



Doing the Buddha's Practice

Mindfulness/awareness was the meditation the Buddha himself practiced and taught. It was his basic prescription for human suffering. Looking at life with an open and nonjudgmental attention, we see our confusion and develop insight. This is the basis of all Buddhist practice and the key to liberation.



PHOTOS BY
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My friends, it is through the establishment of the lovely clarity of mindfulness that you can let go of grasping after past and future, overcome attachment and grief, abandon all clinging and anxiety, and awaken an unshakable freedom of heart, here and now. —THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA

Establish a liberating clarity of mindfulness of the body in the body, of the feelings in the feelings, of the mind in the mind, and of the dharma in the dharma. —THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA

IN MYTHS FROM AROUND THE WORLD, men and women have searched for an elixir that will bring protection from suffering. Buddhism's answer is mindfulness. How does mindfulness work? Let me illustrate with a story that became the basis for the 1988 film *Gorillas in the Mist*. The movie tells the account of Dian Fossey, a courageous field biologist who managed to befriend a tribe of gorillas. Fossey had gone to Africa to follow in the footsteps of her mentor George Shaller, a renowned primate biologist who had returned from the wilds with more intimate and compelling information about gorilla life than any scientist before. When his colleagues asked how he was able to learn such remarkable detail about the tribal structure, family life, and habits of gorillas, he attributed it to one simple thing. He didn't carry a gun.

Previous generations of biologists had entered the territory of these large animals with the assumption that they were dangerous. So the scientists came with an aggressive spirit, large rifles in hand. The gorillas could sense the danger around these rifle-bearing men and kept a far distance. By contrast, Shaller—and later his student Dian Fossey—entered their territory without weapons. They had to move slowly, gently, and, above all, respectfully toward these creatures. And, in time, sensing the benevolence of these humans, the gorillas allowed them to come right among them and learn their ways. Sitting still, hour after hour, with careful, patient attention, Fossey finally understood what she saw. As the African-American sage George Washington Carver explained, “Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough.”

Mindfulness is attention. It is a non-judging, receptive awareness, a respectful awareness. Unfortunately, much of the time we don't attend in this way. Instead, we react, judging whether we like, dislike, or can ignore what is happening. Or we measure our experience against our expectation. We evaluate ourselves and others with a stream of commentary and criticism.

When people initially come to a meditation class to train in mindfulness, they hope to become calm and peaceful. Usually they are in for a big shock. The first hour of mindfulness meditation reveals its opposite, bringing an unseen stream of evaluation and judgment into stark relief. In the first hour many feel bored and dislike the boredom. We can hear a door slam and wish for quiet. Our knees hurt and we try to avoid the pain. We wish we had a better cushion. We can't feel our breath and we get frustrated. We notice our mind won't stop planning and we feel like a failure. Then we remember someone we're angry at and get upset, and if we notice how many judgments there are, we feel proud of ourself for noticing.

But like George Shaller, we can put aside these weapons of judgment. We can become mindful. When we are mindful, it is as if we can bow to our experience without judgment or expectation. “Mindfulness,” declared the Buddha, “is all-helpful.”

PETER, A MIDDLE-AGE computer designer, came to a meditation retreat looking for relief. He was coping with a recently failed business, a shaky marriage, and a sick mother. But meditation quickly became an agony. The anger and disappointment that pervaded his current situation rose up in the quiet

room to fill his mind. His attempts to quiet himself by sensing his breath felt hopeless; his attention bounced away from his body like water on a hot skillet. Then it got worse. A restless woman seated nearby began to cough loudly and frequently. She began to fidget and move and cough more as the first day wore on.

Peter, who was struggling just to be with his own sorrow, became frustrated and angry, and, as she continued coughing, enraged. He sought out my co-teacher and good friend Debra Chamberlin Taylor and insisted that meditation was the wrong approach and that he wanted to leave. The teacher asked Peter to close his eyes and mindfully notice the state of his body. It was filled with tension and hurting. With Debra's help, Peter found he could hold the tension and hurt with a more accepting and kind attention. He breathed, relaxed a little, and recognized that the medicine he needed was nothing other than to understand his own pain.

The next instruction he was given was simple: as you sit, keep a gentle mindfulness on your body and notice whatever happens. After only a few minutes, his fidgety neighbor began a long coughing spell. With each cough Peter felt his own muscles clench and his breath stop. Now he became more curious, interested in how his body was reacting. He began to notice that hearing each cough produced an internal clenching and a wave of anger, which subsided as he practiced relaxing between the spells.

Finally, at the end of the sitting period, he got up to walk down to the lunchroom. As he arrived, he noticed this same difficult woman in line just ahead of him. Immediately he noticed how his stomach clenched and his breath stopped—just seeing her! Again, he relaxed. After lunch when he returned to the meditation hall he checked to see what time his name was listed for a private interview with his teacher. Further down the same list he read the restless woman's name. Still paying attention, he was surprised. Just seeing her name made his stomach clench and his breath tighten! He relaxed again. He realized that his body had become a mirror, and that his mindfulness was showing him when he was caught and where he could let go.

As the retreat went on, his attention grew more precise. He noticed that his own anxious and angry thoughts about his family and business problems could trigger the same clenching and tightening as the woman's cough did. He had always tried to have things under control. Now that his life had proved out of control, the habits of anger, blame, and judgments toward himself were tying him in knots. With each reaction, he could feel the knots arise. After each one he would pause mindfully and bring in a touch of ease. He began to trust mindfulness. By the close of the retreat, he was grateful to the restless woman near him. He wanted to thank her for her teaching.

With mindfulness Peter found relief. He also discovered the benefit of curiosity and openness, what Suzuki Roshi famously called beginner's mind. In Suzuki Roshi's words, “We pay attention with respect and interest, not in order to manipulate, but to understand what is true. And seeing what is true, the heart becomes free.”



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Sitting meditation at an April 2007 daylong group retreat with Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California (above and pages 38 & 39)

MINDFULNESS AS FEARLESS PRESENCE

The art of listening is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive. —ALAN WATTS

Sitting mindfully with our sorrows and fears, or with those of another, is an act of courage. It is not easy. Mary believed that to face her rage might kill her. John's son's cystic fibrosis brought terrifying images of wheelchairs and early death. Perry was afraid to face his infidelities and sexual peculiarities. Jerry could hardly bear to think of the carnage he had seen during his work in Bosnia. For Angela, facing the re-occurrence of her cancer meant facing death.

With patience and courage, they gradually learned how to sit firmly on the earth and sense the contraction and trembling of their body without running away. They learned how to feel the floods of emotions, fear, grief, and rage and to allow them to slowly release with mindfulness. They learned to see the endless mental stories of fear and judgment that repeat over and over, and with the help of mindfulness to let them go and relax, to steady the mind and return to the present.

In the Buddha's search for freedom he too turned his mindfulness to overcome his fears:

How would it be if in the dark of the month, with no moon, I were to enter the most strange and frightening places, near tombs and in the thick of the forest, that I might come to understand fear and terror. And doing so, a wild animal would approach or the wind rustle the leaves and I would think, "Perhaps the fear and terror now comes." And being resolved to dispel the hold of that fear and terror, I remained in whatever posture it arose, sitting or standing, walking or lying down. I did not change until I had faced that fear and terror in that very posture, until I was free of its hold upon me...And having this thought, I did so. By facing the fear and terror I became free.

In the traditional training at Ajahn Chah's forest monastery in Thailand, we were sent to sit alone in the forest at night to practice the meditations on death. Stories of monks who had encountered tigers and other wild animals were part of what kept us alert. There were many snakes, including cobras. At Ajahn Buddhadasa's forest monastery we were taught to tap our walking sticks on the paths at night so the snakes would "hear" us and move out of the way. There were moments when I was really



Outside the Spirit Rock dining hall during a break in practice

frightened. At another monastery, I periodically sat all night at the charnel grounds. At one monastery, every few weeks a body was brought for cremation. After the lighting of the funeral pyre and the chanting, most people would leave, with one or several monks left alone to tend the fire in the dark forest. Then, as a practice, one monk would be left, remaining there until dawn, contemplating death. Not everyone did these practices. But I was a young man, looking for initiation, eager to prove myself, so I gravitated toward these difficulties.

As it turned out, sitting in the dark forest with its tigers and snakes was easier than sitting with my inner demons. My insecurity, loneliness, shame, and boredom came up. All my frustrations and hurts, too. Sitting with these took more courage than the charnel ground. Little by little I learned to face them with mindfulness, to make a clearing within the dark woods of my own heart.

Mindfulness does not reject experience. It lets experience be the teacher. One Buddhist practitioner with severe asthma learned to bring a mindful attention to his breath and limit his attacks by being patient as the muscles in his throat and chest relaxed the stress in his body. Another man undergoing a painful cancer treatment used mindfulness to quell his fear of the pain

and added loving-kindness for his body as a complement to his chemotherapy. Through mindfulness a local politician learned not to be discouraged by his attackers. A frazzled single mother of preschoolers used mindfulness to acknowledge feeling tense and overwhelmed, and to become more respectful and spacious with herself and her boys. Each of these practitioners learned to trust the space of mindful awareness. With mindfulness they entered the difficulties in their own life. Like the Buddha in the thick of the forest, they found healing and freedom.

FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR MINDFUL TRANSFORMATION

Learning takes place only in a mind that is innocent and vulnerable.

—KRISHNAMURTI

There are four principles for mindful transformation of difficulties that are taught in Western mindfulness retreats with the acronym RAIN. RAIN stands for Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, and Non-Identification. This acronym echoes the Zen poets who tell us “the rain falls equally on all things.” Like the nourishment of outer rain, the inner principles of RAIN can transform our difficulties.

Recognition

Recognition is the first step of mindfulness. When we are stuck in our life, we must begin with a willingness to see what is so. It is as if someone asks us gently, what is happening now? Do we reply brusquely, “Nothing”? Or do we pause and acknowledge the reality of our experience, here and now?

With recognition we step out of denial. Denial undermines our freedom. The diabetic who denies his body is not free. Neither is the driven, stressed-out executive who denies the cost of her lifestyle, or the self-critical would-be painter who denies his love of making art. The society that denies its poverty and injustice has lost a part of its freedom as well. If we deny our dissatisfaction, our anger, our pain, our ambition, we will suffer. If we deny our values, our beliefs, our longings, or our goodness, we will suffer.

“The emergence and blossoming of understanding, love, and intelligence has nothing to do with any outer tradition,” observes Zen teacher Toni Packer. “It happens completely on its own when a human being questions, wonders, listens, and looks without getting stuck in fear. When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth are open.”

With recognition our awareness becomes like the dignified host. We name and inwardly bow to our experience: “Ah, sorrow; and now excitement; hmm, yes, conflict; and yes, tension. Oh, now pain, yes, and now, ah, the judging mind.” Recognition moves us from delusion and ignorance toward freedom. “We can light a lamp in the darkness,” says the Buddha. We can see what is so.

Acceptance

The next step of RAIN is acceptance. Acceptance allows us to relax and open to the facts before us. It is necessary because with recognition, there can come a subtle aversion, a resistance, a wish it weren't so. Acceptance does not mean that we cannot work to improve things. But just now, this is what is so. In Zen they say, “If you understand, things are just as they are. And if you don't understand, things are still just as they are.”

Acceptance is not passivity. It is a courageous step in the process of transformation. “Trouble? Life is trouble. Only death is nice,” Zorba the Greek declares. “To live is to roll up your sleeves and embrace trouble.” Acceptance is a willing movement of the heart, to include whatever is before it. In individual transformation we have to start with the reality of our own suffering. For social transformation we have to start with the reality of collective suffering, of injustice, racism, greed, and hate. We can only transform the world as we learn to transform ourselves. As Carl Jung comments, “Perhaps I myself am the enemy who must be loved.”



With acceptance and respect, problems that seem intractable often become workable. A man began to give large doses of cod-liver oil to his Doberman because he had been told that the stuff was good for dogs. Each day he would hold the head of the protesting dog between his knees, force its jaws open, and pour the liquid down its throat. One day the dog broke loose and the fish oil spilled on the floor. Then, to the man's great surprise, the dog returned to lick the puddle. That is when the man discovered that what the dog had been fighting was not the oil but his lack of respect in administering it. With acceptance and respect, surprising transformations can occur.

Investigation

Recognition and acceptance lead to the third step of RAIN, investigation. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh calls this “seeing deeply.” In recognition and acceptance we recognize our dilemma and accept the truth of the whole situation. Now we must investigate more fully. Buddhism teaches that whenever we are stuck, it is because we have not looked deeply enough into the nature of the experience.

Buddhism systematically directs our investigation to four areas that are critical for understanding and freedom. These are called the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and dharma, the underlying principles of experience.

Here is how we can apply them when working with a difficult experience. Starting with investigation in the body, we mindfully locate where our difficulties are held. Sometimes we find heat, contraction, hardness, or vibration. Sometimes we notice throbbing, numbness, a certain shape or color. We can investigate whether we are meeting this area with resistance or with mindfulness. We notice what happens as we hold these sensations with mindfulness. Do they open? Are there other layers? Is there a center? Do they intensify, move, expand, change, repeat, dissolve, or transform?

In the second foundation of mindfulness, we can investigate what feelings are part of this difficulty. Is the primary feeling tone pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Are we meeting this feeling with mindfulness? And what are the secondary feelings associated with it? Often we discover a constellation of feelings.

A man remembering his divorce may feel sadness, anger, jealousy, loss, fear, and loneliness. A woman who was unable to help her addicted nephew can feel longing, aversion, guilt, desire, emptiness, and unworthiness. With mindfulness, each feeling is recognized and accepted. We investigate how each emotion feels, whether it is pleasant or painful, contracted or relaxed, tense or sad. We notice



Formal walking meditation on the Spirit Rock grounds

where we feel the emotion in our body and what happens to it as it is held in mindfulness.

Next comes the mind. What thoughts and images are associated with this difficulty? What stories, judgments, and beliefs are we holding? When we look more closely, we often discover that some of them are one-sided, fixed points of view or out-moded, habitual perspectives. We see that they are only stories. They loosen their hold on us. We cling less to them.

The fourth foundation to investigate is called mindfulness of the dharma. Dharma is an important and multifaceted word that can mean the teachings and the path of Buddhism. It can mean the truth, and in this case it can also mean the elements and patterns that make up experience. In mindfulness of the dharma we look into the principles and laws that are operating. We can notice if an experience is actually as solid as it appears. Is it unchanging or is it impermanent, moving, shifting, recreating itself? We notice if the difficulty expands or contracts the space in our mind, if it is in our control or if it has its own life. We notice if it is self-constructed. We investigate whether we are clinging to it, resisting it, or simply letting it be. We see whether our relationship to it is a source of suffering or happiness. And finally, we notice how much we identify with it. This leads us to the last step of RAIN, non-identification.

Nonidentification

In non-identification we stop taking the experience as me or mine. We see how our identification creates dependence, anxiety, and inauthenticity. In practicing non-identification, we inquire of every state, experience, and story, is this who we really are? We see the tentativeness of this identity. Instead of identification with this difficulty, we let go and rest in awareness itself. This is the culmination of releasing difficulty through RAIN.

One Buddhist practitioner, David, identified himself as a failure. His life had many disappointments and after a few years of Buddhist practice, he was disappointed by his meditation too. He became calmer but that was all. He was still plagued by unrelenting critical thoughts and self-judgments, leftovers from a harsh and painful past. He identified with these thoughts and his wounded history. Even the practice of compassion for himself brought little relief.

Then, during a ten-day mindfulness retreat, he was inspired by the teachings on non-identification. He was touched by the stories of those who faced their demons and freed themselves. He remembered the account of the Buddha, who on the night of his enlightenment faced his own demons in the form of the armies and temptations of Mara. David decided to stay up all night and directly face his own demons. For many hours, he

tried to be mindful of his breath and body. In between sittings, he took periods of walking meditation. At each sitting, he was washed over by familiar waves of sleepiness, body pains, and critical thoughts. Then he began to notice that each changing experience was met by one common element, awareness itself.

In the middle of the night, he had an “ah ha” moment. He realized that awareness was not affected by any of these experiences, that it was open and untouched, like space itself. All his struggles, the painful feelings and thoughts, came and went without the slightest disturbance to awareness itself. Awareness became his refuge.

David decided to test his realization. The meditation hall was empty so he rolled on the floor. Awareness just noticed. He stood up, shouted, laughed, made funny animal noises. Awareness just noticed. He ran around the room, he lay down quietly, he went outside to the edge of the forest, he picked up a stone and threw it, jumped up and down, laughed, came back and sat. Awareness just noticed it all. Finding this, he felt free. He watched the sun rise softly over the hills. Then he went back to sleep for a time. And when he reawakened, his day was full of joy. Even when his doubts came back, awareness just noticed. Like the rain, his awareness allowed all things equally.

It would be too rosy to end this story here. Later in the retreat David again fell into periods of doubt, self-judgment, and depression. But now, even in the middle of it, he could recognize that it was just doubt, just judgment, just depression. He could not take it fully as his identity anymore. Awareness noticed this too. And was silent, free.

Buddhism calls non-identification the abode of the awakening, the end of clinging, true peace, nirvana. Without identification we can live with care, yet we are no longer bound by the fears and illusions of the small sense of self. We see the secret beauty behind all that we meet. Mindfulness and fearless presence bring true protection. When we meet the world with recognition, acceptance, investigation and non-identification, we discover that wherever we are, freedom is possible, just as the rain falls on and nurtures all things equally. ♦

Everyday Mindfulness

JACK KORNFIELD'S instructions on how to establish a daily practice that will help bring awareness to everything you do

FIRST SELECT A SUITABLE PLACE for your regular meditation. It can be wherever you can sit easily with minimal disturbance: a corner of your bedroom or any other quiet spot in your home. Place a meditation cushion or chair there for your use. Arrange what is around so that you are reminded of your meditative purpose, so that it feels like a sacred and peaceful space. You may wish to make a simple altar with a flower or a sacred image, or place your favorite spiritual books there for a few moments of inspired reading. Let yourself enjoy creating this space for yourself.

Then select a regular time for practice that suits your schedule and temperament. If you are a morning person, experiment with a sitting before breakfast. If evening fits your temperament or schedule better, try that first. Begin with sitting ten or twenty minutes at a time. Later you can sit longer or more frequently. Daily meditation can become like bathing or toothbrushing. It can bring a regular cleansing and calming to your heart and mind.

Find a posture on the chair or cushion in which you can easily sit erect without being rigid. Let your body be firmly planted on the earth, your hands resting easily, your heart soft, your eyes closed gently. At first feel your body and consciously soften any obvious tension. Let go of any habitual thoughts or plans. Bring your attention to feel the sensations of your breathing. Take a few deep breaths to sense where you can feel the breath most easily, as coolness or tingling in the nostrils or throat, as movement of the chest, or rise and fall of the belly. Then let your breath be natural. Feel the sensations of your natural breathing very carefully, relaxing into each breath as you feel it, noticing how the soft sensations of breathing come and go with the changing breath.

After a few breaths your mind will probably wander. When you notice this, no matter how long or short a time you have been away, simply come back to the next breath. Before you return, you can mindfully acknowledge where you have gone with a soft word in the back of your mind, such as “thinking,” “wandering,” “hearing,” “itching.” After softly and silently naming to yourself where your attention has been, gently and directly return to feel the next breath. Later on in your meditation you will be able to work mindfully with all the places your mind wanders to, but for initial training, one word of acknowledgement and a simple return to breath is best. As you sit, let the breath change rhythms naturally, allowing it to be short, long, fast, slow, rough, or easy. Calm yourself by relaxing into the breath. When your breath becomes soft, let your attention become gentle and careful, as soft as the breath itself.

Like training a puppy, gently bring yourself back a thousand times. Over weeks and months of this practice you will gradually learn to calm and center yourself using the breath. There will be many cycles in this process, stormy days alternating with clear days. Just stay with it. As you do, listening deeply, you will find that mindfulness developed on the breath helps to connect with and quiet your whole body and mind.

After developing some calm and skills, and connecting with your breath, you can then extend awareness of all the foundations of mindfulness, fully opening to your body and mind. You will discover how awareness of your breath can serve as a steady basis for awareness in all you do. ♦