

Andrea Fella-10-14-09



This is the fourth of five talks by Andrea Fella on **Practice in Daily Life**, learning about tools that support our daily life practice.

When you forget to be mindful, recommit. Be patient.

*"Just as when an ocean-going ship, rigged with masts & stays, after six months on the water, is left on shore for the winter: Its stays, weathered by the heat & wind, moistened by the clouds of the rainy season, easily wither & rot away."*

*Nava Sutta: The Ship (SN 22.101)*

We are often caught up in our habits, and feel like we have no control. However, as we practice mindfulness, we find we can lower the threshold of consciousness, so that things that took place in the subconscious, the things we were not aware of, we now notice. As we become more aware, we can detect the points where we start to choose our reactions. Things that previously had happened on a subconscious level, begin to surface and bring themselves to our attention earlier. We can then be aware of where our reactions are coming from and the choices we are making. These choices often appear as an intention.

### **Intention and Motivation**

Intention is a subtle shift of the mind that precedes any act of body, speech or mind. We can know we are going to move before we move. We can know we are going to speak

before we speak. Even more subtly, we can even know we are going to think before we think, or know we are inclining towards an emotion before it appears

In and of itself, intention is a neutral event – it is simply an energetic impulse, sometimes felt in the body, sometimes felt as a thought or leaning in the mind – it is the sense of knowing something is going to happen. Sometimes teachers call it the “*about to*” moment. We know something is about to happen. Accompanying that about to moment, there is always a reason for the action: the motivation behind the action.

In that place of knowing that something is going to happen before it actually occurs, we have a chance to see the motivation behind the action. We may be motivated out of compassion, or anger or greed, or perhaps out of simply necessity.

Seeing how often our intentions and motivations are less than skillful can be distressing, at times. This is not intended to be a practice that you judge yourself over, but rather one that helps you to learn from your experience.

With the mindfulness exercises you are doing throughout the day (as discussed in previous talks), as your mindfulness begins to connect directly with the activity, you might start to recognize that you know we are going to do something before you do it. This is seeing the intention! In that moment, you might also be able to see the motivation – why are you going to do it?

When you find that particular motivations lead to pain and suffering, for yourself or for others, you have the choice to let go *before* you take action, if you are keeping track of your motivations.

The present moment is the only place where we can act, where we can choose how to respond to what life presents us with. The past is gone; it doesn't exist, except as memories in our mind in the present moment. The future doesn't exist, except as thoughts, in the present moment, about what might happen. All that exists is this very moment, brought about by a whole mix of causes and conditions, most of which were out of our control. How we respond to this very moment is our choice, it is actually the only thing we have a choice about, ever.

The Buddha taught that this choice point is the key to happiness. If we can see this choice point, we have a higher likelihood of choosing to respond in ways that will lead to happiness. One of the aspects of this teaching, though, is that while we have some control over our choice in the present moment, the results of our actions are out of our control. We need to let go of needing specific outcomes from our actions. We can't control the way others will respond to our actions.

## **Mindful Speech**

The practice of wise speech is usually phrased in terms of types of speech to avoid. The four types of unwise speech are

- false speech
- divisive speech: Speech that creates division between people
- abusive speech: unfriendly, harsh, hostile speech
- idle chatter: useless, meaningless speech

Our task is not so much to blindly follow these as hard and fast rules, but rather to pay attention when this type of speech comes up, and in particular to see if we can notice the motivation or intention behind the speech.

There may be some gray areas, which we each need to explore and work through on our own.

One exploration of this for me has been regarding idle chatter. I have found that at times, what I might have defined as idle chatter actually serves the purpose to connect people so they can find a way to communicate on a deeper level, and that in actuality, what initially seemed to be idle chatter actually serves a meaningful purpose.

Or another gray area many of us have come across in our lives: we think about lying, perhaps because we feel that it is really in the best interest of the other person to lie,

because it will avoid hurting them. But perhaps what is called for is to see if there is an alternative way to express that caring intention than by lying.

### **Working with Mindful Speech**

- A good place to start mindfulness of speech is simply to see if you can be aware of speaking while you are speaking. Once you can be aware of that, then you can start to look at motivation and intention, and how the conversation is impacting you, emotionally and physically

- Beginning to recognize the conditions in which you have difficulty being mindful while speaking is helpful! There is no need to be self-critical in this situation, use the knowledge you have gained about the conditions that make it difficult: add a little interest to those situations and see what more you can learn.

- Include sending and reading email in this practice of mindful speech. It is an excellent place to see how we respond and react to communications with a much slowed down time frame.

Here are some suggestions for working with mindful speech in your daily lives. See if you can work with them for the next few weeks, and observe for yourself what helps you to be mindful of your speech.

(1) See if you can pause before speaking.

If you can do this, then you have caught the intention to speak, and you have a chance to be mindful for the next few moments of speaking. Sometimes it can be difficult to do this in certain conversations (for example, work conversations where you won't get a chance to speak if you pause.) A suggestion for that situation (from Non-violent communication work) is to rephrase what was last said, as a way to slow down the

conversation -- for example, "As I understand what you just said..." If you remember to do this, you have also caught the intention to speak, and you again have a chance to be mindful in the next few moments of speech.

(2) If you remember to pause, take a moment to recognize whether you know what you are about to say, and also what the motivation is behind it. If you can notice these two things, reflect on whether this is something that you actually do want to say! You have a choice about whether or not to speak at this point.

(3) Try to track whether you are agitated or not agitated while you speak. Rather than trying to keep track of the full range of emotional states while you speak, start with just tracking these two: whether you are agitated or not. Agitation will usually signal something to pay attention to.

(4) If you find it nearly impossible to remember to do the above three exercises throughout your day, see if you can find someone who is willing to practice them with you a few times in the next couple of weeks. Pick a time (say over a lunch-date) that you agree to speak with these considerations in mind.

Play with mindful speech. Explore what helps you remember to practice it. Explore what helps you while you are practicing it.