

Mindfulness of the Mind

Intro

So, we are now entering into our final stretch of the Eightfold Path: in the beginning we talked about Wisdom as seeing the world for how it really is; then we talked about Morality as a means of acting well within the world.

Now, as we enter into the Meditative side of the Path, Adeesha taught us the importance of having right effort—of keeping good things in our lives, and working to remove the negative. Last week, Ron started us out on Mindfulness, and taught us about the importance of being mindful of our bodies as a means of 1) Being mindful of the present moment, and 2) Removing attachment to our body, while 3) Learning to take care of our body. We learned that our bodies are wonderful things, as they can be part of a healthful mental practice.

This week, we'll be discussing the other half of mindfulness: being mindful of our minds and feelings.

Sometimes, it may seem like being mindful of our minds can be complicated and difficult—and it is. Being mindful of the body, although also difficult, conceptually seems simpler: after all, we can see the body; we can touch it and feel it. Our mind and feelings, on the other hand, are not so easily seen or understood: they are intangible.

But this does not mean they're not real: in fact, as we know, the mind can impact us more than anything. H.H. the Dalai Lama always says that even if we are at the pinnacle of physical health, well-dressed, and in the life of luxury, if we are suffering internally, no external thing can bring us joy; conversely, if we are content inside, no physical problem can bring us harm. That said, being mindful of our minds/feelings is, I would argue, one of the most important aspects of a useful Buddhist practice.

So, what are we mindful of?

- 1) Now, I keep saying “the mind,” but in reality I'm referring to all the intangible phenomena within us
- 2) The Satipatthana Sutra, which Ron used for his talk, offers us a useful frame of reference, and tells us that we should be mindful of 1) Our Feelings, 2) Our Minds, 3) Our Mental Qualities
- 3) Unlike mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the mind is something which we do not sit down and analyze, so to speak. As Ron pointed out to me, it is a more organic process. When you are sitting and meditating in concentration, has your mind drifted? Of course it has—and the place where it drifts is the place where we can be mindful.
 - i) Instead of *choosing* what we are mindful of, we become mindful of what is occurring.

Mindfulness of Feelings

1) Mindfulness of our feelings is sort of a like a bridge between being mindful of our body and being mindful of our mind: when we say “feelings,” we’re talking about literal sensory feeling.

2) So, when we are mindful of our feelings, we are being mindful of what our body is doing or what is occurring to our body, and we are listening to what our mind is saying about that:

“And how does a monk remain focused on feelings in and of themselves?...When feeling a painful feelings, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a painful feeling.’ When feeling a pleasant feeling, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a pleasant feeling.’ When feeling a neutral feeling, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a neutral feeling.’”

3) I know that’s not the most exciting description of mindfulness, but what it is showing us is that we are to be mindful of our feelings without becoming attached or averted to them. The monk in this text is not saying “I have a pleasant feeling, so I’m happy,” or, “I have a painful feeling, so I’m unhappy.” There is just recognition of what is.

4) You’ve all heard me say this before when teaching meditation, but the point of this sort of exercise is to not internalize the feeling, but to recognize it. The statement “I am feeling a painful feeling” is *much different* than “I am in pain.”

5) The point of this is to learn to feel how our minds connect to the external world around us without becoming attached to that world. When we feel pain, we recognize pain; when we feel pleasure, we recognize pleasure. But we don’t recoil from the pain, and we don’t get caught up in the pleasure: we simply experience it, and let it pass.

i) I am NOT saying to ignore pain: take care of your body. What I am saying is that we will, inherently, come up against moments where pain is inevitable and unavoidable. Just recognize it then.

Mindfulness of the Mind

1) Of course, it’s pretty normal for feelings to become thoughts, which is what makes up what we call “the mind”: if we like something we’re feeling, chances are we’ll want to keep it; if we don’t like it, we’ll hate it.

2) When we have these thoughts about our feelings, it is an important time to recognize what those thoughts are: “When the mind has passion, [discern] that the mind has passion. When the mind has aversion, discern that the mind has aversion.”

i) So when you are meditating, or when you feel something, examine how you are reacting to that feeling—how are you internalizing it?

3) Now, what about just-thinking, separated from feeling? Have you ever tried to sit down and meditate, and just not been able to concentrate? Have you had one of those days where your mind is going every-which-way?

i) Well, that’s not a bad thing, so long as you can recognize it: “When the mind is concentrated, discern that it is concentrated; when the mind is scattered, discern that it is scattered.”

- ii) An hour spent ‘meditating’ and realizing you aren’t meditating at all is better than an hour where you trick yourself into believing you’re the calmest, most concentrated person on earth.
- 4) Always remember that the goal of mindfulness meditation is not to make your mind a certain way, but to see how your mind is. This is not to say that you cannot change the mind—that you cannot concentrate the scattered mind, or remove aversion and attachment—but that you can only do these wonderful things once you see the mind and feelings for what they are.

Mindfulness of Our Mental Qualities

1) Once we become mindful of our feelings and our thoughts, we can become mindful of the qualities these feelings/thoughts have on our minds. THIS is where we can begin to do things with these thoughts.

2) Now, in the Satipatthana Sutta, the text describes how to be mindful of how our mental qualities and formations arise, and (in typical Buddhist fashion) it does this by naming a whole bunch of lists to describe different mental states we may have, and to describe them all would take us a long time.

i) For future research, they are a) the Five Hindrances, b) the Five Aggregates, c) the Six Senses (remember, in Buddhism ‘consciousness’ is a sense), d) Seven Factors of Awakening, e) and the Four Noble Truths.

2) What we can discuss is that, with all mental formations, we should become mindful of how and why they came about, and then what we can do about them. This is where we use the Dharma, which teaches us about impermanence, the cause of suffering, and No-Self, and use to change our ingrained thinking habits.

3) I would like to spend a little time using the Qualities of the Four Noble Truths as an example: so, let’s say you’re meditating and something stressful comes up—a thought which causes you suffering or unsatisfactoriness:

i) Recognize the thought and feeling—”This is stress”

ii) Remember that all phenomena have a cause: what is the cause of this stress? What is making you suffering?

iii) Remember, there is a cause, and that cause can be eliminated from here on out.

iv) How are you going to remove that cause of suffering; what will be a cause of joy?

4) Remember, the ‘cause’ of suffering often lies not in the event or thought itself, but in some sort of attachment we have. Suffering stems from when the world is one way, and we want it to be another.

i) If you know you can change the situation (ie: It’s hot, so I’ll take my sweatshirt off), you really have nothing to worry about.

ii) If you cannot change the situation, worrying will not help you—instead, you should look to remove the attachment

iii) This is the advice of H.H. Dalai Lama.

So, what’s the point of all this?

- 1) Ultimately, the point of all this is that once we leave the meditation cushion, mindfulness should follow us. The more we are mindful cross-legged, the more we can be mindful in the world.
- 2) We are essentially redirecting all our habits—when a thought or feeling arises, our new habit will become recognizing it. When we have a feeling, a thought, we will think: “Well, why I am feeling this why? I did this thought come about?”
 - i) This enables us to separate ourselves from impulsive thoughts and feelings: instead of becoming our anger, we can recognize what causes anger; instead of being sad, we can recognize what causes sadness.
- 3) Although people seldom believe it, I think that by just *recognizing* why we are suffering, we eliminate a large portion of that suffering.
 - i) People often marvel at the peace and calm great Buddhists have, right? But often times this does not come from a total elimination of negative thoughts immediately, of sadness or being upset, but rather from recognition of these thoughts
 - ii) As the old proverb goes, “Better the Devil you know than the Devil you don’t.”
 - iii) Once we recognize our thoughts and feelings, we can alter them. Much like with curing a disease, we must first realize we’re sick; to cure suffering, we must first see our thoughts, and we must see where suffering comes from.