

Dharmette: Practicing with Suffering

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I talked about the value of recognizing what's happening, what's happening here and now. But not just recognizing, but once we've recognized it, to take some time to be with whatever it is you've recognized, to find if there's a better way you can be attentive to it. Can you recognize it so that you're not judging it, or judging yourself, if you're not aversive or clinging to something, so that the recognition, the way of being mindful of what's happening, feels pleasant to you, is enjoyable for you. It's a nice way. It's nice to be just present and open in a nice, simple way. To not be for and against your experience, but rather just to be present for it.

So one of the things we're trying to do with mindfulness practice is, in fact, to discover a way to be present, a way to be mindful, that feels satisfying, independent of what it is that we're being mindful of. So something we're being mindful of might be very difficult and painful. It might be very pleasant and nice. There's a natural tendency for human beings to prioritize the pleasant, hold on to it and indulge in it, and to avoid and resist and maybe push away, close down around the unpleasant. People might be fine practicing with the unpleasant to find a way to be with it in a nicer way, with an easier way. But if they're having pleasant experiences, then they will say, I don't need to practice with that. I just want to enjoy it. But the two go together.

To learn how to be present in a relaxed, open way that is not for or against the experience, but just is a way to learn how to enjoy our life deeper and not be caught in the pendulum swingings of life between pleasant and unpleasant, good and bad. So this idea of finding a way to be present in a way, honestly, clearly, about what's happening now, in a way that we find is very deeply satisfying, becomes particularly useful when we are suffering. Buddhism includes being very honest about the fact that I'm suffering, this is difficult, I'm depressed,

I'm angry, I'm sorrow, you know, whatever it might be. Buddhism is about being of great honesty about it. But in doing that, what we learn if I keep practicing, we learn that there is something for us that's better than suffering. So it isn't suffering for suffering's sake, but it's learning that how we're present, how we're mindful of our suffering, that's actually satisfying. That how we're attentive to suffering is what's better than suffering. If you're going to suffer anyway, choose the better aspect of it. Which is choose to focus on how you're aware of it, how you're attentive to it, free of for and against, free of right and wrong, free of being the one who's the, you know, the one who's doing it wrong, or the one who, free of even the idea of the one who's suffering. Free of the one who is successful in not suffering.

Look at me, mom, I'm no hands, I can be happy without any problems. The idea is to learn this wonderful art of attention, of mindfulness, of bringing presence honestly to what our experience is, so that honesty and that presence, that attention, actually feels better than the suffering we're having. Not to diminish suffering, or ignore it, or push it away, or deny it. But so that now we can look at our suffering from the vantage point of this other place. Most people, when they suffer, are living in their suffering. The suffering somehow influences them so much, they're so caught in it, or resistant to it, or come to great conclusions about something about life because they're suffering. And it makes suffering so much more difficult. They add what in Buddhism we call the second arrow. They add suffering on top of suffering. But if we can learn that there's something better than suffering, that helps us to look at suffering honestly and see it, but it doesn't trouble us as much. We don't define ourselves by the suffering. We don't react to the suffering. Because we've learned how to be mindful in an easeful, relaxed, open way, in a non-resisting way, non-clinging way. We just have learned the art.

And how do we learn that art? By learning how to do it by sitting meditating with our breathing. If our breathing is uncomfortable and not to our liking, that's okay. Now it's opportunity to experiment and discover how can I be with an uncomfortable breath. If I'm having the most pleasant breath anybody's ever had on this planet, don't rush to publicize it in the New York Times. Look at me, how great I am. I had the best breath of anybody. Now you're caught. Just, oh, it's a pleasant breath. Let me see what it's like just to be present for that simple pleasantness without being for it, or against it, or make a story about myself because of it.

So in very simple things, we're beginning to learn in mindfulness that how we're mindful is a big part of what we're learning in mindfulness practice. How we're being mindful. So it's not simply just kind of getting concentrated, like on the breath, or focusing on something and knowing it. It's not a checklist approach, just like, okay, I'm supposed to be mindful of what's here. Okay, that was the in-breath. Okay, now I did my job. But it's to be mindful, and then

after you recognize what's happening in the present moment, take some time. It could just be a second or two sometimes, but take some time to see, can you find a healthy way to be mindful. A nice way to be present. In a way that feels good to you. Like you're your own friend. Like you're being a friend for yourself. Compassionate, kind, respectful, supportive.

Oh, look at this. This is a nice breathing. Okay, good. This is a nice breathing. Let's just let it be that simple. It's a nice breathing, good. This is a difficult breath. I'm having trouble with the breathing. Okay, let me just be mindful of having trouble with breathing. Oh, it's like this to be troublesome. It's like this to have an uncomfortable breath. And then how is it to know it this way? Well, actually, pretending. I really don't like it. Okay, let's not pretend. Let's see, can we find another way to be present so that attention is not caught in liking and not liking? So it's an art we're learning. And then as we learn that art, the day will come when you will suffer. Sooner or later. You'll suffer. And you'll know that at the same time there's something better than suffering. What is that? How you're aware of your suffering. So you don't have to get rid of your suffering to know what's better. And if you can know what's better, the way I'm talking about, that gives you a very mature, supportive, and helpful way to go and address your suffering. To be with it and explore it. That you can't really do if the way you're with suffering is reactive to it. Or if you're defining yourself by it, or you have for and against it, and you're fighting with it or something.

This simplicity, this very simple way of being present, that is not caught by what you're aware of, is a phenomenal gift that you give yourself. So to learn that over and over again in the small ways of this practice, one breath at a time, is one of the great gifts. So I hope that made sense, what I said. And if it doesn't make sense, then you're welcome to leave it here in the room when you leave today. Don't worry about it.