

Challenge Check-In (2 of 5) Prioritizing Pleasure

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Good morning. I am here to give the second talk on the mindfulness check-in – how to use the classic mindfulness teaching on the four foundations as a way of freeing ourselves from unhealthy, unuseful preoccupations with the challenges and difficulties we have in our life.

This is not a denial that we have challenges. But possibly, it is all too easy for us to become fixated on them in an unuseful way. We can get preoccupied; we can ruminate; we can repeat the same fear-based thoughts about what will happen to us and what it all means. We can steam in anger and be caught up in an endless story of blame, and who did what, just angry about someone. Of course, there might be reasons to be afraid or angry. But to ruminate about it, persist in it, and spin in it is an unhealthy way of placing our life energy and attention. Doing this limits us and narrows the scope of our ability to be present for what is here.

Even spending a lot of time thinking about things limits our lives. Thinking has a role, but I mean being lost in thought. In the Buddha's teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, there is no obvious place where mindfulness of thinking is found. We often teach mindfulness of thinking as though there is a place, but in the teachings of the Buddha, there is no such obvious teaching. I think he knew very well that people think a lot. In fact, he gives instructions elsewhere on how to work with distracted thoughts.

But in the classic teachings on mindfulness, the Buddha offers a different way of being present for our direct experience, one which is not mediated so much through our thinking. Rather than seeing things through the lens of what we are thinking and how we're thinking, we drop into these four different areas and tease apart these four areas of the totality of our experience. They are to be aware of how things are experienced physically in the body; how things are either pleasant or unpleasant – the pleasure or the discomfort of things; the mind states; and the mental processes.

Today, the topic is the second foundation – what is called the “feeling tone” of experience. This is when we go through the checklist and realize, “Okay, I’m having some difficulty.” This almost happened today as I came to IMC to teach a little later than usual. I could have been preoccupied with that: “Oh, I need to get there! I’ll be late! What will happen? When I get there, how am I going to set everything up efficiently?” I could be spinning that way. That would be the challenge: the challenge of being late, and my preoccupation and worry around it.

Once I notice that challenge is happening, I give myself the checklist. What is happening now in the body? I’m agitated. What is happening in the feeling tone? It is unpleasant. What is happening in the mind state? It has gotten narrow and tight. What is happening in the mental processes? I am caught up in a certain degree of worry, and a little bit of aversion to feeling the way I’m feeling. If I look at that checklist, I see: Well, the most interesting, maybe the strongest place is actually that the whole thing feels uncomfortable. Let me look at the discomfort. That is the important place to bring attention to.

Sometimes doing this is enough, because it’s enough for me to recognize that I am tense, and then I can relax. I can soften around how I am feeling. That opens the field and relaxes the whole thing, without having to figure it all out in my thoughts and ideas, and get stuck there. So that is a simple way that mindfulness can work.

But for the Buddha, attention to the feeling tone can be revolutionary. It was for the Buddha, because when he discovered some of the pleasure and joy of meditation, he asked himself, “Do I need to be afraid of this?” He answered, no – it’s okay to experience this pleasure.

In a very distant way, this mimics my experience of meditation over the years. In the first 10 years of meditation or so, I had no idea about pleasure. Actually, I was discouraged from feeling any pleasure. If you went to the meditation teacher and talked about feeling pleasure, you were told to let go of that – just stay present. Be with the emptiness of things. Just sit and don't focus on anything. Just let go of the pleasure. There was no way to acknowledge the pleasure. Although when I sat in meditation in that tradition and sometimes had really good feelings of being present, they were never validated or given a place.

When I started studying vipassana, I eventually discovered there is actually a very important place for pleasure, and it's okay to experience pleasure. Having pleasure is part of what it means to be a human being. But, in fact, don't be attached to it. Don't strive and struggle to have it, and don't expect it. But do allow yourself to feel it.

Pleasure can be revolutionary when the mind is preoccupied with what is uncomfortable – when the mind spins out in fear, anger, distress, grief, or sadness. All those emotions are part of human life, and we certainly don't want to deny them or cut them off directly. But the preoccupation with these kinds of difficulties and challenges becomes the fuel for the challenge to grow and persist longer. So we have to somehow be able to moderate or monitor what we are fueling – what we are feeding, growing, and maintaining.

It is not that we are not supposed to feel some discomfort, but maybe it is unnecessary to feed it. When we start tuning into the pleasure – the pleasantness of the moment – something powerful happens that is not meant to be a denial of what is unpleasant. It is a way of moderating or finding our way with what is unpleasant. Pleasure is a different reference point. Our attention is being fed and conditioned in a different way. It is being conditioned by what is pleasant rather than persisting with what's unpleasant.

Some people might protest this idea. Maybe that is reasonable, to some degree, but when we pay careful attention to our own mind's reactivity and what we are feeding, what we are influenced by – the ruminations, the spinning of the mind – we may find out that a persistent way of thinking and being caught is fueling our feelings, fueling the distress, the sense of emotional challenge. That is also not very useful. The mind can actually spin out. If you spin out in a panic attack or spiral downward, it is good to go do something different that's enjoyable. Go find a kitten to play with.

Many years ago, when I was spinning out with fear, I used to take long showers, and the pleasure of the shower would somehow settle things. Go for a walk where you can enjoy the trees and sky. Finding something pleasant to do when we are in danger of spinning out with our preoccupation is a very good intervention to settle the nervous system and quiet things down. Then we'll be in a better place to come back and address the issue. Many people have found that by taking a pleasure break – going off and doing something enjoyable like playing with a kitten – then coming back later to address their challenges, they are in a much better place to reflect on or think about them wisely, or do what needs to be done.

That is a common everyday thing that people can do. But we also learn to do that in meditation through mindfulness. We learn to not prioritize the unpleasant – not prioritize the negativity bias that we might have in all the ways it plays out. For many people, starting to feel more pleasure in the pleasantness of life here and now brings things into balance when they are imbalanced in the direction of what's uncomfortable.

As we start feeling the pleasant, the comfortable, and give ourselves more time for it, that begins to have a different conditioning on our emotional life and mental state. Prioritizing the pleasant tends to change the energy level of what is being energized and spinning out. It tends to energize healing states and pleasant states. It is a lot easier to be with our emotional, mental, and worldly challenges if we can hold them in a place of being calm, open, pleasant, at ease in the world, and enjoying it.

So, to go through the mindfulness checklist. When you notice that feeling tone (the experience is pleasant or unpleasant) is the most salient aspect on the checklist, you might spend more time with that. Sometimes all that is necessary is to know the experience well and be present for how it is. Just being present for the unpleasant can change things. But sometimes you want to bring a balance into the whole system by intentionally focusing more on what is pleasant. Not manufacturing pleasure, not going out and getting alcohol to make it pleasant, not doing something artificial or contrived, or something that does not have a good influence on you, but healthy forms of pleasure.

These may be forms of pleasure that do not require anything different than what you're doing. But rather, you avail yourself of the pleasure that is already here. You can do this in meditation. What is already here? Can that be a support for being with the difficulties? Can you let that meditation pleasure be here? Can you take it in fully? In the course of meditation, if pleasure arises – even the pleasure of being a bit calmer than you were

before, let that register. Receive that. Let that be. Don't be old school and dismiss it: "I can't be attached to that." Yes – don't be attached if you can – but you are allowed to feel it, take it in, and be nourished by it. There's a way that healthy, wholesome pleasures of meditation – mindfully learning how to be with ourselves – can have a healing effect on us.

Hopefully, I've conveyed that the Buddha's emphasis on feeling tones and pleasure is a revolutionary thing for some people to focus on. It is a game changer. For the next 24 hours, maybe it can be the game that you play. Explore the world of how you experience pleasant and unpleasant. How do you react? What is your reactivity level with things that feel unpleasant? And what are your beliefs, reactions, and comfort level with what is pleasant? Can you allow yourself to notice more of the pleasures that are already here? Can you switch from the negativity bias some people have towards what's unpleasant, and begin to give yourself a richer, fuller experience of what is pleasant? May that be beneficial, support your Dharma practice, and support your ability to have a realistic and useful way of being with challenges. Thank you.