
Mindfulness and the Mind

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I will be looking at mindfulness in general and then relate it to aspects of Buddhist meditation. Small children hopefully tend to be carefree. This of course can lead to them being care-less, which means that they don't pay attention to what's going on. Hence one of the great duties of any mother is to say *"Watch out! Take care! Haven't I told you....?"* This is basic instruction in mindfulness: look where you are going watch what you're doing. Why is the child not looking where they are going? Because they are caught by an idea. Ideas tend to decontextualise us, to absorb us in such a way that we have little attention left for what is going on around us.

A child might be in the park playing with a ball. Then their parent is taking them home and if the child drops the ball they are going to run after it. However, they are now on the pavement where there are cars nearby. The child's focus of attention is on the ball; they are forgetfulness of their lived context. That's why the adult has to shout to the child, *"Oi. Look out! What are you doing?"* to waken them up from the dream-like state of their fixation on the ball, the object of their desire.

Generally speaking, all forms of neurosis are dreams of fixation, whether it be depression, anxiety, obsessive turns, or the so-called personality disorders. These are all ways of being caught up in something. One can get caught up in memories, in worries about the future, in worries about one's appearance, in worries about what other people think of us... When this occurs the phenomenological field, the immediacy of the presenting of experience, is being mediated through a veil of our habitual tendencies. We don't see very clearly but we do not recognise this because once we get used to wearing these dark glasses, we think that what we see is how things actually are. If someone develops agoraphobia, for example, they become convinced that if they leave

where they're living, something awful will happen. Although they can see out the window that other people are walking about safely, this doesn't interrupt their conviction that something dreadful will happen to them if they go out.

From this point of view, you could say that kind of neurotic turn is a state of distraction from the actual. With the arising of anxiety, changes in breathing, in skin tension and so on are taken to be true signs of actual danger and this misleading interpretation is taken as an absolute truth. Believing this, there is an automatic distraction from any evidence that would put it into question. We trust our experience but our experience is governed from a position of extreme individualisation. The people I see walking out on the street have two arms and two legs; I stay inside my flat also with two arms and two legs, but if I were to walk over to the front door and open it and step out, these legs of mine would collapse. Because I have a different kind of legs! Other people have wonderful legs. Mine are wobbly, rubbery legs. Because I know this to be a fact, your encouragement to get me to cross the threshold is a punishment and a danger.

This is the nature of the world that most of us live in. Maybe not with such extreme intensity however the open field of life is closed to us by our own presuppositions. We are imprisoned within our thought constructions.

In the modern usage of mindfulness, the idea is to encourage people to be more aware of the actual status of whatever beliefs are arising for them. It starts by calming our mind through giving focused attention to a simple object. The first thing we realise is that thoughts are always moving. We see that there is a tension or contradiction between the messenger and the message. A thought such as "*I can't*" arises. This passes very quickly. The lived phenomenology of the arising of the thought is that it is a transient phenomenon which has no power to remain in the mind. Nor do we have the power to keep it in our mind. Yet the message, the semantic content of the thought, seems to be eternal. "*I can't, I told you before. Why don't you just understand, I can't!*" The presentation of the semantic structure, whether it comes as a thought in our head or as words coming out of our mouth, is in its very nature, transient. However, it establishes a feeling tone. The feeling tone may be experienced as intense, but actually it is like morning mist in a valley. You can walk through the mist since it lacks substance but if you look at the mist, it appears to block your way. That is to say, it is the quality of interpretation that I bring to my thoughts which blinds me to their evanescence.

By becoming more attentive to the actuality of thought, by looking clearly rather than believing, one can start to see that the walls of our prison are not made of stone.

They are made of clouds or dreams. Their power to captivate me is the power that *I* have to allow myself to be captivated by them.

Most people get anxious thoughts from time to time. What makes this a clinical issue or not is how much credence, how much belief, we have in these thoughts nor how seriously we take them to be. In the summertime it is very nice to lie outside in the fields and to look at the clouds going by. You can see an elephant, a train, a dragon... you can see all sorts of things passing across the sky. There is an experience: it doesn't linger in the world yet we can hang on to it. The thoughts in the mind are very similar: once we believe something, it takes on a truth. However, it's not the truth of the object; it's the truth of the subject. *"If we get a lot of immigrants here in our country it will destroy our culture"*, or *"If we get a lot of immigrants here in our country it will enrich our culture."* We can notice that each of these divergent views can energise people very strongly. Human culture is the play of ideas and so the management of ideas is very important. If we had no thoughts, no ideas, we are going to be paralysed; but if we believe our own ideas very strongly we are going to become stupid.

How to maintain that position of dynamic enquiry, of not knowing in relation to mental phenomena? If we sit inside an identity which is constructed out of ideas, then we will increase our anxiety when we put that construction into question. Whatever we take ourselves to be is a transient formation taken as a true indication of something enduring. When the transience of all phenomena, outer and inner, is ignored, then we abide in a fragile self-deception. Events occur which disturb the beliefs and habits we have constructed our life around. Fortunately, we are used to talking ourselves into existence. Language is the sea that we swim in. Our sense of ourselves is inseparable from the thoughts that we have internally and the words that come out of us. The way other people speak to us can make us feel happy and relaxed or anxious and uptight. We are labile and our moods move very quickly.

The self, our sense of who we are, is not a fixed thing, it's always a work in progress. Existence is dynamic. We are full of potential and the world around us is full of potential. Relating these two together means that we don't quite know what's happening. When this not-knowing is not embraced as the simple truth itself, neurosis can arise as an answer to this existential uncertainty because neurosis gives you something definite to say about yourself such as, *"I am depressed."* We can sit in that bubble, and it will act as a protection against the world. When we get caught up in neurosis we are so preoccupied that we have a kind of buffer zone around us which muffles the impact of the invitations of the evolving world.

To allow the world to be fresh, and allow ourselves to be fresh, we have to find a way of working with circumstances. Our anxiety arises from our fantasy of agency, our felt sense that we have the capacity to make things happen. We have certain governing beliefs such as 'I exist' and perhaps, 'I am a good person', or 'I am a bad person'. These core beliefs sit at the seat of power, maintaining the edifice of an enduring sense of self. The desire to hang on to our sense of what we are brings us to live in a state of false consciousness rather than step out into an unknown exploration.

Mindfulness practice can open us to a site of enquiry which is non-conceptual. Instead of being a construct of thoughts and memories and intentions, we find ourselves present as the clarity of focused attention. Then no matter what I am looking at, because there is more separation and perspective, the actual configuration of the occurrence is being revealed through my attention and is no longer destabilising my sense of self.

When we relax, we find ourselves as part of the unfolding field itself. What is required is elicited from us by the movement of the field. It's a bit like learning to swim. At first you are trying too hard, attacking the water, whereas the water is actually your friend. If you are a friendly with the water, it will support you. In a similar way, we can start to feel the basic goodwill that is present in all people and this creates an ambience within which there is the free flow of interactive energy.

We are a flow of experience unfolding in time. Normally we take it that I am the experiencer, and you are what I experience. I am here talking with you. I see your faces and shapes and I also see my hands moving around. I am also aware of the sound of my voice. That is to say, I experience myself and I experience you, and all this is a unified field of experience. My embodied being is within the field of experience. I am not the subject looking at objects. I certainly cannot have objective knowledge about you because moment by moment how I am revealed to myself, and how you are revealed to me, is shifting and changing. There is a showing; everything is showing. Who is it shown to? A moment of our own self. This is an unrepeatable moment and the self that is present as part of the experience is unrepeatable. The revelation of life is precise and ungraspable. How it is depends on how you are.

In the dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, mindfulness means to be mindful of the unborn or immediate clarity of the moment before thought. A mirror is not defined by the quality of the reflection in it. Mirrors offer an infinite hospitality; they are always available and without bias. Our selective attention, by its very nature, is bringing certain aspects of the field forward and receding other aspects in order to maintain the

unfolding topology of our sense of our self and of the world. These two aspects, infinite hospitality and selective attention, are not in contradiction. Our selective attention is revealed to us because of the clarity of the mind itself.

So first of all we need to start to be mindful of who is the one who is seeing, who is the one who is talking, sleeping, eating and so on. Clearly for each of us we answer, "I am!" So what is this 'I'? The 'I' refers to two aspects. It refers to the nexus of self-identification. So each of us could tell many stories about ourselves, demonstrating the narrative discursive sense of the ego self. However, 'I' also refers to simply the one who is looking, and in that looking, seeing, listening, hearing... – a simple presence with no self-defining content.

Our ego consciousness wants to move towards this unfolding domain and mark it out in terms of its existing body of knowledge. This is how we create more of the same. Whether it is neurotic or reasonably successful, it is a dualistic structure in which we project what we know and then are reassured when things are as we know them to be. At first when we practise, it can seem that open awareness and ego-self involved consciousness are two different orders of experience. Yet if we simply settle into the intrinsic openness of the mind, we find that the movements of ego consciousness generate self-dissolving patterns one of which is the current formation of ego-self.

Mental activity cannot create real entities. Although we believe in ourselves and in our world this belief does not grant them real existence. When this becomes clear then we see that intrinsic awareness and ego-selective consciousness are non-dual. They are not two things. In fact they are not things at all. They are modes of the brightness of our mind as it is in itself.

The mirror receives; the reflection is the sign that it has received. Awareness is like the mirror, open, undefended, untouched by whatever occurs. Selective attention is part of the interplay of reflection as subject and object arise in mutual influence. Applying this to ourselves, we find that learning to receive without anxious defensiveness or appropriation can be quite difficult. The principle meditation instruction is to stay open with whatever is arising: don't merge into it and don't keep it at a distance either. The mirror offers infinite hospitality to what it is representing. It is not keeping the image at a distance, the mirror is open and empty enough to show the reflection as if it was itself. You will never actually see a mirror as mirror. The mirror shows itself by showing what it is not, as if it is what it is not. It both is and is not the reflection. Similarly the mind both is and is not its content.

Our mind is open and empty and its clarity is not a thing. It is not a construct built up by exercises or experience or learning from books. The mind is the revealer, the showing function, and what is shown is the inseparability of what we take to be inside and what we take to be outside. For example, we are sitting here together and we all have thoughts, feelings and sensations going on inside. Outside there are colours and shapes and noises. These aspects show themselves simultaneously. Sometimes the tilt of our attention is inside, sometimes it is outside, but essentially outside and inside are inseparable and simultaneous. How we are in our connection with other people is part of what is going on; it is our mode of participation. How I am talking just now is not how I always talk: these words are evoked by this circumstance, by this context. This is true for all of us all the time.

The level of mindfulness which encourages relaxing and opening and seeing that all the outer and inner phenomena are moving moment by moment frees us from the delusion of being a thing in a world of things. We awaken to the way in which we are moving like seaweed in the ocean, pulsating with the rhythms which are all around us. This is wonderful because it keeps us very fresh and changing. Life is not boring or stale because nothing is ever the same. We become timeless and we are time; we live precisely here in the unfolding moment. This is not time as a kind of road or pathway that we move up and down at different speeds trying to co-ordinate all the aspects of our diary. Paradoxically, because we are more relaxed and open and because we are in time as time there is always time, and so ordinary activities get done.

Relaxing our preoccupations, we can see that we are pluralistic, multiple. Our self is not a fixed definable entity. It exists as a potential which can reveal itself in many different ways. En-roling and de-roling is the pulse of life. With this we can manifest in many different modes. We can be adaptable and connective, which is the basis of compassion.

Being mindful of the deep openness which is the root of our potential to arise in many different forms, we awaken to the three aspects of our presence: our basic presence which is open and empty; the variegated luminous radiance of that openness; and thirdly, the unique specificity of each moment of our existence. No moment or occurrence is ever repeated. Our time here together is almost gone. This is our life; the colour of the leaves is beginning to change, so where are we, if we are not here, not now?