

Mindfulness as Coming Alive to Life

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Welcome.

So it might be that sometime during the meditation you realized that you had been lost in thought, like, "Oh right, I'm here at IMC doing that meditation thing," instead of whatever the mind was rehashing or rehearsing. There's a way in which maybe you realize, "Oh, actually I'm here, and the breath feels like this." Just really being with the experience of the body breathing—feeling the expansion in the chest, the movement of the belly, or feeling the air going in and out of the nose, whichever way it might be.

Maybe that was part of your experience, that you really felt like, "Oh, I'm here with what's happening." And maybe it was interspersed with ideas or experiences that weren't here. They were doing something else, whatever they might be.

This might be one of the early insights for mindfulness practice: we start to realize how often and how much our mind is elsewhere. Our mind is there, the body is here having an experience, and the mind is who knows where. Most of the time, it's just not here.

When I first realized this, I had this little tenderness, this little bit of sadness. Like, wow, I've been disconnected from life in some kind of way, just lost in thoughts, trying to imagine things into existence, or create a better past, or planning, planning, planning, trying to make ourselves feel safe all the time.

Maybe you've had this experience of driving on the freeway and then realizing, "Oh wait, where am I? I think the exit was back there." You were driving. The hands were on the steering wheel, the body clearly was there, the eyes were open, and clearly the car was still driving itself or being driven, but your mind wasn't there. It turns out that we're doing this more often than we realize.

So today I'd like to talk a little bit about this idea of mindfulness practice as a way which kind of brings us here to our life that's actually happening. Not the life that's happening completely imaginary in the mind, but what's really happening. Because there's this way in which we often are meeting this moment, this experience, through the filter, through this veil of what's going on in the mind.

Even if we are kind of present, maybe we're halfway present. What I mean by this is, an obvious example would be that we often have expectations about how experiences should be, how we

should be, how those people over there should be. And then each moment is just getting evaluated according to, "Does it meet expectations? Yes or no?" And it will always be no, that's a hint. And then we're like, "Okay, now how do I get it to be this imagination thing that I made up?"

We have these ideas, these beliefs, these views that are in the mind. And then we're evaluating our experience in terms of them. Often we kind of let go of the experience just to be with the mental thing, trying to figure it out, analyze it, and think about how we can make it be more like our imagination.

I don't want to make it sound like all thinking is bad. I just want to highlight that often we're not as present for our lives as we could be. Being present for our life has this satisfaction. It has this greater ease and contentment, even when it's uncomfortable, compared to just being in the mind. Our ideas about things will never match exactly what we want because the ideas aren't real. They're not substantial. They're just something that's happening in the mind.

So there's this way in which we have difficult conversations with someone, and then for the next hour, half a day, days, or weeks, we're just rehearsing. "Oh, I should have said this, and I can't believe they said that." Meanwhile, we've done the dishes, or [Laughter] had dinner, and all these types of things, and weren't really present for it.

So mindfulness is this way that can help us turn toward this actual experience of life, what is actually happening. It helps us to distinguish this experience of life versus our ideas about life.

Early in my meditation practice, this would not have made any sense to me. I was like, "What are you talking about?" I didn't realize how much the mind was involved with the way I was experiencing life, experiencing everything, until I started to meditate. I started to really see the difference between, for example, a bodily experience, like feeling the cushion or chair against the body, the pressure, or a sound, just hearing a sound without identifying it.

There is an experience, and then there's our relationship to that experience. These are two different things, but so often they're conflated. And the relationship is very often, "No, it's not enough. I want more," or, "It's not what I like. Please get me something different." What's happening in the mind then, we just spend our life there. Meanwhile, the birds are singing, the sky is blue, plants are growing, people we love are nearby. We're having hopefully some good meals, hearing the bird songs. I don't know why my language tonight is a little sticky for some reason. I'll see if I can be a little bit more clear.

Part of mindfulness practice is we can just ask ourselves simply, "What's actually here?" And what I mean by "here" is very often something tangible. So it can be the felt sense of the body. It could be the fact that there are sounds without having to identify, "Oh, that's a car driving

down there, or that's Diana's voice." What's here, often to be felt in the body, is a good way to be present because the body can't be anywhere else. Of course, the mind can be elsewhere.

We can ask ourselves, "What's being known directly this moment?" And that's pointing to the mind. The mind can be knowing, "Oh yeah, there's a lot of thinking going on. There's frustration, there's boredom, there's excitement." Mindfulness practice is asking us what's actually happening now. That can be in the body, or it could be what's being known this moment.

That brings us back from commentary and into contact. Commentary about how things should be, or our ideas and beliefs, and more into what's actually happening. So we're not trying to erase thought. We're just trying to recognize thought as thought. And it's distinct from so many experiences we have that don't have words. So many experiences we have are sensations rather than words.

When we can recognize, "Oh, this is a thought," then boom, there we are right in the present moment. That's what's being known right then is a thought. Thinking is happening. So as opposed to being lost in the content, we're like, "Oh yeah, there's a lot of thinking happening." This way brings us to what's our life, the fullness and the richness of this.

Mindfulness is not about becoming blank. It's not about getting rid of thought. It's about returning to contact. What's actually here: the breath, the body, this ordinary world, the experience of thinking.

I'd like to offer a poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer^[1]. It's called *Big Conversation*. There's a way in which I think this poem is kind of whimsical and tender. She's pointing to things that are just wonderfully ordinary. So this poem is called *Big Conversation* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:

I've become the person who talks to avocados. "Oh, look how ripe you are!" The one who talks to dust bunnies under the bed. "Oh, my goodness, how long have you been there?" I've become the person who narrates wind as it gusts, the one who composes out loud while writing poems. In short, I am the person who once mystified me. *Does she really think lettuce seeds can hear her?*

And I love being this woman who converses with stars, with shadows. This person who notices feelings that rise as I move through a day, and takes pleasure in greeting them. "Hello, shame," I say. "Hello, fear. Hello, embarrassment." How much easier life is when I join in the big conversation. Then I am never alone.

Not that the bananas talk back. Neither does the mop. But that doesn't stop me from being curious about my connection with all of it—the stain on the dish towel, the pond as it melts, the broken pot, the robin in the yard, the highway trash. It's not the talking part I love, but letting

my attention touch everything. Cracked glass, a lost glove, tire tracks. Mostly I love the listening for what isn't said back.

I realized for myself, I just love poems that have this whimsical bananas and ponds and broken pots. There's something about it that just brings life here, ordinary. And she writes, "That doesn't stop me from being curious about my connection with all of it." She's feeling this connection, and there's nothing grand that's included, right? Avocados, dust bunnies, dish towels, robins. And all of it, all of this belongs into the field of attention. The breath belongs, the body belongs, the sounds belong, the mood belongs, all of it. There's a way in which we can think that we can just be dismissive: "I don't really need to pay attention to some things." But everything belongs. Why not bring our attention to all of it?

In this poem, she talks about mindfulness also greeting uncomfortable emotions. "Hello, shame. Hello, fear. Hello, embarrassment." These are the things that we want to bounce off of and not experience. I appreciate so much that the poem doesn't say, "Hello, shame, please go away." It's just like, "Yep, this is what's here in our life." Sometimes it's exactly what we don't want. But this is how life is. And does it become easier if we can meet things instead of always being pushed around? Trying to avoid things means, "I can't go over there, or I have to only go over here because then I might feel that feeling, and I don't like those feelings, so I can only go here. Oh, but then that thing over there..." And pretty soon our lives just start to get smaller and smaller, and we start to feel more and more burdened.

Greeting and allowing difficult emotions, for example, doesn't mean we like everything that arises, but it means that we can meet it without turning against it. We are so often saying no. There's something radical that happens to the heart and the mind when we can say, "Okay, yes, this is what's here."

It doesn't mean we have to dive into the deep of it. Maybe we're not ready for that. Maybe we're not resourced for that. We're not feeling steady enough for it. That's okay. That's how our life is. Sometimes we're in seasons where we're feeling like it's just too much. But don't underestimate how powerful it is to even just say, "Hello, shame. I think I'm not ready right now for you. I see you. I respect this is happening. I'm going to turn over my attention to the experience of breathing right now." That is so different than shame and then having to jump away and organize our whole life in order to avoid this. It turns out to be easier in the long run.

It doesn't matter how many times somebody like me tells you this. This is actually something you have to experience for yourself. Otherwise, these are just words that I'm saying. But maybe there's a little invitation. Don't believe me. Try it out for yourself. This isn't more thoughts for you to believe or take on board. This is just an encouragement to see for yourself about meeting life as it is.

There's this way that I appreciate in this poem. It starts with her talking: "Oh, hello dust bunnies. How long have you been there?" [Laughter] But the poem ends with listening. It starts with talking and ends with listening. The poem is saying not that the talking doesn't matter, but because it's about letting attention touch everything. The talking is a way that she's letting it touch everything. But there's also a way in which we might understand listening as a way of receiving everything. Both are needed.

Sometimes maybe talking is like placing attention on. We could understand it that way. Listening is about receiving what's being experienced. In meditation, much of what we are paying attention to doesn't talk back in words. The breath isn't explaining itself. The body isn't giving a lecture on why it feels something. A sound doesn't tell us what it means. Instead, we're listening to something that's other than words. We're listening to experience, a knowing that doesn't have words. This listening brings us closer to life, or quite in contact with life, by touching what's here or allowing ourselves to be touched by what's here.

So mindfulness offers us a way of coming alive to the life that is already here, before the mind has explained everything, before we've had to figure everything out or analyze it or turned it into a story. Just to be experienced.

Mindfulness as listening might be one way that we could understand this. This isn't about passivity. It's not about spacing out or resignation: "Okay, I'll just shut up and listen." It's not about that. When we're really listening to somebody, we are attentive, receptive, and engaged. We're nodding our head or saying "mm-hmm" in the right place. We're not interrupting every sentence. We're not immediately preparing our argument or what we're going to say next, or trying to force the person to go a particular way with the conversation. When we're present, it's not completely passive. We're engaged, paying attention when we're listening.

In the same way, if we want to understand mindfulness as a type of listening, being receptive, being available, it's not cold observation. Instead, it's a way in which we are contacting life, whatever life is bringing us, with interest, with respect, with care. We're not leaning in trying to make something happen or push it away. Instead, we're just being present without collapsing into, arguing with, or getting tangled up with what is known.

We could understand mindfulness as listening to what's being received, what's being known. We might say it's heartfelt listening. Not in a mushy or sentimental way, not in a dramatic way. It's just bringing all of ourselves with some care, with some respect, to what's actually happening.

This is one way we could understand mindfulness. It's a way that helps us have contact with our life. I'm using this language of listening because in the same way that listening is the ears having contact with sounds, mindfulness can just have us in contact with whatever is arising. And in the

same way that listening is receptive, we can use mindfulness as a way to be receptive, as opposed to trying to make things happen and make them be a particular way.

Mindfulness is this coming back to this moment, this breath, the dust bunnies, the feeling of the chair pressure against the body. Each time this happens, we're a little bit less lost in our ideas about life. We're a little more intimate, in contact with life itself, less removed from the experience.

And this happens in such small, ordinary moments. It doesn't require grand moments. Just being with the temperature of the water while washing the dishes or brushing the teeth. Just being present for ordinary things like this.

We could say that contacting life and coming alive is the fruit of mindfulness. Listening is the way that mindfulness practices returning again and again to the present moment. I'm using listening not restricting it to the conventional way with sounds, but more as a receptive, receiving experience.

So, is there a way that we can let attention touch this life? And may listening help us come alive to this life.

I'd like to read this poem again. *Big Conversation* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

I've become the person who talks to avocados. "Oh, look how ripe you are!" The one who talks to dust bunnies under the bed. "Oh, my goodness, how long have you been there?" I've become the person who narrates wind as it gusts, the one who composes out loud while writing poems. In short, I am the person who once mystified me. *Does she really think lettuce seeds can hear her?*

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Thank you. I'll end there and I'll open it up for some comments and questions.

Q&A

Questioner 1: At any given time or moment, there are so many things happening at once. I'm wondering what being mindful means in the context of which things to be mindful about, because we can't be mindful of everything at once.

Diana Clark: Yes. Nor would we want to be. I had a teacher once say, "Well, when a feeling is coming up, if one is not necessarily ready to deal with that feeling, then you might notice what else is going on." But how do you think about what to be mindful about?

There are a number of ways I can answer this. One is when I was using this idea about mindfulness as listening, because we don't choose which sounds show up. So often with mindfulness, there are just things that are compelling. We're just experiencing them. Mood, the poem's talking about shame, fear, embarrassment. It just is known. It's not necessarily that we went out and chose, "Okay, now I'm going to be mindful of shame." But then what happens is often it gets known and then we have a reaction like, "No, no, no, I don't want this," and then we have this idea, "Okay, I should put my attention elsewhere," which is a legitimate thing to do. If we don't feel like this is the right time to be with shame, we can then choose the myriad of other things that are happening: our feet on the floor, or pressure against the body, because that's very tangible. So mindfulness as listening is just listening to whatever is compelling.

This does require a certain amount of trust, right? I know certainly I have spent a big portion of my life feeling like I needed to put my attention here and not there. There's some wisdom around that, but there's also some wisdom in recognizing we don't control this as much as we think we do. If we did, you would never have to practice mindfulness. You would just choose to put your mindfulness on the breath, and boom, you would do that until you chose to do something else.

The third thing that I'll say about this is that even asking the question might be the mind saying, "Oh no, I need to be the referee here. I have to supervise." The mind is trying to insert itself and say, "I need to make a decision about what to be mindful of." That's a little bit what I was talking about earlier, how we're often living our experience through the veil of the mind. The mind thinks it can navigate what we're mindful of. I love that you asked this question. That's the perfect thing that the mind would do. So hopefully that was helpful.

Questioner 1: Yeah. Thanks.

Diana Clark: You're welcome. Anybody else have a comment or question? Is somebody here?

Questioner 2: Hi. You mentioned two ways. One thing that's surprising to me is just how multidimensional the experience of being absorbed in thoughts can be. So it's interesting to describe it instead as a "mind veil." I don't know if it would be correct contextually to consider it in terms of all the way to consciousness of the twelve links^[2]—like why thought itself isn't multidimensional in itself, like there's additional...

Diana Clark: That's right. The content of thoughts, it can be juicy or boring, but what are actual thoughts? They're just mental events, and we have a quadrillion bazillion of them a day. But the content is where the juiciness is, and mindfulness practice helps us to be able to see that a thought is a thought and not get lost in the content. Is that what you're pointing to? How just thoughts themselves are...

Questioner 2: That's like the most practical aspect of what I was talking about.

Diana Clark: Yeah, because when we start talking about the twelve links, that starts to get complicated, because where are thoughts in there, right? Yeah. Thank you, Daniel. I'll pass you the microphone.

Questioner 3: I really like that poem. The part that got me excited was, "And I love being this woman who converses with stars, with shadows." When you were talking about listening and receiving, the words that came to mind from some of my experience is kind of being porous. It's kind of hard to put into words, but sometimes I feel like I'm really receiving the experience and it feels very open.

Diana Clark: Yeah. And is this open feeling, is that pleasant, unpleasant, neutral?

Questioner 3: Super pleasant.

Diana Clark: Yeah. That's what happens when we're less trying to grab experience and make it do something, and there's more just experience moving through.

Questioner 3: But trying to find that experience of being porous, striving for it... never works.
[Laughter]

Diana Clark: The trying of it is what makes it not happen. Yeah. Thank you, Elena. And back there.

Questioner 4: I think I'm getting fairly good at being mindful of small things in life like the tire tracks or the sound of a squirrel going around a tree. And then there's the other part of it, which is these deep-rooted, usually negative thoughts or feelings, insecurities, things like that, which is very difficult for me to bring mindfulness to and separate and observe. I feel like there are these two parts of me: this mindful part, this observer, and then this other thing that might happen an hour later where I'm just engulfed by a feeling or a thought. I'm wondering if there's any advice on bridging the gap between the two.

Diana Clark: Can you say a little bit more? You use this word "engulfed by a feeling or a thought." What is that experience?

Questioner 4: Kind of what you were talking about earlier, where I'm trying to grasp at anything to change it, to run from it, to not feel it. The opposite of, "Oh hey, there's insecurity. Welcome.

Hi. How are you doing?" It's like, "Oh no, I don't want this anymore. Get it away." Or believing all of the millions of thoughts that come up behind a feeling of insecurity as an example.

Diana Clark: Yeah. So insecurity is arising, and then there's this thing like, "No, no, no, I don't want this." Can you be with the experience of, "No, no, I don't want this"? Don't worry about the insecurity. Be with the not wanting. Be with the aversion. Be with the, "Please go away." Can you be with that experience of not wanting? In particular, it can be really helpful to locate the experience of not wanting in the body. So this can be a little bit, if we're not used to it, maybe not so obvious, but you touched yourself here...

Questioner 4: Yeah. Okay.

Diana Clark: So that is a way to be with that, I would say, and then just be with the not wanting. Bring a little bit of curiosity and warm-heartedness to it. Curiosity could be a little bit like, "Oh, is this moving or is it static? Is it getting bigger or smaller? Does it have a stabbing feeling with it, or is it just more of a pressure feeling?" It's not that you have to figure it out. The curiosity, those questions, are just a way to make it a little bit easier to stay with it.

So the not wanting feeling is adequate just to be with that. And then the feeling of insecurity, for example, will be unfolding, unfurling on its own, which is fine. It will start to run out of juice. It won't go away forever the first time you do it, but this is exactly how it does go away because the not wanting is fueling it. The not wanting is what's making it last. So if you can bring some care and respect to the not wanting, then the fuel for the experience of insecurity will start to run out.

Questioner 4: Thank you.

Diana Clark: So, I'm giving you all permission to talk to avocados and dust bunnies, whatever else you find. And wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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