

Robert Cusick 04-21-2010



Robert has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1997 and is a student of Gil Fronsdal. He trained as a Buddhist monk, under the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw, at Pa Auk Forest Monastery in southern Myanmar (Burma). He also trained in the Soto Zen tradition at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center and with A.H. Almaas (Hameed Ali) in the Diamond Approach (DH6). Before leaving for Burma, Robert participated in the second Buddhist Chaplaincy training offered through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and he completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program (DPP1) at Spirit Rock

Meditation Center. He subsequently served there, upon his return to the U.S., in the role of Retreats Program Manager. Robert is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher.

Mindfulness

Sometimes people confuse mindfulness and Vipassana. This is easy to do, because it is often said that Vipassana meditation cultivates mindfulness.

Vipassana teaches us to see things as they really are. This means we see the three marks of existence:

- Impermanence - all things pass
- *Dhukka* – there is nothing in the material world that can bring long-lasting deep satisfaction. The Buddha said “Whatever is impermanent is subject to change. Whatever is subject to change is subject to suffering.”
- Not-self (*anatta*) – there are no phenomena that can be called “the self”. Our bodies change – they are not the self. Our emotions and thoughts are temporary – they are not the self. We are not our jobs or our possessions.

Mindfulness is a bare awareness of what’s happening when it is happening. In *Mindfulness in Plain English* (http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/mindfulness_in_plain_english.php), the Ven. Henepola Gunaratana tells us:

Mindfulness is mirror-thought. It reflects only what is presently happening and in exactly the way it is happening. There are no biases.

Mindfulness is non-judgmental observation. It is that ability of the mind to observe without criticism. With this ability, one sees things without condemnation or judgment. One is surprised by nothing. One simply takes a balanced interest in things exactly as they are in their natural states. One does not decide and does not judge. One just observes.

It is psychologically impossible for us to objectively observe what is going on within us if we do not at the same time accept the occurrence of our various states of mind. This is especially true with unpleasant states of mind. In order to observe our own fear, we must accept the fact that we are afraid. We can't examine our own depression without accepting it fully. The same is true for irritation and agitation, frustration and all those other uncomfortable emotional states. You can't examine something fully if you are busy reflecting its existence. Whatever experience we may be having, Mindfulness just accepts it. It is simply another of life's occurrences, just another thing to be aware of. No pride, no shame, nothing personal at stake - what is there, is there.

Mindfulness is an impartial watchfulness. It does not take sides. It does not get hung up in what is perceived. It just perceives. Mindfulness does not get infatuated with the good mental states. It does not try to sidestep the bad mental states. There is no clinging to the pleasant, no fleeing

from the unpleasant. Mindfulness sees all experiences as equal, all thoughts as equal, all feelings as equal. Nothing is suppressed. Nothing is repressed. Mindfulness does not play favorites.

Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for Sati is 'bare attention'. It is not thinking. It does not get involved with thought or concepts. It does not get hung up on ideas or opinions or memories. It just looks. Mindfulness registers experiences, but it does not compare them. It does not label them or categorize them. It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis which is based on reflection and memory. It is, rather, the direct and immediate experiencing of whatever is happening, without the medium of thought. It comes before thought in the perceptual process.

Mindfulness is present time awareness. It takes place in the here and now. It is the observance of what is happening right now, in the present moment. It stays forever in the present, surging perpetually on the crest of the ongoing wave of passing time. If you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is memory. When you then become aware that you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is mindfulness. If you then conceptualize the process and say to yourself, "Oh, I am remembering", that is thinking.

Mindfulness is non-egoistic alertness. It takes place without reference to self. With Mindfulness one sees all phenomena without references to concepts like 'me', 'my' or 'mine'. For example, suppose there is pain in your left leg. Ordinary consciousness would say, "I have a pain." Using Mindfulness, one would simply note the sensation as a sensation. One would not tack on that extra concept 'I'. Mindfulness stops one from adding anything to perception, or subtracting anything from it. One does not enhance anything. One does not emphasize anything. One just observes exactly what is there - without distortion.

Mindfulness is goal-less awareness. In Mindfulness, one does not strain for results. One does not try to accomplish anything. When one is mindful, one experiences reality in the present moment in whatever form it takes. There is nothing to be achieved. There is only observation.

Mindfulness is awareness of change. It is observing the passing flow of experience. It is watching things as they are changing. It is seeing the birth, growth, and maturity of all phenomena. It is watching phenomena decay and die. Mindfulness is watching things moment by moment, continuously. It is observing all phenomena - physical, mental or emotional - whatever is presently taking place in the mind. One just sits back and watches the show. Mindfulness is the observance of the basic nature of each passing phenomenon. It is watching the thing arising and passing away. It is seeing how that thing makes us feel and how we react to it. It is observing how it affects others. In Mindfulness, one is an unbiased observer whose sole job is to keep track of the constantly passing show of the universe within. Please note that last point. In Mindfulness, one watches the universe within. The meditator who is developing Mindfulness is not concerned with the external universe. It is there, but in meditation, one's field of study is one's own experience, one's thoughts, one's feelings, and one's perceptions. In meditation, one is one's own laboratory. The universe within has an enormous fund of information containing the reflection of the external world and much more. An examination of this material leads to total freedom.

Mindfulness is participatory observation. The meditator is both participant and observer at one and the same time. If one watches one's emotions or physical sensations, one is feeling them at that very same moment. Mindfulness is not an intellectual awareness. It is just here. Mindfulness is objective, but it is not cold or unfeeling. It is the wakeful experience of life, an alert participation in the ongoing process of living.

Mindfulness teaches us to master the mind, not to control it. In meditation, we may be counting our breath, and then find ourselves thinking about something that happened at work. That moment of awareness, where you realize you are no longer focused on your breath, is mindfulness. When this

happens – and it happens to everyone – just return to the breath. Don't judge yourself or criticize yourself for not focusing on your breath, just notice it and gently return to the breath.

"Strong bouts of thinking are fueled largely by identification and/or preoccupation with thoughts...."

When a particular theme keeps reappearing in our thinking process, it's likely that it's being triggered by a strong emotion. In that case no matter how many times you recognize the same thought or concern, if it's possible, just come back to the breath. If the emotion underlying the thinking isn't recognized, the concern [fueling the repetitive thinking] is liable to keep reappearing. For example, people who plan a lot sometimes discover that the tendency and habit towards compulsive planning often arises out of apprehension or worry. If this isn't seen and acknowledged, the worry itself becomes a factory for new planning thoughts. So, if [the meditator] notices a repetitive thought pattern, it is skillful to see if the emotion associated with it can be acknowledged. Nothing needs to be done about it other than to see and know it. By practicing mindfulness of the emotion itself, [the meditator] can ground them self in the present moment. [The breath likewise anchors attention in the present moment.] Acknowledging the emotion that's generating the thoughts is sometimes all that's needed to break the cycle of repetitive thinking.

- Loosely quoted from a teaching given by Gil Fronsdal...

We can learn to apply this technique in daily life. If we become angry about something, notice that we are becoming angry. Be mindful of your anger – what does it feel like to be angry? This awareness of being angry may in itself break the thinking loop, the tape that plays in our minds that justifies our anger and fuels it. At the least, just being aware of the anger will cool it. With practice, you will be able to see the signs of anger earlier, and begin to be aware of what the trigger for that anger is.

Two weeks ago, we discussed the difference between the mind and mind objects. Think of the mind as a mirror. The mirror doesn't move - the images in the mirror are the things that move and change. Images in the mirror are mind objects – all the thoughts, passions, sensations, and feelings passing through the mind are like the images in the mirror. They are impermanent, imperfect, and they are not the self.

That anger you may be feeling is a mind object. It will pass. The anger is like an image in the mirror that is your mind – be mindful of it, notice it with bare attention, without judgment.

In order to grow our mindfulness, it is important to meditate every day. But rather than make a commitment to mediate for 20 minutes every day, and then get tired of it, it's better to start with meditating 5 minutes every day. Set aside 5 minutes every day at the same time. You will find that this practice will grow your motivation, and you will start to sit longer. Mindfulness won't just happen, you have to do it yourself. Remember – just 5 minutes every day.