

Challenge Check-In (3 of 5) Accompanying with Wise Awareness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello. Welcome to our five-part series on what I am calling the mindfulness check-in. We check in with ourselves when we are having challenges, difficulties, or troubles in our lives.

I would like to present this in a slightly different way than I have the past couple of days. We are using the Buddha's foundational teachings on mindfulness as a way of reframing our challenges or difficulties. When we are in the middle of a challenge or difficulty, we often use a framework, orientation, belief, or attitude that is not supportive or helpful. Rather than trying to avoid the challenge, pretending it is not there, or fixing it – in mindfulness practice, we reframe the situation. We approach it in a new way that may be more productive and helpful for us while resting in the middle of it all.

A lot of our challenges are how we are challenged with our emotions, beliefs, physicality, and fears. All kinds of things go on inside of us. Unless there is an immediate danger, it is invaluable to check in with ourselves: "How am I? What is going on here for me?" Simply calming down a bit puts us in a much better space where we can see what is going on with some wisdom.

We pause and check in. We check in with these four different ways. It is a reframing. The value of this is that we are often caught in a framework that is clearly not helpful. Actually, it may not be that clear if we don't know it is happening, but often it is self-reinforcing.

I would like to use an analogy or an example. If a person tends to distrust dogs, the distrust might cause them to feel anger at the dog. When a dog comes along, and we angrily stare at it, the dog will take that as a threat. They will be more likely to growl or attack, than if we just relax and ignore the dog, resting with some ease, and not staring at it.

When we go around with an attitude or a framework that all dogs are terrible and shouldn't be here – dogs can pick up on that attitude. Dogs then become that way. If we are afraid of dogs, the same thing happens. Dogs have a way of sensing fear. Maybe when we are afraid, we also stare at them to try to protect ourselves. The fear is self-reinforcing. It is a framework we have for fear or anger that we believe is true: "This is how things are. It is accurate." We don't realize how we self-perpetuate the proof that this is how it is. This works with people as well.

Sometimes we can see how we are: "Oh, I am angry. I am afraid. This is the framework or attitude for how I am seeing things." Certainly, there may be threats and difficult things out there. We don't want to deny that. We should be careful. We might say to ourselves, "Let me reframe this – let me look at this from a different point of view."

That is the wisdom of the Buddha. Try on a different framework. See if there is a wiser, more beneficial way to be. We ask ourselves: "How is this for me physically? How is it in terms of feeling tones?" Today the emphasis is on how it is in terms of the mind or heart states. "What is the state of my mind or heart? How am I experiencing this moment?"

Notice if the state of mind is one of anger, fear, greed, doubt, or agitation. Perhaps the mind state is contracted or scattered. The Buddha teaches that if we can see these mind states, our mindfulness practice is to then know that the mind is *with* this state, *with* fear. We are with anger, with desire, with being scattered, with being contracted. This word "with" is so phenomenally simple, humble, and easy to overlook, but it is so powerful.

It creates a space between what is happening with us and the mind or the awareness. In simple lay terms, it creates a space between ourselves and the experience. In that gap, that little pause, or that recognition, there is space to question or reframe. “I now know that I am here with this mind state. It feels as if it is filling me in many ways, but I am not it and it is not the awareness. How do I want to be with this? How can I be with it?”

An important reframing we can do in times of challenges is to begin finding some degree of agency, so we can choose to do something wise. In meditation, and sometimes in daily life, it can simply be reorienting: “How can I be present for this challenge?”

Meditation is a fantastic laboratory in which to work with this. Ideally, we are comfortable and safe during our meditation time. Maybe we have locked or closed the door. We are clear that right now, we are safe. We looked around, checked all the corners, and looked under the bed and in the closet. Everything is okay right now.

We begin by asking the question, “How should I be with this?” Simply asking that question is an expression of agency. It is the beginning of our strength. “I am with it now. How do I want to be with it?” It might be that we learn very quickly, we shouldn’t be with it. “This is not useful. I don’t know how to be with it without spinning out or getting overwhelmed by it. I need to take a break. I need to break how I get sucked into its whirlpool.” Then we do something different, something that stops us from being swept up in it.

We might find a different framework to hold so that we don’t get swept up. The framework creates a container, a balance, a foundation, and a grounding. Then we can be with it in a good, healthy way. When we are with a challenge in awareness practice, we might ask the question, “Should I be intimate with this, staying really close, or should I be very spacious?”

There are times I have difficulties with physical or emotional pain. I sometimes find that it is most helpful to be with it intimately – like I am sitting in the heart of it. Sometimes that is useful, and sometimes it is not useful at all. What is useful then is to step back and create space. Be really wide within an expansive awareness and an expansive mind. Sometimes we can use our imagination to support this. We can imagine that we are in a very large room. The awareness is as big as a cathedral-like room, and we can hold the challenge. Or perhaps we are standing on a hilltop 100 yards away. With that distance, we are not holding it at all. We are so far away that we can allow ourselves to be aware from that distance.

We might have the ability to shift the focus of attention so we come back to the breath. The rhythm of breathing is the center. It is where we stay grounded. We are still aware of the mind states in the peripheral vision, on the side. “Oh, yeah, I am afraid; I am upset; I am sad.” We are whatever we get pulled into. We get distracted, and the mind gets busy. The mind state is there, but we don’t look at it directly. Just like with a dog, don’t look at it directly. Look away but continue to be aware that the states are here. Use the peripheral vision to know what is going on.

The third foundation of mindfulness emphasizes two helpful ways to reframe. One is the word “with.” The Pali word is the prefix *sa* – with greed, with ill will, with delusion. It is also used with healthy states – the opposite of greed, ill will, or delusion. I am with generosity. I am with love; I am with wisdom.

A fascinating thing happens with this. When we emphasize “with,” some things get weaker. The difficulties, the things where we are most reactive tend to get weaker. “Tend” is the operating word here. When we are with something that is coming out of our inner reactivity, it begins to weaken. If it is coming out of our inner wellspring of wisdom, the wellspring of our innate capacity to be with the world in a nurturing way, then that tends to grow. As it grows and we settle, we start recognizing more and more the spacious, expansive mind. That recognition is a reframing. We are learning to reframe and to be with challenges in an expansive, spacious way.

Today’s topic might seem a bit complicated, but it is well worth beginning to understand how all four of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are a reframing. “How is the challenge from the point of view of my physical experience?” Once we are aware of it physically, that gives us a foundation to learn to be with it in a helpful way. Be present and mindful in a compassionate way.

“How am I with the feelings? Are they pleasant or unpleasant?” This gives us the power or the strength to choose. Is it useful to stay with the unpleasantness or would it be more useful to bring in the pleasantness that is here and has been overlooked?

Today we are considering the mind states: "What is this? How am I? How am I with this? What is the state?" Then we switch to, "I am with this." This might help us find a more supportive way to be with things.

As you go through your day, notice when there are difficulties. Start with the smaller ones. Notice how you fall into or get preoccupied with the difficulty. See if you can switch to accompanying it, or accompanying how you are. Try to simply be *with* how you are so that how you are is not subconsciously driving you. Be really present. You are with it so that the reactivity does not have the upper hand. Then see if you can figure out how to be with it wisely.

So, thank you, my friends. I look forward to tomorrow