

The Eightfold Noble Path

-- Right Awareness

Sometimes I think the translation of the word "mindfulness" is incorrect in two ways. Right Mindfulness is a step of the Eightfold Path and is the centerpoint of Buddhist practice. First, it's not a good translation because "mindfulness" is kind of an insipid word. "Be mindful" -- what does that mean? It doesn't have the kind of inspiring quality of spaciousness, courage, or living fully. Perhaps if you pronounced it differently and said, mindfulness, that would be a better understanding of the word and its power. But a more fundamental difficulty in even talking about mindfulness, whatever that means for us, is that the mind and the heart are the same word in Sanskrit or Pali. So perhaps a better word would be "heartfulness" -- live in a heartfelt way. Forget about this mind stuff all together. You could do without a lot of it, if you haven't noticed.

The Buddha very often said that mindfulness was the heart or the essence of his practice -- to be heedful or aware -- that was the road to liberation and to the deathless, to freedom from even birth and death; that is, freedom from being caught in the cyclic nature of things, stepping outside the cycle of things.

What does "mindfulness" mean to us sitting here as a group. We sat for an hour this evening or a little bit less, but for those of you who have attended regularly, we've been sitting here for a year doing something supposedly related to paying attention and being mindful. What does it mean? What are the qualities of it, what are we doing here? We sit, we pay attention to the breath, or our body sensations, or the sounds, or the people walking by, or the various thoughts and images in our mind.

To be mindful first means simply to come into the present -- to listen with our senses, with our heart, with our physical body, with our ears, with our eyes, to what is actually here in the present; the body, the heart and the mind. It's that thing I've spoken of many times before, the sign from the casino in Las Vegas, "You must be present to win." In Las Vegas, in therapy, in meditation, it's all the same thing. In order to awaken or to use our life in a skillful way, the first task is to get here, to start to live in the present moment, which means not living so much in our fantasies, in the future, not living so much in the past, in our images and memories, and reliving things that are gone already.

The first is learning to be present, which itself is a very wonderful thing, because "here" and "now" and "in the present" are the only places that we can appreciate life to begin with. Otherwise, it's kind of second-hand, what happened a few years ago -- that's a nice memory -- or what we fantasize about. Where can you really appreciate this life we're given? Only in the present.

Also, there is something else which interests a lot of people and can only be found in the present, and that is love. If you want to love a person or you want to be loved -- some of you perhaps know

anyway, right? -- where does love take place? Or "when" is a better question. Again, it's a nice memory, "Gee, I was in love once or twice" -- or more in some of your cases. It was very nice. It evokes a nice thing to remember it. Or it's in the future, "Oh, if only I could meet that right wonderful person," or "this person that I live with," or "this family," or whatever, "if they would change so they would become right, then I could fall in love all over again with them or be happy with them." The only place that you can really love a person or be loved is in the present. No other possibility for it. All the rest is fantasy.

Also in the present comes the possibility of touching our intuition, of creativity, of clarity; all kinds of things. So the first aspect of awareness is simply learning in some way to live more fully here in our present reality. If you learn nothing else from meditation practice than that, you get your money's worth -- especially since there's no charge.

Secondly, mindfulness or heartfulness mean seeing clearly. It means non-grasping, non-greed, non-hatred, it means not pushing away, and it means not going to sleep, but seeing what is present for us. Bare attention, remembering, being in the present, without trying to change it somehow, which is a hard thing to learn because we're generally planning on what we're going to make this something into next. But then what happens? We end up doing that all the time and missing all the somethings that are here, always waiting for the next one.

Mindfulness is really a way of learning to see what is here in a very clear way. People talk about learning mystical things in meditation or spiritual life. There is nothing more mystical, or startling, or bizarre, or amazing, than what is right in front of us. In my days I've done a lot of strange things. I've been to a lot of different countries on this planet, and observed *saddhus* on beds of nails in India, and strange animals in other parts of the world, and in my early days I took a number of the various kinds of psychedelics and drugs one could take, and have had all kinds of realms and weird experiences, and all kinds of things in meditation. I have never encountered a realm as peculiar, or bizarre, or as interesting as this one.

Someone said:

The mystery of life is not a problem to solve,
or something that you find somewhere else,
but it's a reality to experience here.

We went to the zoo with the baby on Sunday. If you landed on some weird planet, and then you saw pygmy hippopotamuses or 300 pound ostriches and really wrinkled elephants -- Did you ever look at elephant skin? Just amazing! -- or the kind of snakes that are there, or sloths hanging upside down, you would say you had come by your spaceship to a really peculiar planet. And yet we forget that. We start to take it all for granted. It all becomes very ordinary, and it's not. If you attend a birth, it's an amazing thing to see a baby being born out of a human body. How does that happen? How does it get in there? I know you know how it gets in there. But I mean, how does it really get in there? Like the ship in the bottle. An incredible thing happens in there, the baby coming out of a woman. And we take it for granted.

So to pay attention means to somehow have a newer or a fresher vision, to see clearly. It means to stop our judging and our planning and just see what's here, which is part of what we do in meditation; to stop and not judge a single thing; let it be exactly how it is. Let God take over for a little while and run the show rather than our minds, which get very tired, and very full, and very busy anyway, and need a rest.

Someone said:

The classic question is: If you pay attention and you don't judge, then how do you live in the world? What part of attention or awareness is that?

That's called *sampajanna*. *Sati* is mindfulness, *sampajanna* means clear or right comprehension. It means not only do you pay attention to what's here, but then when you act in your life you also look at the context, at the suitability or the intention of it; what is present. When you act, you first have to see what's here, and then some intuition, or inspiration, or thought arises, "I'll do this or do that." It's to pay attention to where your heart is, what motivates you, what the intention and the purpose of your action is, so that you pay attention but you also note the context.

The way Joseph, my colleague and friend, answers the question when people say, "When you just pay attention and note 'lifting, moving, placing' in the walking, or the in and out of the breathing, how can you live?" He said, "Well, I was doing my lifting, moving, placing one day on a road in India near the Burmese temple where I lived, just moving my feet and paying attention, and all of a sudden I heard 'clang, clang' of the bells, and I recognized it. I knew what those bells were. I looked up and sure enough the elephant that lived in town was coming down the road right towards me. I noted 'hearing, hearing' and 'seeing, seeing'; then I noticed the intention to move out of the way arise, and then I walked out of the way."

So there are two parts. The first is seeing what is here, living in the reality of the present, and then responding to it wisely, being aware of the situation that we're in.

At times this year I've talked in this class about another aspect of awareness which I think is really important to remember in our lives, and that is the very interesting question of why we don't pay attention; why do we go to sleep, why do we drive on automatic pilot, why do we eat three meals a day, two-thirds or three-quarters or ninety percent of it on automatic pilot? Why do we live so much not here? It's a pretty interesting question, maybe even more interesting than saying, "One should pay attention or live in the present." How come we don't?

There's a story:

When Krushchev pronounced his famous denunciation of Stalin, someone in the Russian Congress Hall was reported to have said, "And where were you, Comrade Krushchev, when all these innocent people were being slaughtered?" Krushchev paused, looked around the hall, and said, "Will the man who said that kindly stand up?"

Tension mounted in the hall. No one moved. Finally Krushchev said, "Well, whoever you are, you have your answer now. I was in exactly the same position then that you are in now."

Why is it that we don't pay attention? One reason is fear, that if we actually come into the present, there are certain things we have to deal with that we haven't had to in our lives. For some people it's boredom. We're really afraid of being bored. For some it's loneliness. For some it's grieving, something in their hearts that's not finished. So it's better to distract yourself, see a lot of movies, talk to people, keep yourself busy, stay on the phone, and keep yourself working, so you don't have to feel certain things.

Another reason we don't stay awake is habit. You could be very peaceful, not have any grieving to do, and be comfortable being alone, and so forth, but it's like there's this huge flywheel inside. And there you are. It's a quiet day, you're just sitting down in the park, and all of a sudden out of nowhere you start thinking about what you'll do next week or next year, making plans, and playing back memories, because there's this powerful habit of thinking. It takes training to kind of release the clutch and let it slow down. That's part of what meditation is about.

Also, pain is another reason, because if you live in the reality of the present moment, what do you experience? Up and down, light and dark, night and day, and pleasure and pain. And if you don't like pain which a lot of people don't -- understandably -- then what you have to do is manufacture some fantasy, to live in a lot of thought and busy-ness so you don't feel it. However, you rob yourself of something very, very important when you do it, which is that you rob your life of living, of heartfulness, of fullness, of vitality, of your existence.

To live in the present means that you have to face your boredom and your loneliness when they come. They're not there all the time, and they're not so bad actually when you come to terms with them. They're a little scary but they're not so terrible. And you have to face the fact that there is this habit of greed, and hatred, and fantasy, sort of a machine that spins out thoughts out the habit of it. So you have to be willing to be aware of pain as well as pleasure. But if you are, the rewards are fantastic, because then you can really experience being with another person, walking down the beach, taking a walk in the park, walking outside and seeing the stars.

It's really very interesting to start to pay attention to when we go on automatic pilot. If you were to look at something in your meditation, rather than trying to be aware, try to be mindful of when it is that you go to sleep, what it is that's hard for you to be aware of. That is something that is quite interesting to learn about. Use it as a signal. "I haven't been very mindful today. I wonder what's going on? I haven't been very mindful this week. I wonder why? What's happening? Oh, I'm sad. It's hard to be sad, so I have to keep myself busy," or "This thing is coming up that's difficult to deal with, so I think a lot and plan, rather than just notice that it's really hard." We learn somehow to find the center in the moment rather than toppling forward or into the past.

If you let yourself do that, then everything stops. And one of the most wonderful things about awareness or heartfulness or mindfulness is that it allows us to come to rest, because there's really only one place to rest, which is in the present.

We're householders, we're not monks and nuns. And the question often asked is: In order to be mindful does it mean we have to talk slowly and sit many hours a day and go into an ashram or some monastery? How can we bring mindfulness, heartfulness, wisdom here into our lives? How do you do that? Well, of course, as I said in the past few weeks, sometimes you do have to look at your life and see if you want to slow it down a little bit, if it's crazy, if it's real busy. Because our culture is a little bit mad in that way, you might need to take a look and see, "Gee, is it time to stop doing a few things, to make a little more space, to slow down?"

Fundamentally, "mindfulness" means to learn to be aware where we are. If not here, where else? If not now, when? Mindfulness is the opposite of "if only," it's the opposite of hope, it's the opposite of expectation. It has in it a certain kind of contentment, not that one might not choose to change the world, but a kind of acceptance that this is really what we get, these sights, these sounds, these smells, these tastes, these perceptions. This is it! Then in another moment, there will be another "it." It's not something else. "I know that this is all it is, but this is it." When one accepts it, then one can come to rest.

Mindfulness in a way is the opposite of grasping, or attachment, or identification. And it can go very, very deep when we allow ourselves, because what we start to see -- if we slow down a little bit and pay attention -- is how it is a kind of conditioned phenomenon, like a machine, the mind spins this stuff out in a very orderly way by habit -- thoughts, fantasies and memories. The world works in certain conditioned patterns, and that's its nature, and it's all impermanent and quite ungraspable. Where is yesterday? What happened to your weekend? Where is it? What happened to 1984, your 20's, or whatever it was -- maybe you're 20 now. For some of you, your 20's, 30's, 40's and 50's, where did they go? They all disappeared, gone. Isn't that an amazing thing?

It's a very profound thing to start to be aware of life coming out of nothing and disappearing into nothing. A day appears for awhile, and then it's gone. It can't be grasped, it's like a bird flying. You cannot hold time and fundamentally you can't hold yourself.

So the spirit of mindfulness is learning to live in an awake way. As the Buddha said, "I'm not a man, I'm not a God. I'm none of these things. I'm awake." How can I convey the spirit of this? There are songs from the monks and nuns who lived after the Buddha died that are in these poems. If you read *The Rigatha*, the songs of the sisters, there are many enlightenments that take place while they're walking through the forest. One nun is in the forest talking about how happy she is that she doesn't have to do housework anymore and she drops a cup or something like that on the ground, maybe it breaks, and all of a sudden she's enlightened. She says, "Oh, that's how it is." Things arise for a while and then they pass away. If you can accept that and see that -- each day, each moment, with each person, to experience what's there -- and then leave it and go to the next, you can live in a deeply free way. So it really has the spirit of aliveness to it.

In the monastery it was beautiful. We had all these rules, 227 major precepts and then some hundreds of minor precepts, and then they told you how to fold your robe, which side of the bowl you should put down, and how you should clean it properly. Even how to pee. There is a particular way monks are supposed to pee. You're supposed to squat down, you can't stand up, and you can't pee into water where there are obvious living things or on plants because you might harm them, and

things like that. At first when I read this, I said, "Well, what's the difference if I squat down? Nobody is looking, first of all. These rules are dumb." But after awhile of living them, in this beautiful forest monastery, where there wasn't anything else to do besides meditating and following the rules, which would drive you crazy initially, what you began to see is that somehow they brought you to see that everything was precious, that everything was worth caring for; that it mattered where you peed, that you could pee on the ground and not on a bush, and not harm it; or that it mattered how you took care of your bowl, which was one of your very few possessions. It was a gift from people who said, "We want to support you because we think that monasteries and what you're doing is valuable in the world and reminds all of us of something precious. So we'll give you a bowl."

You take care with your bowl, you take care with your robe, you take care with your car, you take care with your house, you take care with your clothes, because to be aware in some way means to remember the preciousness of life and to begin to take care with the earth and all the creatures and things on it. It's to be aware of ourselves and our bodies, of our actions, to be aware politically, to be aware economically, to be aware socially as well.

Imagine if you were told that you have some disease, let's say AIDS because there's a lot of it that's happening, and it's both scary to people and very immediate and present, and real important to look at. Someone said, "Well, at best you have four years, maybe you have a year to go." How would you start to live that year? Things would change for you, I assure you. Your life would become a lot more alive and precious for you. Or imagine that you've been in prison for a long time, as people are in many, many countries of the world. Amnesty International said that 55 countries have political prisoners who are imprisoned and often tortured because of religious views. The majority of the large countries on the earth imprison people for what they think. It's really painful. And then you were let out after a long time in prison, how would it be just to walk down the street in San Anselmo? What would the trees be like? Just the experience of being free, watching the cars, being able to go into a confectionery store and order any kind of sweet that you wanted, or just seeing the sky and feeling the air and being able to decide whether you're going to go down the block to the right or to the left. It's that spirit of heartfulness, of mindfulness that it comes to. It's not so much that you're supposed to be tedious about it at all, but it's somehow much more the spirit of an appreciation of life and of seeing it in a clear way.

I remember when I was seven years old I spent a whole summer in bed. I had this kind of infection and I couldn't leave the house. And then when it ended and I finally could go out, I was given something like a dollar, which seemed like a lot of money at that time, and I went and I bought a ball and some bubble stuff, and I went to this big park near my house. It was like being let out of prison for a kid being in the house for a whole summer. I was so happy. To this day I remember the sun was shining, I could blow my bubbles and turn cartwheels and throw my ball and do anything I felt like. It was so wonderful. In some ways, that's part of the spirit of bringing awareness to our life. It also means, as I said, that we have to be willing to face that which is difficult, to open to what Zorba called "the whole catastrophe," and to appreciate it in some way. It's really quite a trip.

So first it means to take care with the earth, to learn that awareness means to receive, to see the preciousness of things. Secondly, then it allows our world to teach us, to let it teach you very simple

truths which are the most important. For example, one monk went to his master after a long time of training and begged the teacher to give him enlightenment. The master led him over to a bamboo grove. He said, "See that bamboo there, how tall it is? See that one over there, see how short it is?" And the monk was enlightened.

Things will teach us when we see them afresh, when we see them anew. We see them for a minute, we see the ungraspability of anything, of our own bodies -- they change -- of our thoughts, of our feelings, not to speak of the people and the things around us. -- changing, ungraspable. And that they do. Sometimes they're big and sometimes they're small. That's the way that things are. It teaches us the preciousness of life. When we pay attention we can learn. We can learn from our families. We can learn when our hearts are closed and when they're open. We can learn what it means to be attached, what it means to let go and be freer. We can learn about all the forces in the mind. We can learn about doubt and fear and anger, through awareness. We can learn about love and kindness through attention. It's really universal. We can learn to play tennis in a better way.

To train ourselves to be aware is the gift of the Buddha. He said: Here, I'll give you a gift that can make life come alive for you, that can bring both happiness and freedom. And it's a very simple thing. Learn to train yourself to live more in the present. Do what it takes to do that in your life. How can we do it? Here we are, householders, right; not like we have all day to sit and walk in some monastery.

Some hints perhaps. First of all, as I've said in previous evenings, one of the most beautiful expressions of awareness comes from Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh where he says: See if you can learn to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes. Usually we wash the dishes in order to get the dishes clean, right, and then we can get on and do something else, right, or talk to someone. Did you ever do anything like that, where you just did it in order to do it? Maybe we let ourselves do that on vacation. You go hiking in the Sierras, and if you're not too driven -- "Can I get to this camp site by this hour," or something -- and you let go of that a little bit, you just walk along the mountains in order to be walking, everything becomes what it is. It's beautiful.

That's the first hint, to start to take some things in our lives and do them for their own sake. Does that make sense to you? Another way is to listen with your heart a little bit more, to try to pay attention to what it's like when you're with people, and see if you can let your words come out of your heart, to say really what you feel inside, what you care about, and to listen with your heart rather than your mind. That's a very good way to wake up; especially the people you live with -- your kids, your spouse, family, and things like that.

People say, "How can you be mindful at work? I'm a writer," or "I'm a mathematician." These are some of the questions I get at retreats. "How do you do math mindfully? You have to think and ruminate." Or, how do you write mindfully, or watch a movie? The best I have been able to come to in that is that when you write, just write; when you watch a movie, just watch the movie; when you read, just read. Not writing and also thinking how people will view it when you're done writing, and planning, and seeing how many more minutes you have to write, and so forth. Just be present for the writing. It doesn't mean to think or be in some special mode. Just do what you do. Not so complicated. When you do math, do math.

Of course, sometimes it gets a little more complicated than that, and at retreats I've often told the story of Zen master Soen-Sa-Nim who generally teaches his great Zen teachings, "When you walk, just walk; when you're hungry, eat; when you're sitting, just sit." So there he was at the breakfast table eating breakfast and reading the paper. Students who saw this were very upset. "You know, you're the Zen master. You tell us, 'When you eat, just eat,' and here you are eating and reading. How do you explain this?" He said, "Very simple. When you eat and read, just eat and read."

The spirit of it is not so complicated. It's not to make something really false or different about it. It's more the quality of being a bit more where you are. I think that comes from Yoda in Star Wars. Another thing is to remember the power of the act of coming into the present.

I told the story a few weeks ago of Robert Aitken-roshi who wanted to go to Japan to study Zen during the Korean War. It was considered a war zone and people weren't allowed. When he went to the consul or the ambassador who was a very learned and dignified Japanese man, he was told, "I'm sorry, we just can't have visitors; it's war time. The American government doesn't want it and the Japanese government is following that." The ambassador offered tea. It was very nice. He said, "Why do you want to do that? I mean, there's this war we have to stop." He took his cup of tea and he picked it up and he drank it very carefully and silently, and then he looked at the ambassador and said, "Taking a cup of tea I stopped the war." With that the ambassador was wise and he understood that, and he arranged a visa for him to go to Japan to study.

What we do, if we do it with our full heart and our full being, is a way of bringing the planet back into balance. All you have to do is look at the news or read Time or Newsweek; it's crazy. And it's crazy because it's all mind and thought and going in circles and it's not connected with the heart and the earth. Taking a walk you stop the war, taking a cup of tea, sitting a little bit every day, you stop the nuclear arms race because you let yourself get quiet and feel the earth and the air, and then your actions and your vibrations and the effect you have on other people, and maybe even the concerns that you act out politically, all come from that connection with yourself and with the earth around you.

I have a good friend who is lawyer from Harvard Law School, a very fine lawyer. He sits through lots of meetings. He said he has really learned to work with his breath. Communication is kind of redundant. You could probably tune in on every tenth sentence and get most of the meaning of things. He is really in love. He says, "I love my breath. It's much better than what goes on in the meetings." So you can use your meditation in grocery stores standing in line waiting for checkout, or traffic jams. Wonderful times to meditate.

I remember sitting at my teacher's cottage. He sort of sat in a little chair, and people would sit around and he would receive visitors. I was sitting there and waiting for him. It was a really hot day. Usually they had iced coffee on a very hot day in the tropics. Iced coffee is first so good because it's so cool and delicious; and the Thai coffee is half sugar. And secondly, since you don't eat except one meal in the morning, to have a big glass of dark iced coffee filled with sugar is like about three or four hours of caffeine and sugar stimulation before it wears off. It's great sitting. It was a great drug for sitting, there's no question about it. I was kind of in the doldrums. "I've swept my cottage, now I'll go over and I'll sit and I'll wait." And on hot days like this, if the teacher sees a lot of people

sitting around, he says, "Okay, you can bring some iced coffee for these poor starving monks," or whatever. So we sat. I kept thinking about how I was going to go back and meditate. I'd get to my cottage and then after I had it, for two or three hours I would be very alert and awake, and I'm kind of sitting there sweaty and hot and a little bit depressed and just waiting and waiting and waiting. He must have known it, and I'm waiting and waiting. Hours go by and other people come by and I'm waiting and waiting. I think, "God, when am I going to get this wonderful coffee so that it will perk me up and I can really meditate?" Waiting, waiting. It never came. Finally, it became real clear after a lot of hours of waiting; waiting to meditate. I was sitting there doing nothing. When are we going to meditate? "I'll do it when I get to the sitting, then I'll meditate," or "I'll do it tomorrow." Somehow it's to remember that it's here in the present we're talking about.

In some way, mindfulness means coming back to our real home, coming to rest in the present. It is our real home. And our real home is not connected with grasping, our feelings, our bodies, our thoughts, our images, or all the things that are changing -- but it's the ease that we can find in being with up and down, light and dark, and all of this duality which is changing. With an open heart, with heartfulness, with mindfulness, being with it as it is, then receiving it and deciding, if we will, what things to choose to respond to in a wise or compassionate way.

This is Don Juan to Carlos Casteneda:

For me the world is incredible because it is mysterious, awesome, stupendous, unfathomable. My interest has been to convince you that you must learn to make every act count in this marvelous world, in this marvelous time, I've tried to convince you. You must realize that you are going to be here for only a short while. In fact, too short for witnessing all the marvels of it. I wanted to convince you that you must learn to make every act count.

The spirit of awareness or mindfulness really means coming into our life, into the physical senses, into the feelings, into the movement of mind, and into the heart, and living each day from our heart. What do we care about? Taking a concern and a care for the preciousness of the earth. In the end what one discovers is that mindfulness and love are the same thing. To be aware, without grasping or resisting or trying to change -- to receive what's here -- is to love it; that they're not really separate, that the heart and the mind come together. Or as one of my teachers said: The mind creates the abyss and the heart crosses it. The mind creates distinctions, and coming into the present, into the heart, resolves all of that.

The talk in a way is a reminder. Let me ask you a few questions as a way of ending. First of all, what keeps you, what keeps each of us from really paying attention in our lives, from living more fully? Just think about it as I ask. What fear or difficulty in your life keeps you from living here in the present? What illusion or misunderstanding in your life keeps you from living here in the present? What would you have to do to make your life really support living mindfully? What would you have to change to make a real support for this mindfulness or this heartfulness? What would you have to change in your life to allow yourself to love more fully? And the last question is to ask in your heart should you make those changes. See what it said. Generally, it has a good answer.

Even mindfulness, however, cannot be grasped. There are days when you're going to be more mindful and days when you're less mindful. And it too, like all things, comes and goes. What you can do is nourish and find ways. That's what we do together here. We sit together, sometimes we have discussions and questions, sometimes I talk to myself out loud and you get to participate, sort of listen to it. It is a way to remind ourselves that there's something really precious. Spiritual life is pretty simple. It's not easy but it's pretty simple.