

Simplicity of Mindfulness

Andrea Fella

June 14, 2026

Keywords: *Suttas*, mindfulness, *First Noble Truth*, dependent origination, five aggregates, *Dharma*, Dalai Lama, Munirji, Joseph Goldstein, anger

I also have an announcement that two of my colleagues asked me to make, and it's that there's a three-day non-residential retreat happening here at IMC at the end of the month. There's also a flyer out on the counter for it. It starts on July 31st, in the afternoon and evening of Friday, and goes from 5:30 to 8 p.m. On Saturday, it goes from 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., and on Sunday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. It's led by Tanya Weiser and Shelly Galt, and it's an opportunity to get the taste of a residential retreat without having to sleep in somebody else's bed. You get the taste of a full day of practice, and then go home to your own home for the evening.

Registration is required, and there's a QR code on the flyer. And I imagine there's also a link on the website for this too. So if you're interested in seeing what a residential retreat might feel like, or just interested in integrating a little bit more the practice into our daily lives because of the shifting between the retreat practice and daily life going home, it can provide an opportunity to allow the mindfulness to infiltrate our daily lives in a new way. So I just encourage you to take advantage of that opportunity.

One of the things I kind of emphasized in the guided meditation was the simplicity of the practice itself, the simplicity of our mindfulness practice. And the instructions that the Buddha offers are quite simple. But there's a lot in what the Buddha taught. And sometimes it can seem like, with so many lists and so many different instructions, it may not seem so simple what is offered in the Buddhist teachings. And one thing I'll point to is that in the teachings themselves, there's maybe kind of two flavors of what the Buddha is pointing to.

One is the flavor of how to meet our own experience, how to practice, what the instructions for meditation are, what the instructions for mindfulness are. And then the other piece of what's pointed to in the *Suttas* is a description of how our minds work, the nature of our

minds to be conditioned. There's many teachings describing in great detail how our minds get caught in habitual ways. And these teachings are pretty complex because our minds are pretty complex. So these descriptions of how our minds work, it's kind of amazing to me that 2,600 years ago, the Buddha could describe in such detail the workings of our mind. And these same processes are at work now.

I mean, we have a lot of different things in our environment that the Buddha didn't have, cell phones and AI. And yet all of the processes at work in our minds are the same. We want to hold on to things that we like. We want to push away things we don't like. And the ways our minds get caught are still the same as they were 2,600 years ago. So these teachings about how the mind works, how the mind gets caught, how it struggles, and the teachings also of how the mind can turn and move in the direction of more ease, more peace, more freedom, those teachings are a bit more complicated, are a bit more complex. They're harder to understand.

I mean, the lists of the five aggregates and the twelve steps of dependent origination, there's a lot of teachings that we might think, well, I've got, you know, it's hopeless. I'm not going to be able to learn all of these things. But I want to emphasize again the practice that the Buddha pointed to is really simple. And it's the simplicity of that practice that begins to reveal the complexity of the workings of our minds. We don't actually have to understand all of those teachings in advance in order for the practice to bear great fruit.

So when I first met the practice and really started practicing, I was suffering a lot at that point. This is a story I often tell, so some of you may have heard this. I was suffering quite a lot. There was a lot of anger happening, and I would find myself just frozen in front of my computer, just frozen, not able to function. So the anger was really taking over my life. I was really, really angry at this one particular person for something they had done.

And so I reached out to friends and told people, "I'm really struggling," and one of my friends sent me a book about mindfulness practice, mindfulness meditation. And I did not understand a lot of what was in that book. What I did kind of get out of that book was a little tiny bit of wisdom, which was something along the lines of: try recognizing your difficult reactive states of mind instead of acting on them. Just know that they're happening. And I saw that and thought, what good is that going to do? Isn't that just going to make me more angry, to notice that I'm angry? But fortunately, in some fashion, I had kind of hit bottom, and so I was willing to try anything.

And so I just told myself, okay, well, I will see if I can know that I'm angry when I'm angry. Now that instruction is a similar instruction to what I pointed to in the guided meditation.

When breathing in, know that you're breathing in. When breathing out, know that you're breathing out. When you're angry, know that you're angry. And this ended up being pretty transformative for me.

The first time I noticed that I was angry with this kind of recognition, oh right, I said I was going to know that I was angry when I was angry, I was frozen in front of my computer, and that recognition arose as like, "Oh, I know that I'm angry." Now I'll tell you, it did not feel pleasant. It was really painful. In fact, that's the first thing I noticed. It was like, wow, this is really painful. And the next thing was like, well, I don't know what I'd do with this. I guess I go back to work.

So that's what happened for me that very first time. And in retrospect, you know, years later, looking back on this entire sequence of events that I'll describe, that moment was actually a pretty powerful moment. Because in the moment before, I had been frozen, not able to function, not able to work. And that recognition of, oh, I'm angry, let me put the anger aside and get back to work, it was huge actually. And so I just kept kind of having that curiosity. My friend told me this was all useful, so I kind of was borrowing trust from her.

And over the course of some weeks, I began seeing that I would recognize that I was angry before I got frozen. Like, I would recognize that I was angry and it was more of a normal anger. And then it was more of just kind of an irritation, or a kind of thinking about that person and being grinchy. And that's when the mindfulness would wake up and be like, oh, there is the beginning of anger. And over the course of that time, I learned a lot about anger. The biggest thing I learned was that anger hurts.

And that I had some beliefs about it. Like I thought that that anger was going to make the other person miserable. But it was making me miserable. And this was highlighted because I was in the Peace Corps at the time, and the person I was angry with was 7,000 miles away. You know, they did not know I was angry. But the recognition of, oh, this hurts here, that's also one thing the teachings point to, is the suffering of our reactive states of mind.

And so, you know, again, in retrospect, looking back on this whole sequence of events, seeing how I began to see the anger more quickly, the mindfulness was connecting with that more quickly, and then seeing things about the anger being suffering, these are teachings that the Buddha points to. Our reactive states create suffering here, and that is actually something that should be understood. That's what the *First Noble Truth* says. There is suffering, and suffering should be understood. So that teaching around understanding suffering, that's another way to frame that teaching of when you recognize that you're angry, know that you're angry.

Because that understanding of suffering is not about figuring it out. It's not about teasing it apart and understanding the whole history of why that person did what they did and why I reacted the way I did. It's about understanding the present-moment experience. What is the experience right now of this suffering? And that's exactly what that instruction pointed to. And so that instruction was what I worked with for a number of months. When you're angry, know that you're angry.

And I think of this as, you know, it's like it's a seminal core teaching of the Buddha, the simplicity of when an experience arises, know it as an experience. And it's so simple. It's like, you know, these teachings, the instructions for our practice, are so dense in a way. What can be revealed with just a simple instruction like that is like a really, really piece of dark, dark chocolate that just explodes in your mouth when you put in this tiny little bit of chocolate. It's like it's so dense that the wisdom of the Buddha is so dense. You don't need a lot of it to experience the benefits with the simplicity of the practice.

So there's some analogies that are offered in the *Suttas*, and I'm a particular fan of some of the analogies that the Buddha offered. They're so evocative, and they really provide a kind of felt or visceral sense into some of the teachings in a way that can go in without having to memorize lists or anything. You kind of get this image, and the image can speak to us. So one of the images around practice is that of a hen tending her eggs. And the image goes, or the story goes, that if a hen sits on her eggs, keeps them warm, takes care of them properly, only leaves for short moments to get food and comes back, you know, if the hen is tending to the eggs properly, then the chicks will hatch.

The hen does not wish, "May my chicks hatch out safely." They will hatch out safely because she's tending to the eggs skillfully. But if she's wandering around the yard and not sitting on her eggs, the eggs will not hatch properly. Even if she wishes them to hatch properly, they're not going to hatch properly because the conditions are not in place for them to hatch. So this image brings a lot up to me, kind of the pieces of this image. One is the simplicity of what the hen has to do for the eggs to hatch.

She sits there, and there's a warmth in the image because it's the warmth that allows the eggs to hatch. She doesn't have to know a thing about how embryos develop into chickens. They just hatch. So these pieces, like there's a simplicity of what she's doing. It's just simple conditions for the eggs to hatch. And there's this sense of staying with the eggs, this continuity of warming the eggs. So this points to the warmth and simplicity of our practice.

The teachings often, you know, we talk about, you know, if when breathing, know that you're breathing, when angry, know that you're angry. You know, this simple nature of the teaching.

But the experience, in my experience, the feeling, probably not immediately when I noticed the anger, the first time I noticed the anger, but over time, what my experience is as I notice what's happening in the present moment with just a simple receptivity and recognition, is like allowing what's here to be here. That's another kind of way to frame the mindfulness practice, is that we open to what's here and we know that it's here. There's an allowing perspective to our mindfulness practice.

And the experience of that allowing is one of love. The feeling of when I recognize, oh right, what's happening is this pain in the body, there's this feeling of care, of connection, of love. And so the experience of this simple practice of knowing experience as experience has a flavor of warmth, of kindness, like the warmth of the chicken, the hen sitting on her eggs. And then there is the continuity piece of needing to come back, you know, needing to be with the next moment, the next moment, the next moment. Just the simplicity of that.

The next simile, these are three similes that are offered in the same teaching, and I kind of like the way they build on each other in a way. The next simile is of a carpenter who uses a tool to shape wood. I think it's called an adze, and I believe that's its function, to shape wood. And the simile isn't so much about what the carpenter's doing with the adze, but it's about the fact that the carpenter uses that tool each day. Again, that continuity of using the same tool over and over again, and the handle of that tool gets worn.

Now that's an image of imperceptible change. And the teaching says that even though that carpenter doesn't know every day, "This much of the adze handle has worn away," there's a sense that, you know, when the carpenter picks up the tool, it's a smoother fit to the hand. So there's an understanding that the handle is getting worn just through the use of the tool. Again, the imperceptible change is a piece that is a useful image or understanding in our practice, that it takes the continual kind of coming back over and over again. In this case, we could think of the mindfulness practice being the tool, and the wearing away of the handle as being like the releasing of some of our reactive habits and patterns, the wearing away of those patterns and habits.

And it doesn't, you know, happen overnight. It doesn't happen in a split second. It's a slow process. So over the first, I described over the first few months of my practice, that coming back to see the anger, I did have a kind of a big understanding in those first few months, which I'll describe a bit later. But the anger at that person lasted for a couple of years. And, you know, it was just this kind of wearing away of that anger.

And at a certain point in the time, I began noticing that, you know, the anger would arise and I would just notice it and be with it and kind of get on with my day. This happened a

lot. I had been partners with this person who had done this thing, and there were many, many memories. So pretty much, you know, a lot of things that I would do would bring up a memory of the person, and the anger would come up when the memory of the person would come up often. And so, you know, it would arise a lot. But I would just recognize, it's like, okay, yep, I see you.

And it often seemed to happen while I was taking a walk. And so I just, you know, told myself, okay, yep, I see you. You know, you can take a walk with me, but I'm going to put my attention on my feet. So that, you know, it was kind of a gentle setting aside. But it wasn't a repression of the anger. It's like I even invited it to take a walk with me. So I was just noticing that, and I began noticing over a long time—I do not even know how long this part was—that at some point I began noticing that a rising of those angers was coming up less frequently.

So it was getting worn away. You know, it's like there was more space, less of that reactivity. And then one day I was taking a walk, and the thought occurred to me, I have not experienced that anger in a long time. So the person came up in my mind with that memory, and I could not find a trace of the anger anymore. It disappeared while I wasn't looking through this really, really simple practice, just knowing the anger when it happened, and not even trying to notice how it felt in the body or what else was, what other emotions or thoughts were going on. All of the instructions that I had learned around working with emotions, it was just really simple.

It's like, yep, there's the anger. I'm going to keep taking a walk. It was so simple, just noticing that light touch of anger, just like picking up the adze handle over and over again, over and over again, just knowing this is what's happening, this is what's happening. It was so simple, and it disappeared. I actually didn't trust it at first. You know, it's like, where did it go? And it has never come back since then. So I'm convinced.

I mean, I talk about it a lot. I'm convinced that if it was still here, it probably would have arisen while I was talking about it at some point. It's not there anymore. In fact, what I experience is a wish. I wish that he'll be happy. You know, I wish that he's happy.

So that kind of wearing away, the patience, not expecting—like I think sometimes we think we'll see something so clearly, we want to dig in and find all the details about something, and that's how the suffering will go away. I knew so little about what was going on there. I had seen something much earlier, which I'll describe in a bit, but yeah, it was just so simple. It went away. It just wore itself out.

There's another simile that really speaks to that just wearing itself out. The simile of the car-

penter is still using an image of a person doing an activity. So there's a sense of intentionality in that image. And like with the hen, there's a sense of a being caring, doing something to cultivate conditions. The cultivation of the conditions with the carpenter are less directly related to the task that he's doing, which is an interesting image. You know, with the hen, the cultivation of the conditions are directly related to the hatching of the eggs.

With the simile of the adze handle, the wearing away of a handle is related to using the tool, but not particularly what he's using the tool for. So mindfulness is a very general tool that can be brought to bear on any experience, and that bringing that tool to bear begins to wear away the unwholesome, and simultaneously cultivate the wholesome. The third simile is one that takes any kind of consciousness out of the picture altogether. So the simile is of a ship that has been out at sea for a long time, six months, and it's exposed to the elements when it's out at sea, and then the ship is brought in.

And so there's, you know, in this case there's the people who are taking the ship out and bringing the ship in, but the simile is more about what happens to the rigging on the ship. So the image is that when the ship is brought into dry land—and I can imagine this is an image that people in the place, the location where the Buddha was teaching, were seeing, ships brought in during the dry season or during the season when they were not fishing or whatever they were doing, and so this was an image that people had, it's an experience that people had. So the ship is brought in and it sits on the shore for six months. And day by day those ropes, the rigging of the ship, are exposed to the elements—the sun, the sand, the wind.

And day by day, and again this is a picture of imperceptible change but happening really naturally, really just the nature of the rigging and the elements are to wear away at the rope. And each day you walk by the ship. You know, again I imagine being there looking at this ship. And each day you walk by this ship, and it doesn't look like the rigging has changed. It may sag a little bit but, you know, the rigging still looks like rope. But then one day you walk by and the rope has fallen apart.

And that's just happened because of conditions, because of natural conditions, of the elements wearing away at the rope. Again, the imperceptible nature of this and the natural course of events. There's so many images in the Buddhist teachings about nature and how nature does its thing. This is an image of something that people would see every day. And again, it's the conditions of the elements and the rope. Like each day the grains of sand are wearing away at that rope, and then one day you walk by and the rope has fallen apart. And you never saw it falling apart, much like I never saw the anger going away. I looked one day

and it was gone.

That again is the image, is that the sun and the sand and the wind are like moments of mindfulness meeting experience. Just each moment of mindfulness wears away at our reactive habits and patterns. And we need the patience because we want to see results, right? I mean, this is how we are. We like to see results. But we don't necessarily get to see results day by day.

We do over the course of time get to see how things have shifted, like over those first few months noticing the shifting of anger from being something that was completely consuming me to being something that I could navigate in my day, and then eventually that it was gone, that it had disappeared. So this simple practice, like we don't have to see something in detail or see all of the conditions that are putting things together in order to experience the benefits of the practice. And again, this simplicity of the practice can reveal amazing complexity of our minds. Just this simple witnessing. In fact, the simpler the mindfulness, the more it can see.

It's very much like a mirror. You know, a mirror will reflect whatever's in front of it. And it can reflect a white wall, it can reflect fog, it can reflect steam on a mirror, or it can reflect the most complex Bosch painting ever in front of it. So the mirror is not changed by what it reflects. It just reflects. And it's a simple, simple thing that reflects. And so the simpler the mindfulness, the more it can see.

And yet it doesn't have to see in detail for freedom, for ease, for peace to come. And yet sometimes we get those moments, those moments of some clear seeing, and those moments can feel pretty transformative. So in the first couple months of my practice, these first couple of months, I was not interested in sitting meditation. So everything that I described in those first couple of months, the noticing the anger as it arose, was all happening in daily life. And this experience too that I'm describing also happened in daily life. And this was the moment that I decided, oh, this is useful. I'm going to keep doing this, and wow, this is amazing what can be seen.

So it was a real faith-producing event. You know, it really helped me to step on fully onto the path. It was quite an experience. And it was again, it wasn't anything I was doing except that I had been kind of connecting with anger. I had been connecting with anger with mindfulness over the previous two or three months, and had started seeing that the mindfulness was, I would say, almost backing up into the beginnings of the anger. You know, I said it was like more normal anger, just more irritation about this person, things like that.

Well on this particular day, I was in my kitchen and I was just doing a normal activity. I was cutting an apple. I wasn't trying to be mindful. I wasn't working at cultivating mindfulness. I was just cutting an apple. And my understanding, again in retrospect, is that because I had kind of been curious about being mindful when anger arose, there was a recognition when I cut the apple of a memory of being with the person I was angry with, and we were at a fruit stand. So I could see there was a connection between what I was doing and the memory.

And then I felt, I could feel this kind of urge, you know, this impulse to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry. But I could see in that moment that I was not angry yet, but I felt the impulse, the urge to get angry. And what my mind said in that moment—and again, I did not do this, I could not have figured out how to do this if I'd tried—my mind said, "You don't have to get on that train." And the thought went away. So I saw the thought go away.

And I stood there in my kitchen waiting to get angry. Because I had not experienced yet, until that point, this person coming into my mind and anger not coming up. And anger didn't come up. And I was like, you know, yeah, I could say that I could not get on that train for a split second. But, you know, let's just wait. Let's see what happens. And I didn't get angry.

And the next thing that happened was that I was so overwhelmed with gratitude and seeing that, oh, this is a way to more ease and peace in my life. In that moment, I think what the lesson was, I understood how the practice worked and trusted that it worked even in all of those moments that I had no idea how it worked. So it was a little bit of a clear seeing of the conditioned nature of something arising and how intention leads to action, mental action, physical action. But again, it was the simplicity. I could not have tried to see that. It was the simplicity of the awareness that saw that.

It was just like I was watching things unfold, like dominoes falling. I was just watching it happen. And that moment was pretty transformative and powerful. But, you know, I've experienced just a handful of those, probably maybe two handfuls of those in my 27 years of practice. Much more of my practice has been this gradual, gradual unfolding, the trust in the simplicity of just meeting what's here, having some curiosity about experience as experience. It's so simple. It's so simple.

Those moments of what we think of as insight, they can be inspiring, faith-inspiring, and inspire us to continue. But they're not actually the goal. You know, the aim of this practice is release, release from greed, aversion, delusion. And that happens through the cultivation of conditions of warmth, of care, through a continuity of just meeting what's here, and a

patience in the imperceptible change that happens. And trusting that, trusting that imperceptible nature of change.

The Dalai Lama famously says, you know, don't try to look at the results of your practice after a day or a week. He said, think back five years and notice what's changed. You will see the benefits. And I'll end with a quote from Munirji, which Joseph Goldstein often quotes, again about the simplicity of practice. He said over and over again, Munirji told him, "Sit and know that you're sitting, and the entirety of the *Dharma* will be revealed to you."

Thank you for your attention, and I'm happy to hang out and check in if anybody has any questions or something they'd like to share with me. So thank you.