

Julie Forbes, PhD 12/15/2010 We're all in this together.



Awareness practices, including mindfulness meditation, constitute a foundation for the work that Julie Forbes facilitates and underlie her approach to helping people improve their quality of life. She began practicing meditation in 1985 and has completed professional training in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. and through the Stress Reduction Clinic at El Camino Hospital. She has been teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs since 1997.

The following are notes provided by Julie, with minor edits by Dave.

We're All in This Together

The Three Jewels (The Three Refuges)

These are elements that give strength to a person's practice:

- *Buddha* – The teacher (The Buddha “personifies the full potential for awakening and compassion found in each of us.”¹ Gil Fronsdal)
- *Dharma* – The teachings and practices
- *Sangha* – The community of practitioners (people who share in practice).

How Sangha is Essential to Mindful Practice

"The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile nor the joy of companionship; it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone else believes in him and is willing to trust him."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Providing Mutual Support

● Motivation to practice

One of the most common obstacles I hear from mindful students/practitioners is the difficulty they have maintaining a regular practice. Once they are at home, there are so many demands and distractions that arise from home/work and preoccupations that take over, practice often falls off of the plate. It is understandable, given the nature of our everyday lives, that we will contend with these competing demands and our practice may wane. Having a place to join others in practice, particularly away from the distractions of home and work life, can help support practicing on a regular basis or renewing practice when it has waned. The support we feel can be very subtle; we support one another with our mere presence. There are times when I have felt more connection with a silent group of practitioners than I have in a group of friends. Having joined with others in practice, that support can help you renew your commitment to

regular practice at home or to practicing with the community on a regular basis. For this reason, attending a sitting group is one of the first recommendations I give to students who inform me that they are having trouble practicing regularly or have fallen away from practice. As a teacher, I find support for my practice in *sangha* as well.

- Shared values and priorities

As you evolve in your practice, it is not unusual for your values and priorities to shift. The practice that we are engaged in helps us cultivate the capacity for kindness, compassion, and contentment. And these qualities may reflect what and how we value people and things, and how we prioritize. There are times when these shifts may conflict with the experiences we have in our day-to-day life. If we are exposed to aggression, preoccupations with materialism, excessive ambition, or narcissism, we may be challenged to respond from our shifting attitudes. For example, a student of mine recently expressed that he finds that he is getting angry less often. At the same time, he is making choices to take more time for himself, away from colleagues and even family. The conflicts that may arise within your surroundings can be challenging to deal with when practicing on your own. There are times when people feel isolated from others around them who don't share their shift in values and priorities. *Sangha* gives us the opportunity to be with a group of like-minded people who share and support these priorities. This group of people can relate to your challenges and you can know that you are not alone in this effort.

Enhancing Understanding and Learning

- Examples of others (role modeling)

When other people display how the practice is impacting their life, or changes in choices they have been making, this can be inspirational, give us some examples of how the practice can make an impact in our life or help us feel like we are not alone in our intentions. By hearing how others have benefited it can also serve as a possibility for ourselves: if they can experience this, it is also a possibility for me. When I teach groups of people who are relatively new to the practice of mindfulness, I find that they look to each other to see progress. If someone in the class expresses that they have had more tolerance related to their teenager or if another person shares that they have started to sleep through the night, other students recognize that they, too, can experience those changes. Moreover, when students share suggestions about how they encourage their mindful practice in everyday life, other students are receptive to these options. For example, if a student says that they found it invaluable to get up 15 minutes earlier to practice before getting ready for work, other students may be willing to try that. And if a student goes on a retreat and tells the others about their experience, the other students are more inspired to try a retreat. When students are evolving in their ability to act out of kindness and/or compassion this can serve as an example of how others may embody these qualities. In *sangha*, we can inspire one another by our examples.

- Learning from others' understanding

It is not just the teachers who have wisdom of the dharma and share that wisdom. Practitioners each have their own wisdom. When we come together in a *Sangha*, that wisdom can be shared. There are times when a student expresses a concept or understanding in a way that cuts through confusion that others have had. Perhaps it is an analogy that helps them to gain clarity, or other times it is their interpretation of a concept. The wisdom that we cultivate in this practice really is strengthened when we receive one another's wisdom. Remember that this practice was originally spoken teaching, passed down from one to another and eventually written in text. We really enhance this tradition when we discuss the dharma teachings and speak about the way we understand them. When we share our wisdom in *Sangha*, it additionally helps us to translate concepts that come from other times and places into our culture and daily environments, so we can make them real and manifest them in our lives.

- Seeing our patterns/habits more clearly

When we practice on our own, we don't have what I call a reality check. Without external feedback, we can be unaware of some of our own habits or tendencies – we remain blind to them. Whereas, in a *sangha*, we relate to others, and in this way, some of our patterns become more noticeable. Through those relationships we can see some of our patterns more clearly; in this way other people in the group become a mirror for us. For example, if a student easily becomes ego attached and feels the need to be an expert when topics are discussed, they may attend a *sangha* and have the challenge of working with that pattern. Practicing alone, this pattern may not be visible to them. Therefore, being in the *sangha* increased our understanding of ourselves in ways that would not arise on our own. Being a member of the *sangha*, you can also be a mirror for others.

“When we forget, we are reminded. When we have remembered, we become the reminders for others.”²

- Arinna Weisman and Jean Smith

Providing a refuge, a safe place to practice

When I teach mindfulness at a work place, people often want to hide the fact that we are doing this work in that environment. They may be embarrassed if a co-worker walks into the conference room while we are meditating. And when I provide students with suggestions on ways to extend mindfulness into their daily life, we often have discussions about how they can avoid drawing unwanted attention to themselves: walk at a normal pace when practicing walking meditation at work or in the park, practice in your car where people won't disturb you, learning to exhale completely in way that isn't obvious so you can do this in a meeting, etc. Practicing mindfulness requires a vulnerability and bravery that is not often supported in day-to-day environments that we frequent. We are practicing to become more truly ourselves, and this is a new way of being for many of us. We need an environment that provides us with the safety to

practice these new ways of being. As Gil Fronsdal describes, “*Sangha* is, or aims to be, as safe place for people to be themselves.”¹ He continues, “For the same reason, a *sangha* is also a safe place to experiment with new ways of being. As practice relaxes our insecurities and automatic patterns of behavior a *sangha* can be, for example, a place for compulsive speakers to explore speaking less, or inhibited speakers to explore new ways of speaking up.”¹ A *sangha* is a place that encourages us to take a closer look at our experiences and consider new options that may serve us better. Perhaps it even reinforces our new conditioning rather than inhibits it.

*“In a sangha we become a community that supports the best of ourselves and also supports the abandoning of the worst of ourselves. What greater gift can we give each other than that?”*²

- Arinna Weisman and Jean Smith

I used to sit on the banks with a raft and watch the water roll lazily by. One day I pushed my raft into the shallows of the water and found the water moved swifter than I thought. My raft was actually a boat. Then, after some time, I rowed my little boat into deeper water. There were great storms. Mighty winds, tremendous waves, and sometimes I felt so alone. But I have noticed my little rowboat is now a mighty ship manned by my friends and loved ones; and beautiful calm seas, warm sunny days, and nights filled with comfortable dreams always double after a storm. Now I could never go back and sit on the bank. In fact, I search for deeper water. Such is life when lived.

- B.D. Gullledge

References:

1. *The Issue at Hand: Essays on Buddhist Mindfulness Practice*, Gil Fronsdal
2. *The Beginner’s Guide to Insight Meditation*, Arinna Weisman and Jean Smith