness is a soft cotton ball that you gently touch to the wound and then pull back. It can be too much to use mindfulness to go right into the difficulties and to stay there. Have the wisdom to know that it's valuable to see, recognize, and acknowledge what's there, and to make space for it, even if it's two moments of space. Then pull back. Then, when you're ready, touch it again.

We're looking at how we can allow this beautiful heart we have to find its way to resolve what's going on for us. It takes a lot of honesty. It takes a lot of discomfort sometimes. Mindfulness practice can be talked about in wonderfully idealistic ways – in peaceful ways. I apologize if I give that impression too much. A really important part of mindfulness practice is learning how to be comfortable with discomfort – to learn about our reactivity, our beliefs, our sense of self – all the things that come into play. I hope that you realize that practicing mindfulness with discomfort is actually a really important part of mindfulness. This is not publicly advertised! Don't go looking for discomfort, but if it visits you in your practice, that's an important part of learning. Learn how to be more equanimous, non-reactive. Become wise about what goes on inside of you.

A day will come when you learn to be comfortable with discomfort. The world is an uncomfortable place. It's inherently an unsafe place in many ways. The coronavirus pandemic highlights what's always been true: this world is a fragile place, and dangers are ever-present. Sick, old age and death come sooner for some people than for others. What's happening now is highlighting, in a way that's distressing and difficult, that now's the time to practice. Practice begins with simply caring for yourself, with compassion for yourself, with getting exercise, getting food, talking to friends, doing what's needed to come into some kind of balance. Once there's some balance, maybe the practice can take you more deeply into it.

Q4: "Why does mindfulness seem to wax and wane over the days, only to be stronger after retreat and then fade away or be easier during peaceful times, and harder during stress?"

I suspect that it has a lot to do with our preoccupations. We get involved and active, thinking about things – all sorts of things that come along. The more we're concerned about things, the more active we are, the more preoccupied we are – the more the groove of thinking operates. We're caught in our thoughts, involved in our thoughts. There can be mood shifts, emotions coming and going. We can have a good night's sleep, or a poor night's sleep. There can be something physiologically going on with us. We might not be our best self. There are so many variables that go on in human life.

Certainly, on retreat there's a calmness, a steadiness, a strong factor of concentration, a sense that we have, to some degree, cleared the table of a lot of preoccupations. When we return, all of those things begin to wane. Preoccupations come back. Concentration wanes. It's hard to keep the same level of concentration in daily life that we've had on retreat. But again, really be at point A, and don't be so concerned about the ideal.

Learn how to practice with what is. If that's complicated, if we're preoccupied or agitated, there's this wonderful art, this real treasure, of mindfulness. In a certain way, accept what is. Don't be in conflict with any way that you are. See if you can start discovering how there can be a moment of mindfulness, a moment of recognition: "Now this is how it is." In that simple recognition of: "This is how it is" – without fixing it or trying to make it go away. Things are still uncomfortable, but there's a gap, a little crack in our experience, where there is some degree of peace, freedom, ease, acceptance, or non-conflict, in which there's space for more compassion, more wisdom – and we can find our way.

Q5: How not to be afraid?

How not to be afraid? Don't cling to anything whatsoever. Most fear is a byproduct of clinging to something or being attached to something. My short answer doesn't really respect the complexity of what's needed to be with fear, the care that's needed to be with fear.

One of the wonderful little instructions that I give around fear is: when you're afraid, help your fear feel safe. If you're distressed about your fear, then it won't feel safe to be there. And your fear will be more afraid. The whole system will be more upset. If you feel that it's wrong to be afraid, or if you're afraid of fear, this all makes it more complicated. Your fear is a very important part of who you are. In a sense, fear is an attempt to take care of you. It's a movement of self-care, of self-protection. Sometimes it may be misplaced. Sometimes it involves acts of imagination – fears of the future that aren't realistic or even appropriate. But regardless of that, fear is still a wonderful movement of self-care and self-protection. Take that fear and hold it in the cupped hands of awareness. Help it feel safe. A great mantra for fear is: "It's ok. It's ok." Do that, especially in meditation, and see what happens to the fear. Fear will begin to thaw – fear will begin to relax – if it starts feeling that you're a safe person for it. It's like a small child who's really afraid. You aren't going to psychoanalyze the child. The child will just turn off or get more afraid. You aren't going to tell the child to be different. You may bring them over and put your hand on their shoulder and say, "It's ok. It's ok." Help the child feel safe, and maybe give them a treat or something to drink. Help your fear feel safe.