

Mindfulness of Mind (4 of 5) Waking Up to Non-Clinging

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I think that what we're learning to do in this practice is to recognize our challenges – the way we get stuck and attached – as messengers, as opposed to seeing them as enemies. If they are messengers, you don't want to kill the messenger. You want to learn from it. You want to use it as an opportunity to wake up.

The idea of waking up is such a beautiful one. When you wake up to something, nothing changes in the world, but you see clearly now. You understand clearly now. Maybe there are attachments and clinging in the mind, but you wake up to them, and it is as if you have become bigger than them. You see: "Oh, that's what's happening. I see it."

There is something powerful about clear seeing. There is freedom there. This is the process of moving into Teflon, an analogy I use for non-clinging. Sometimes the mind can be more like Velcro, or it can be more like Teflon when there is awareness.

This week, I am using "mind" and "awareness" synonymously, so "mindfulness of mind" and "mindfulness of awareness" mean the same thing. Mindfulness of mind is closely connected to mindfulness of attitude or the way that we relate to experience.

What happens as we practice is that we are restoring the simplicity of awareness, the most simple form that's accessible to us. Some people might want to call this "a natural state of awareness." Philosophically, it is a little bit dangerous to claim that, but it's kind of like that. When awareness doesn't stick to anything, but allows things to arise and pass through, awareness feels healthy and right, as if this is home.

As we become mindful of awareness, it becomes clear that attention is operating with a certain level of porousness, transparency, non-stickiness, and non-clinging. There's a clarity to the fact that, for instance, there is a sound outside, and it comes through without any waves or ripples in the mind. It's true that my knee hurts, but there are no ripples, no contractions, no stories, no agendas around that. Experience is known clearly, and we are awake to it – meaning we have become larger than any story, agenda, reactivity, or judgment. Awareness can just be with experience and feel it with a kind of clarity, like it's Teflon. Things just roll off it or are allowed to just float.

This is not automatically true for beginners, but as we do mindfulness practice and get deeper into the practice, at some point, we become aware of the nature or the quality of *how* we're paying attention – the attitude and the extra baggage we bring along with it. One attitude that is particularly significant for Buddhists to become aware of is the clinging that has us lingering on and holding on to things, pushing against things, or wanting things.

When we see clinging clearly, we will certainly let go of it, but it is also possible to wake up to it. Waking up to clinging is the restoration of a healthy, liberated mind. We can certainly get relief by letting go. Please let go when it's easy to do. But there is a whole other process that has to do with waking up. This is the restoration of a clarity in which whatever happens can occur and pass through.

One image that is sometimes used for this is that the mind becomes like an endless sky. Clouds, birds, and all kinds of things go through the sky, but the idea is that they don't stick to the sky. The sky doesn't interfere with them, stick to them, or hold onto them. The sky just lets everything go right through.

There are times when awareness can be like that. That possibility is not necessarily so far away if we associate awareness with waking up. Rather than asking, "How can I be mindful of this thing?" we can sometimes ask ourselves: "How do I wake up to its presence? How do I wake up to it here?"

What is the difference between being mindful (knowing it), and waking up to it? As I've said, waking up is associated with an expansion of awareness, where awareness seems to have a great capacity to know without reacting to what is known. There is a great capacity to allow things to just be there, floating in the sky of awareness, without doing anything, having an agenda, or wanting anything.

As we practice the restoration of a healthy, free mind – a Teflon mind, or if you prefer a more natural metaphor, a lotus leaf mind, where the water drops or rolls right off the lotus leaf, or a sky-like mind. This is a very different orientation from how most minds operate. Most minds are operating focused on what they want or what they don't want. They are focused on objects of attention, objects of thought. Sometimes they are blinded by and completely preoccupied with them – stuck on them.

Now we are turning the attention not necessarily away from the objects of mind, but shifting the focus towards something that, in a way, is larger than any particular thing that we think about, or want, or don't want. In that spaciousness of mind, openness of mind, stillness of mind, and smoothness of mind, there is a degree of freedom, a degree of space. There is a healthy feeling of being alive and breathing.

With that as a reference point, it becomes clear when the mind gets stuck or caught in something. When the mind gets preoccupied, we can feel the stickiness there. One of the great functions of this practice is that we get more and more sensitive, more and more attuned to when we are attached, stuck, contracted, or preoccupied in a way that's not healthy and useful. Ideally, that heightened sensitivity does not lead to more stickiness, or to more judgments and self-criticism for being caught.

Instead, it becomes almost a delight: "Oh, I see it here. This is good that I see it. Great." This is the "heavenly messenger," as it was called." Then, maybe ask yourself the question, "How do I wake up to this now? What is it like to be awake with awareness?"

So, there is the relaxation that supports a more open awareness, the recognition of awareness itself, respecting awareness, and today, the restoration of the wonderful capacity of awareness. Tomorrow, we will talk about the release of awareness. Thank you very much.