

Andrea Fella-09-23-09



Andrea Fella has been practicing Insight Meditation since 1996, and, under Gil Fronsdal's guidance, began teaching meditation classes in 2003. She is particularly drawn to intensive retreat practice, and has done a number of long retreats, both in the U.S. and Burma. During one long practice period in Burma, she ordained as a nun with Sayadaw U Janeka. Andrea teaches residential retreats for IMC, and is in the Spirit Rock teacher training program with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein.

This is the first of five talks on Practice in Daily Life, learning about tools that support our daily life practice.

We have all received instructions for meditation or sitting, and how to apply mindfulness in those circumstances. But how do we apply mindfulness in our daily life?

The reason we want to engage in mindfulness practice in our daily life, rather than just during sitting, is that daily life is where we meet suffering. Daily life is where our patterns cause stress and suffering.

Sitting makes mindfulness easier to apply in daily life because it helps break the reactive pattern. The practice of mindfulness in sitting leaks out into our daily life. Meditation and mindfulness uncover patterns and sources of suffering in our lives. Mindfulness makes the patterns more visible.

In mindfulness practice, we pay attention to emotions but we don't react to them. Sometimes we encounter trigger situations, where we seem to explode with reactivity, as if we have no choice and we cannot control it. In trigger situations, things come up through the unconscious, arising and taking hold below our threshold of awareness. By the time we notice, it's too late.

Meditation lowers the threshold, so we can see what is happening sooner and easier. We become more sensitive, and we begin to see things in the moment they happen rather than historically. By seeing things in the moment and paying attention, the sources of reactivity can

be revealed. Once the source is revealed and we see the reaction as it is being formed, we see that we have a choice, while we still have a choice. This is what allows us to turn away from reactivity.

The Pali word for mindfulness is *sati*, which comes from the root word for memory. The trick for mindfulness is to remember to be aware and to pay attention. Mindfulness is like a mirror-mind; it is not thinking, judging, or reacting. Mindfulness is bare attention; it is just watching what is happening in the mirror without analyzing, judging, making decisions, or putting more than just plain awareness on it. You should have about 50% of your awareness on the watching, and 50% on the content.

Cultivating mindfulness in our daily lives is often quite difficult. It seems so difficult to remember to be mindful!

To facilitate cultivating mindfulness in daily life, it is helpful to choose some “projects” to bring mindfulness to. If we try to bring mindfulness to our whole day all at once, we are setting ourselves up to fail.

When we choose specific things that we vow to wake up to, often it takes us quite a while to remember our vow. Hours, if not days, can go by without our recollecting our “project”. The first time we remember our project, we are likely to think we have failed. We think: “It’s been two days, and I haven’t remembered at all, obviously I can’t do this.”

In actuality, when you remember your project for the first time, it means that your mindfulness has begun! In that moment of remembering, take notice of what is happening for you right then and there, and then resolve again to keep trying to “wake up” for your chosen activity.

The first time I explored this in my own practice, I picked two projects, and each became a mindfulness “bell” for me: one was a difficult emotion that felt out of control at that point in my life, the other was a very neutral event that happened regularly throughout my day. The first was anger; the second was switching between DOS and Windows on my computer.

In working with the anger, I found that early on it would take me a while before I remembered I had decided to pay attention to it, and by that time I would be in a full-blown rage. Slowly, over

time, I caught the anger earlier and earlier in the process of its escalation, until I began to see the inclination to anger, before I actually became angry.

With the more neutral event, initially, I often found I remembered quite some time after the event had passed. But even that late recognition was a sign that mindfulness was beginning. Over time, we find we catch these mindfulness “bells” more and more often.

Another way to help bring mindfulness into your daily life is to put mindfulness reminders around your house, choosing strategic places to put a small note to remind you to pay attention, especially if there is a place or activity in which it is difficult to remember to be mindful:

Assignment

For this week, I'd like to suggest that you pick two projects to work with:

1. Pick a simple daily activity that takes several minutes (e.g. brushing teeth, unloading dishwasher, making bed.) Bring a simple, light mindfulness to the activity. Notice your posture, your mood, whether your mind is reacting to the activity, how your breathing is.
2. Pick something that happens regularly in your day and use it as a mindfulness bell. (E.g. closing a window on computer, opening doors.) It is helpful to pick an activity that you initiate, rather than one that is a response to something in your environment. For example, opening a door is an activity that you usually initiate; answering the telephone is a response to something in the environment.
3. Choose a partner to check in with daily with how you are doing. If you can't find a partner, keep a journal.

Instructions

You will find that you will forget to be mindful. That's okay. When you remember that you have forgotten to be mindful, that is the return of mindfulness. Be aware of your state and that mindfulness has returned. This is just like when you are sitting, and you recognize that your

mind has gone off somewhere and you need to come back and be aware of your breath. That is mindfulness.

Every time you remember that you forgot to be mindful, resolve to keep trying.

As you continue to do this, you will find that you will get faster at remembering to be mindful. It will come closer to the experience, and become easier.

Mindfulness doesn't feel like a big deal. It is simple and ordinary, and that is all that is needed. Mindfulness is not something you have to do or work at, it is just being aware, and knowing what's happening while it's happening. You don't have to be aware of every last detail when you are being mindful – just pay attention to the obvious. Mindfulness should be effortless and spontaneous.

Mindfulness is not a lesser practice. It is a major road to liberation and freedom. Staying on it takes practice and resolve.