

Insight (3) Mindfulness vs Insight

Gil Fronsdal

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Hello and welcome to this third talk introducing the topic of insight. Today I'd like to discuss the difference between mindfulness and insight, mindfulness and *vipassanā*. The word *vipassanā* is what we translate at IMC as insight. Some people who practice mindfulness don't translate *vipassanā*; they just use the Pāli word to describe the technique of practice that they do, practicing *vipassanā*. Sometimes in our tradition, in using the word insight, we say we're practicing insight meditation.

But originally, back in ancient Buddhism, the word *vipassanā* did not refer to a practice. It referred to the results of the practice. The way in which the practice led practitioners to be able to see deeply into their experience. That deep seeing is the insight that we see, the insight we come to understand—the liberating perspective, orientation, understanding, seeing, perception, that comes into play in a way that brings this liberation from suffering. So mindfulness practice is not the same as insight, but it's mindfulness practice that leads to the insight.

Mindfulness creates the conditions by which we're present enough and clear enough in our awareness and perception to be able to see clearly. So this word *vipassanā*, I often, as I have on Monday, kind of described its meaning as being clear seeing, where the “Vi”, the prefix *vi-*, is just a prefix of emphasis. It emphasizes seeing, how we see, or strong seeing, so it becomes clear seeing. But the *vi-* can also be a prefix that distinguishes things and that divides things. Another way of understanding *vipassanā* is that it's distinctive seeing or distinguishing seeing.

It's seeing the clear distinctions of things, seeing with clarity so that we see the particularities of what's actually happening. Again, the emphasis is on what is seen, in a sense, not the act of seeing. So mindfulness is a practice that leads to that. In classic Buddhism, mindfulness is

not an end to itself but a means to something. How is mindfulness practiced in the teachings of the Buddha?

There are a number of attentional faculties that are engaged that we can call mindfulness practice, leading to a very strong, established sense of awareness. We have a lot of attentional faculties, and all of them are awakened and brought together in order to be established in the present moment clearly enough in order to see distinctly. There's knowing, the simple recognition of experience. There is sensing or feeling experience, experiencing it experientially through the body. Then there is something called *sampajañña*, which is often translated into English as clear recognition or clear understanding.

This is, I think, the form of practice that's most often taught in what's called secular mindfulness and sometimes in the Buddhist insight meditation tradition as well. It's knowing, it's recognizing, but more than just a raw, simple recognition of what's there. It's recognizing in a particular way. So it comes along with a greater understanding, perspective, orientation. It's a knowing without judgment, knowing with kindness, with friendliness, knowing with spaciousness and openness.

It's some kind of understanding of what we are seeing or knowing or feeling, the context of it, the value of it. In Buddhism, this clear understanding of things is a very important part of mindfulness training because as we understand in some simple way the experience, it can guide us more deeply into our experience. One of the very clear distinctions for clear comprehension, clear understanding, is to understand whether what we're doing, what's going on, mental activity, the practices we're doing, is helpful or not helpful. Is it wholesome? Is it nourishing? Or is it not? Is it onward leading to greater stability, greater presence, being more rooted here in the present moment? Or is it not?

So we're monitoring ourselves a little bit as we practice so we can adjust to how we are, adjust to how we're practicing, so that we begin enjoying it more. It's not a strain, it's not hard work, but we're learning the art of being present in a supportive way that welcomes attention, welcomes us to be. We want to be present. Clear comprehension of what's happening in the present moment is an aspect of mindfulness practice.

So there's knowing, there's sensing, there's clear comprehension, and then the last one that's mentioned in Buddhist teachings on mindfulness practice is—or two kind of things—is to, when we're sensing, to feel the whole body and as we are feeling it, to relax the tensions and the holdings in the body. There is emphasis on calming the body as we meditate. That's kind of a handful of things to hold together. But in practicing these in an easygoing, relaxed way,

then what we're looking for is coming into a place where awareness, attention is now stabilized, established, at ease, resting here in the present moment in our direct experience.

That takes a while. It takes a while for the thinking mind to calm down. It takes a while to understand and see the dynamics of what's happening within us, to be able to settle and relax and to be rooted here in the present moment. For people who practice *samādhi*, that's meant to be a great support for this stabilizing attention in the present moment. At some point when it's stable, being present, being aware, is not work. It's just kind of almost as if it's just how we are.

As we just are, then the next attentional faculty we have, ability to be aware, comes into play. This is what the Buddha calls observing, *anupassanā*. It has the same word *passanā* as in *vipassanā*, and the prefix *anu-* means towards something, to settle back and just be able to observe. The observing of experience has some wonderful qualities. Sometimes when people teach mindfulness, this is what they're emphasizing.

This is to observing; the mind is quieter than it would be if there's simple knowing of the experience. There doesn't have to be a knowing and observing, and then it's not as intimate, it's not connected. When we're sensing, sensations and the sensing, the act of sensing are one and the same. They can't really be separated. A moment of sensing comes with sensation. Sensations we have come with a sensing of the sensations. If there's no sensing of the sensations, are there sensations at all? If there's no one in the forest and a tree falls, is there a sound?

Observing is a little bit removed, but not so removed that it's detached or distant or aloof. Observing—so there's a kind of wonderful delight, wonderful ease, wonderful, maybe a kind of intimacy or a kind of belonging or presence that's comparable to resting on the beach, maybe for hours and just being absorbed and watching the waves wash up on the shore and wash back, coming and going. There's something about the mind that watching very simple motion and the shifts and the changes that relaxes and settles the mind. Watching a river flow can do that. Watching a fire, moving, you know, just like the fireplace or outdoors. People can watch it for a long time, just watching it and watching it.

Sometimes just being outdoors in the natural world and maybe at ease on a bench in a park and just gazing at the leaves, the greenery, the scenery. There's something about just watching and seeing the kids play in the park or watching that we're not necessarily actively recognizing every little thing. We're not actually touching anything. But there's something about observing. It can be very, very satisfying. It's like everything is, nothing needs to happen.

Nothing needs to be done. Nothing needs to be fixed. Just to observe.

So these are the attentional faculties that are considered part of mindfulness practice: recognition, knowing, sensing, feeling, clear comprehension—a little higher order level of understanding that helps us to relax and be simpler and present for our experience in a useful way—relaxing to some degree, and observing. When those are supported by *samādhi*, it's a lot easier for all those to keep us here, rooted, in the present moment, in a fully way where all our attentional faculties are kind of awake and present. *Samādhi* well-practiced not only supports us to be here, but supports us to be here with all these attentional faculties operating kind of naturally, maybe coordinated in some kind of holistic way, that lends itself to a generalized feeling of being aware, a field of awareness that's a combination of all these things operating together.

Then the mind, our heart, is ready for insight—what we see in our experience. So that will be coming up. Mindfulness practice is a practice that leads to insight. Mindfulness practice supported by *samādhi* helps that capacity for insight to come alive in a full way. So thank you. And I look forward to continue tomorrow.