

Mindfulness Meditation Introductory class

Week Five: Mindfulness of In our Daily Lives

Bringing Practice into Daily Life

Joko Beck, a Zen teacher in Los Angeles, suggests in one of her books to choose some “projects” in our daily lives to bring mindfulness to. She said that if we try to bring mindfulness to our whole day all at once, we are setting ourselves up to fail.

After reading this, I picked two projects, and each became a mindfulness “bell” for me, one was a difficult emotion that felt out of control at that point in my life, the other was a very neutral event that happened regularly throughout my day: the first was anger, the second was when I switched between DOS and Windows on my computer.

When we choosing specific things to vow to wake up for, sometimes we will remember right away, and sometimes we wont.

I found with anger that early on it would take me a while, and I would be in a full-blown rage before I remembered that I was supposed to pay attention. Slowly, over time, thought I caught the anger earlier and earlier, until I began to see the inclination to anger, before I actually became angry.

With the more neutral event, initially, I often found I remembered after the event had passed. But even that late recognition was a sign that mindfulness was beginning. Over time, we find we catch these mindfulness “bells” more and more often.

There are many things you might choose as a mindfulness project. You might try

- Noticing getting up from your desk at work (the act of standing)
- Waiting three rings of the telephone before answering it
- The whole several-minute process of going to the rest room
- An emotion that is strong or difficult for you
- Any chore

Another way I helped myself to pay attention was by putting mindfulness reminders around my house, choosing strategic places to put a small note about a particular quality of mind: Truthfulness on the telephone, giving on the door to the outside, patience at my bathroom sink, equanimity on the computer.

Intention and Motivation

Intention is a subtle shift of the mind that precedes any act of body, speech or mind. We can know we are going to move before we move. We can know we are going to speak before we speak. Even more subtly, we can even know we are going to think before we think, or know we are inclining towards an emotion before it appears

In and of itself, intention is a neutral event – it is simply an energetic impulse, sometimes felt in the body, sometimes felt as a thought or leaning in the mind – it is the sense of knowing something is going to happen. Sometimes teachers call it the “about to” moment. We know something is about to happen. Accompanying that about to moment, there is always a reason for the action: the motivation behind the action.

In that place of knowing that something is going to happen before it actually occurs, we have a chance to see what our motivation is. We may be motivated out of compassion, or anger or greed, or perhaps out of simply necessity.

One of the most powerful places to practice with this is in the area of speech. Paying attention to speech can be a very challenging practice. Much of the time, we speak automatically, without noticing first what we are going to say, or even that we are going to speak. And much less often do we take a moment to contemplate the effect our speech will have on the person we are talking to.

A great exercise to try is to simply pause before you speak. Just pause. Even remembering to pause can be hard! But that pause allows you to recollect that you are going to say something, that there is an intention to speak, and if you pay attention in that pause, you have the possibility of noticing, first, what you are going to say, and second, what the motivation is behind saying it.

Seeing how often our intentions and motivations are less than skillful can be distressing, at times. This is not intended to be a practice that you judge your self over, but rather one that helps you to learn from your experience.

When you find that particular motivations lead to pain and suffering, for yourself or for others, you have the choice to let go *before* you take action, if you are keeping track of your motivations.

The present moment is the only place where we can act, where we can choose how to respond to what life presents us with. The past is gone, it doesn't exist, except as memories in our mind in the present moment. The future doesn't exist, except as thoughts, in the present moment, about what might happen. All that exists is this very moment, brought about by a whole mix of causes and conditions, most of which were out of our control. How we respond to this very moment is our choice, it is actually the only thing we have a choice about, ever.

The Buddha taught that this choice point is the key to happiness. If we can see this choice point, we have a higher likelihood of choosing to respond in ways that will lead to happiness. One of the aspects of this teaching, though, is that while we have some control over our choice in the present moment, the results of our actions are out of our control. We need to let go of needing specific outcomes from our actions. We can't control the way others will respond to our actions, be they skillful or unskillful.

But we can take refuge in knowing that we are responding to the world in the most skillful way that we can. When the Dalai Lama was asked about how he felt when his decisions led to unfortunate outcomes, he responded, "My pure intention is my refuge."

Sila – Ethics

One way to look at our motivation is to use the Buddha's teaching on Sila, or ethics. This teaching is about looking at our relationship to others.

For lay people, the Buddha suggested five basic guidelines, or precepts, for ethical conduct. (Monastics have more!) They are: to refrain from killing, to refrain from stealing, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from lying, and to refrain from intoxication.

These guidelines are taken on as practices, not to judge ourselves for right and wrong, but rather to help us examine our motivation. We might consider these to be a set of five mindfulness "bells," as I was speaking about earlier. If we find ourselves about to do one of these things, the instruction is "Wake up! Pay attention! What is the motivation behind this action?"

These five precepts are stated in the negative, as actions to avoid. But they each have a positive aspect, a wholesome quality of mind that is cultivated along with the action we are avoiding. Each of the precepts is paired with a positive mental quality that is cultivated. Refraining from killing is paired with compassion; refraining from stealing, honesty; refraining from sexual misconduct, fidelity; refraining from lying, truthfulness; and refraining from intoxication, clarity of mind.

There is a mutual interconnection between our body and our mind. Making changes in our mind can result in changes to our actions, and likewise, making changes to our actions can result in lasting and deep changes to our minds. The place where that interconnection happens is at the point of intention.

A question sometime arises about why the precepts are stated in the negative as actions to avoid, rather than in the more positive way, of "I vow to cultivate compassion," for example.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American monk trained in Sri Lanka, has an excellent response to this. I will simply read it, since I think he states it so beautifully:

From *Going for Refuge, Taking the Precepts* by Bhikkhu Bodhi.
Wheel Publication No. 282/284 Buddhist Publication Society

The answer to this is twofold. First, in order to develop the positive virtues we have to begin by abstaining from the negative qualities opposed to them. The growth of the positive virtues will only be stunted or deformed as long as the defilements are allowed to reign unchecked. We cannot cultivate compassion while at the same time indulging in killing, or cultivate honesty while stealing and cheating. At the start we have to abandon the unwholesome through the aspect of avoidance. Only when we have secured a foundation in avoiding the unwholesome can we expect to succeed in cultivating the factors of positive performance. The process of purifying virtue can be compared to growing a flower garden on a plot of uncultivated land. We don't begin by planting the seeds in expectation of a bountiful yield. We have to start with the duller work of weeding out the garden and preparing the beds. Only after we have uprooted the weeds and nourished the soil can we plant the seeds in the confidence that the flowers will grow healthily.

Another reason why the precepts are worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what develops within ourselves. Thus we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind since inner attitudes are just simply not so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of the work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving-kindness, and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth.