

Dhammas (3 of 5) The Entanglements

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This week I am going through the five mindfulness exercises that are taught in the fourth foundation of mindfulness. I call them “exercises.” These are ways of practicing in order to develop a heightened sense of mindfulness – so that mindfulness is established. The exercises are kind of the means. The means to be mindful is, in a sense, to be mindful. There are particular ways or emphasis given to each means.

The fourth foundation is about beginning to pay attention to how we get entangled, caught up, or attached to things, and the process of how we become free or liberated. There are three exercises around being entangled or caught. They go from the coarser, more activated, conceptual, and complex story-centered world that we live in to the simpler and simpler. It starts with the complex world of our attachments to our desires and aversions. This could be anything – complicated things in the world, ideas, things we don’t get along with.

Once we stop being so concerned with the world – objects and things in a sense – including our comfort, we settle down. Next, there is a layer, which I talked about yesterday. This is how we identify and get involved with things based on me, myself, and mine.

As we get quieter still, there are less coarse, less complicated ideas and concepts. There is no concept of self anymore. We are left with simple sense experience in the present moment. We are not thinking about the future or the past. We are really present here.

We hear a sound. We feel a body sensation. We recognize there is a thought. These are considered very simple sense recognitions. We don’t usually think of the mind door as being a sense. But whatever ability we have to simply recognize what is happening in the mind, before the complexities and reactions occur, is called a sense experience.

Consider the eye. There is the object of the eye: the things we see. The Buddha talks about the entanglement between them – the knot that forms – how we can get knotted up with this sense experience. So three things are happening. There is the eyesight that sees – the ability of the eye to see. There is the thing that we see. And kind of imagine that between the object we see and the eye, things get knotted up. The knot is in our brain, our mind. We get involved, attached, and caught up with what we see. It gets sticky. We start thinking about it, wanting it, and reacting to it.

It is not the complicated ideas of the world, like winning the lottery. It is just as we go about this moment. It is something very simple. There is a sound. We recognize the sound as a car, and we might get entangled with it. We start thinking about the sound and not liking it because it is unpleasant, or liking it because it is pleasant. We want more or less of it.

The most common English translation for the Pali word is “fetter.” I don’t use the word fetter in my ordinary life. Some of you might. The Pali word means being knotted up – a knot. I like to use that translation.

It is recognizing that there can be these two things. There is the experience we are having, and there is the way we relate to it. The way we relate to something may not be free. We can be entangled; there can be attachments. Or it might be free of any entanglement. We can engage in an experience – think about things, care for things – without being entangled.

This can be very, very subtle. You might be meditating and start thinking about something that is happening. You have now left the flow of the present moment. The word “knot” or “entanglement” may seem too big for this, but something has gotten sticky. We are leaning into it. We have gotten lost in the process of thinking. We have lost our mindfulness and our present moment experience.

The Buddha says in this exercise that we are aware that there is seeing, we are aware of what is being seen, and we are aware of the relationship between the seeing of an object and the seen. When there is an entanglement, we are aware of it. When we are caught by or reactive to the object that is being seen, we are aware of it. So we know when the fetter or knot is present. We also know what it is like when it is not present. This distinction between recognizing the presence and absence of something is very important.

In mindfulness meditation, we often emphasize recognizing what is happening in the present. This provides a subject to be aware of. Sometimes it is important to be mindful of absence – not all the time. But when we have been attached to something, it is valuable to take some time to experience what it is like to be unattached – to experience the freedom that comes.

When we have been knotted up, know the experience of being unknotted. We breathe with more ease. There is a greater sense of openness, spaciousness, and lightness. Whatever way it is experienced, we let that register deeply, and then the channels to unentanglement become more available to us.

So the Buddha talked about noticing the presence and the absence of these knots, and being present enough in the moment to see a knot, which has not yet arisen, arise. We notice the arising of this entanglement, “Oh, here I get knotted up.” This takes a sharp mindfulness to be there and watch the process. We don’t wait until we find ourselves knotted up – we watch the process.

A benefit can come when mindfulness is established well enough in the present moment that there is kind of a sense of flow in the present. There is a sense of arising and passing, appearing and disappearing – the river of experience that is happening here and now. As we stay present for that, we notice when we leave the flow – when we get involved in something. And we can watch the beginning of that because it is part of the flow.

The Buddha also talks about knowing that the knot has been abandoned – let go of. He doesn’t say to let go of the knot – maybe that is implied. We are aware of the knot and the letting go of it – it’s gone, it’s not here – so that we can benefit from experiencing the absence of it.

If it is easy to let go of something, like a knot, let go of it. We are not necessarily letting go of things in the world. We are letting go of the entanglement that is between us and the thing. Then we want to take time to be aware of what the absence of the entanglement is like. If we do this regularly and fully, a special time will come in practice when we have a clear sense that the entanglement is not going to arise again – at least not in this meditation, this state of mind, or presence we have.

We now feel this clarity and confidence: “Wow, I am so settled and present. There is so much peace and self-awareness going on that there is no way I am going to get entangled. That requires a coarser activity. It requires a choice and involvement that I am simply not inclined to do now.”

To really feel this – “Wow, I am not inclined to get entangled again” – is like, “Now I am safe at least for this meditation, for these next few minutes.” And to feel that possibility – to know that is possible – can be life-changing. We now know that life doesn’t require attachment. It doesn’t require being entangled.

At first, we are disentangling ourselves from the coarser, big ideas of the world – the things we want and don’t want. These are the hindrances. They involve stories, ideas, and complicated concepts. Then there is something more subtle – the ways we attach to self. And then there is something even subtler – our relationship to sense contact.

It might seem uninteresting or not so valuable to be aware at the more base level of sense contact. But it turns out that some of the deepest attachments we have arise out of the attachment to basic sense contact. It sets the stage for all the other attachments and suffering we have. It is very powerful to settle enough to really track it.

As we start to get more sensitive and aware of the entanglements and their absence, we are then poised to be aware of some of the benefits that come on the path to disentanglement – to becoming free. We will discuss that topic tomorrow.

Until then, use this concept of a knot or an entanglement. Recognize as much as you can your entanglements, either while you are doing something or afterward. You might reflect over the day, “How was I entangled and caught?” Sometimes it is hard to see in the present moment. Sometimes we can see the entanglement retrospectively. See what you learn about yourself in that process. Thank you.