

Mindfulness of Mind



Our speaker for July 22th, 2009 was Susan Ezequelle. Susan has been practicing meditation since 1997. A student of Gil Fronsdal, she worked closely with Gil and other community members to found the Insight Meditation Center, where she teaches meditation classes and yoga.

The notes on the Dharma talk are Susan's, except for the inserted references. This is the second talk in the series on Mindfulness.

Let's start with a review of those parts of the Satipattana Sutta we've covered so far.

Mindfulness of the Body

An embodied practice – nothing mystical about it, it's an empirical practice, based on what we can know through our experience of life through our senses. And I don't really know of any other way that we experience life as human beings, right? All of our experience comes to us through our senses, we are the filter, and when we're not intimately familiar with the filter how can we possibly see clearly what's happening.

So through this practice we are becoming intimately familiar with the filter.

And when we are really paying attention to what is happening in the body, you know the body has its own wisdom. And we can really tune in to our own insights, our own wisdom, when we are deeply in touch with our bodies. Remember the Buddha said that mindfulness of the body is the only practice you need in order to be free from suffering.

I had two experiences on Monday that showed me how incredibly powerful this practice of mindfulness of the body can be. I was in Longs and the sound system in the store started playing an old Don Henley song from a million years ago and suddenly I found myself breaking out in a sweat and feeling hot and cold at the same time and started moving faster and faster through the store trying to find what I wanted so I could get out of there. And suddenly I stopped and I thought, I need to be mindful of what's happening with this body. And I stopped in one of the aisles and I relaxed and stopped trying to get away from the discomfort of the heat and the sweating. And then I realized that it was the music that had triggered a strong reactive emotion in me. The Don Henley song had brought up memories of a difficult time in my life and it had triggered emotions of sadness, anger, regret. And the emotions had then triggered the heat and sweating in my

body. I suddenly saw the entire sequence of events and as I stood there and was mindful of my body, mindful of the unpleasantness tone of experiencing these memories, and mindful of the aversion to this unpleasantness, I was able to relax into the experience. And the feeling of having to rush around the store to get what I need and to get away began to dissipate. The suffering around this sequence of events began to dissipate.

So that was one, shall we say, “enlightening experience,” all due to the practice of mindfulness of the body. Later in the day my husband sent me an article about certain details of the financial meltdown and this article triggered a lot of anger in me about the injustices of the situation, all the little people getting hurt while a few individuals profited to a degree that’s not even imaginable to me. And I got so angry that I saw how much I was suffering over my feeling that this situation just wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair. I felt almost sick from the anger that I was stewing in. And I thought “I need to sit with this. There’s a lot of suffering here.”

And so I sat with it. I practiced with it by letting go of all my thoughts around these injustices, all my story-making around this situation. There’s an old Zen saying, “With one thought heaven and hell are created.”

So I just sat with the really uncomfortable feeling of my anger. And what my felt sense of it was as if there was a sharp thick spear stuck in my chest. And of course that’s all a concept, an interpretation of this felt experience. And so I let go of that, too. And I asked myself, what is the elemental experience here? Remember how the Buddha taught about the four elements and how we can relate this to our experience of mindfulness of the body. And how that helps us separate out our elemental experience, our felt experience, from our interpretations and our story-making. So then I came to see how the experience in my chest was an experience of intense pressure, of tightness. And so on. After I had sat in this way for 45 minutes I got up feeling totally refreshed, totally free from the suffering around my anger. So by turning towards the anger, through investigating it in the body, through letting go of all the thoughts around it, through not identifying with it, I was able to allow it to pass through me. So a very powerful practice, this mindfulness of body and breath.

Last week we also talked a little about the feeling tone of our experience, the 2nd Foundation of Mindfulness, coming to our experience embodied and noticing, is this pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? What is my reaction to the pleasant, the unpleasant, the neutral?

Mindfulness of Mind

That brings us to the topic of tonight’s talk, Mindfulness of Mind, sometimes called Citta, or Consciousness.

So when we look at our consciousness, our mental awareness of an object, we can see how it's colored by certain mental factors, those factors being desire or greed, aversion or ill will, confusion or delusion.

This coloring of our experience by these mental factors is in operation all the time and when we can be mindful of it, this can give us a little distance from the experience, so we're not so caught, so we can have some relief even when the coloring of the experience is very strong.

Now in this section in the sutta on Mind, the Buddha talks about these forces in the mind – greed, hatred, and delusion -- and he also talks about an opposing group of mind states that are possible once the mind has been cleansed of greed hatred and delusion.

"And how does a monk remain focused on the mind in & of itself? There is the case where a monk, when the mind has passion, discerns that the mind has passion. When the mind is without passion, he discerns that the mind is without passion. When the mind has aversion, he discerns that the mind has aversion. When the mind is without aversion, he discerns that the mind is without aversion. When the mind has delusion, he discerns that the mind has delusion. When the mind is without delusion, he discerns that the mind is without delusion.

"When the mind is constricted, he discerns that the mind is constricted. When the mind is scattered, he discerns that the mind is scattered. When the mind is enlarged, he discerns that the mind is enlarged. When the mind is not enlarged, he discerns that the mind is not enlarged. When the mind is surpassed, he discerns that the mind is surpassed. When the mind is unsurpassed, he discerns that the mind is unsurpassed. When the mind is concentrated, he discerns that the mind is concentrated. When the mind is not concentrated, he discerns that the mind is not concentrated. When the mind is released, he discerns that the mind is released. When the mind is not released, he discerns that the mind is not released.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the mind in & of itself, or externally on the mind in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the mind in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the mind, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the mind, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the mind. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a mind' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the mind in & of itself.

I think it's significant that the Buddha emphasizes that we should know both when one of these factors, or taints, is present in the mind – affects the mind – and also when it's not present in the mind – when the mind is unaffected by greed hatred and delusion.

And this is an important part of the practice – to notice both when ill will is present in the mind, and when it's not present. Because when we notice that it's present we also can probably notice that there's suffering. And when we can notice that it's not present, then we also notice how that feels – it feels good, right? Because there is no suffering present in the mind. No wanting, no grasping, no hardening, no resisting, no uncertainty or cloudiness in the mind. So in this way we train ourselves – we know we want to be free from suffering – that's why you're here tonight, right? We know we want to be ease in life, we want to feel deeply content, we want peace of mind. So if we're mindful we will naturally gravitate towards what makes us happy. We will begin to naturally drop the grasping, the anger, the ill will, because we know we suffer when those forces of the mind are present.

Remember that phrase the Buddha uses over and over in his teachings: “having put away covetousness and grief for the world.”

Covetousness is the wanting, the greed, grief is the resistance, the wringing of hands, if you will, over things not being the way we want them to be out there in the world.

And so when we give up our expectations that we can find true happiness out there, and many people who have not reflected on the true nature of happiness do believe that happiness is about sensual pleasure – what are we left with? We're left with working with our relationship to what's out there, not WHAT we're experiencing moment by moment by HOW we're experiencing it. And how we're experiencing it is through this framework the Buddha gave us – through the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness – and the beauty of this practice within these foundations is that suddenly we're in control. I can't control what's going on out there, in the world, but I can control my relationship to my experiences in life. We each of us have within us the resources to free ourselves from suffering. Through mindfulness of our bodies, of the feeling tone of our experience, of the thoughts, the patterns in our thinking, the forces within the mind associated with those patterns, and through mindfulness of mental qualities.

Last week I talked about ballast. Ballast keeps a ship upright, balanced and steadfast through the waves. So this control that we develop over our relationship to the world, this is what steadies us, it's what keeps us from getting swept away by what's going on out there.

When we contemplate citta, or consciousness, and the qualities of the mind, or these mental factors or forces in the mind – desire, aversion, generosity, anger,

tranquility, and so on—we see how important intention, or volition, is in terms of shaping our minds, shaping our experience. Volition is the act of making a choice or a decision.

“The Buddha identified karma as volitional activity. That is, each volition in the mind is like a seed with tremendous potential of the same way that the smallest acorn contains the potential of a great oak tree, so too each of our willed actions contains the seed of karmic results. The particular result depends on the qualities of mind associated with each volition. Greed, hatred, and delusion are unwholesome qualities that produce fruits of suffering; generosity, love, and wisdom are wholesome factors that bear fruits of happiness. --The Buddha called the understanding of this law of karma, the law of action and result, the "light of the world," because it illuminates how life unfolds and why things are the way they are. The wisdom of this understanding allows us the freedom to make wise choices in our life.”

-Joseph Goldstein, in Insight Meditation

This is how we gain control over our own suffering, when we take responsibility for shaping the mind through our intentions. We can verify, through our direct experience, and I'm sure many of you have already done this – skillful intentions (kindness, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, wisdom) shape the mind towards freedom, freedom from suffering, and unskillful intentions (greed, hatred, revenge, anger, resentment) shape the mind towards suffering. And we can make the choice here – the Buddha's teachings are based on this assumption – that we're not cogs in a wheel, we're not living in a world that's all predestined, we can make choices and our choices matter.

So when we're paying attention, when we notice that we're angry or grasping at something, we can just put it down. We can stop, recognize what's going on, skip the reaction to it – remember the key to mindfulness is this non-reactive awareness, so when we are mindful of our anger, our ill will, you know, all those things we don't like about ourselves – there's no need for reaction, no need for blame, we simply bring bare attention to what is arising.

And we can investigate, with our bare attention, in just the way I described when I was talking about my anger episode. What is the felt experience of this mind state – well, the Dalai Lama calls them the “Afflictive Emotions.” How does it feel in the body? And then once we've investigated it, understood it as deeply as we can by bringing our whole being to it – and I'm not talking about an intellectual exercise here – once we've investigated it deeply, then we can just let it go.

I thought we could do a little exercise this evening around the felt sense of wanting, or grasping.

Take a coin and hold it in your hand. Imagine that the coin represents something in your life that you have a strong feeling of desire for – it could be a person that you love, or a precious material object, or a dream that you have for how you want your life to be at some time in the future. Now extend your arm with the palm downward and clutch the coin while at the same time you tense your entire body, your arm, stomach muscles, your face muscles... Now open your hand slightly so that the coin drops. Notice the feelings around the loss of the coin. Now extend your arm outward with the palm up, the arm relaxed, the hand relaxed and open, create a sense of softness in your body, your belly, relax your jaw. Now we have what we desire, we have what we want, but we hold it lightly, understanding that all in things arise and pass away in this life. And when we hold them lightly, having them is a much more pleasurable experience than clutching and grasping at them. When they leave us we still have our sense of openness, lightness, softness, of acceptance for how things are in this life. Things, people, our preferences, they come and go and we're deeply appreciative when we hold them but we're not clutching and grasping.

The 3rd Foundation of Mindfulness is mindfulness of mind states or qualities of the mind. As I mentioned last week, there is a progression to each of these foundations of mindfulness, in other words, one opens into the next one. So next week I'll talk about the 4th Foundation of Mindfulness, sometimes called Mindfulness of Dhammas, or Mindfulness of Mental Objects. And again we look at these as mental processes in terms of which ones move us towards freedom and which ones enslave us.

There is direct connection between the afflictive emotions we talked about tonight – greed, hatred, and delusion -- and how they color our experience. From these emotions or mental states arise the Five Hindrances. From a craving mind state comes the first hindrance, sensual desire. An aversive mind state leads to ill will. And from a mind state of delusion comes the other three – sloth and torpor (or sleepiness or dullness of mind), restlessness (sometimes experienced as boredom), and doubt.

When the mind is taken over by these hindrances, they take on a brittle quality, which makes it very hard to train the mind, to incline it towards freedom, to work with it effectively in our practice. Recognizing when these hindrances are present, and understanding the causes and conditions that led to the arising of the hindrance, understanding how the mind has become caught, or entangled or fettered, as the Buddha would say, is the practice. This is the practice I used in the drug store, to understand how I got caught in a strong aversive state just by hearing a song by Don Henley. So more on this next week....

To end I thought I would tell you a story that Buddha told as a way of illustrating the benefits of this practice of the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness. And I first heard this story a few years back when Bhante Gunaratana, the wonderful Sri Lankan

monk and teacher, came to IMC to give a daylong on the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness.

Gunaratana used the word “domain” when he talked about the importance – important from the point of view of suffering and ending suffering – he talked about how important it is to stay within our domain, our domain being defined by, or bounded by, the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness.

From the standpoint of suffering, when we work within our domains, within the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness, then we are bringing our awareness not to WHAT is happening to us in our experiences in life, but HOW we relate to those experiences within our domain. Staying within our domain and using the practice of mindfulness, we have at least the chance, the opportunity, to control whether we suffer or not.

We often can't control what's happening outside of ourselves, right? But with this practice we can have control over our domain, over how we respond to our experience in life. Do we allow our minds to react, to swing wildly from our cravings to our aversions and back and forth. Are we always looking to adjust, manipulate, fix our experience? How can our minds be at rest when we allow that activity of the mind to happen over and over?

So the wisdom of staying within our domain, embodied in our practice, aware of tendencies to react, taking control of where we allow our attention to go instead of letting it wander loose, flitting around like a hummingbird. That's when we are most vulnerable -- when we're not present, when we're giving our minds, our attention free rein to wander around looking for that next “worldly pleasure,” or when we've avoided facing up to “what is.”

There's nothing wrong with enjoying sensual pleasures, as long as we're paying attention, as long as they don't become obsessions, as long as they don't cause harm.

The Quail and the Hawk (*Sakunagghi Sutta, SN 47: The Hawk*)

Gunaratana told a story that perfectly illustrated the concept of the domain. The story of the quail...

There once was a young quail, living in a field. The field was a perfect environment for the quail -- he had food, shelter and company; everything he needed to survive. The quail was so well adapted to the field, he even *looked* like he belonged there, his feathers matching the dirt and bushes.



One day, the quail noticed a dirt road alongside the field where he lived. "I wonder where that goes?" he thought, "Maybe it will take me to some place better..."

The quail hopped the fence and started down the dusty road, happily on his way to what he thought would be a grand adventure.

Miles away, a hawk spotted a brown speck moving on the dusty road. Circling to investigate, the hawk was pleased to discover that the brown speck was a delicious looking quail. Without hesitation, the hawk dove. Sinking his talons deeply into the little quail, the hawk seized his prey and flew away.

Helpless, the quail started crying and lamenting, "What bad luck! If only I had kept to my own ancestral territory, the hawk would have been no match for me."

The hawk, confident in his power and swiftness, asked the quail, "What is your territory?" The quail responded, "That field back there where you caught me is my home territory. If I were there, I would challenge you."

So the hawk, without bragging about its own strength, without mentioning its own strength, circled back to the field, and let go of the quail. "Go, quail, but even when you have gone there you won't escape me."

The quail ran into the bushes, weaving in and out unpredictably. The hawk gave him a few moments head start, and then flew up in the sky, circling in search of his prey. The hawk knew that the quail had no chance against his speed and strength, and it would only be moments before the keen vision of the hawk's eyes spotted the doomed quail.

The quail huddled under a bush while the hawk circled overhead. The hawk circled and searched, knowing it was just a matter of time before he caught the

quail. The hawk circled. The quail huddled. The hawk circled and circled, until it got dark and the hawk went home disappointed and hungry.

The hawk returned every day for a month, but never found the quail. The field was the proper territory for the quail, but not for the hawk. The hawk had no chance.

"This is what happens to anyone who wanders into what is not his proper range and is the territory of others.

"For this reason, you should not wander into what is not your proper range and is the territory of others. If one who wanders what is not his proper range and is the territory of others, Mara gains an opening, Mara gains a foothold. And what, for a monk, is not his proper range and is the territory of others? The five strands of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable by the eye — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Sounds cognizable by the ear... Aromas cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable by the body — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. These, for a monk, are not his proper range and are the territory of others.

"Wander, monks, in what is your proper range, your own ancestral territory. In one who wanders in what is his proper range, his own ancestral territory, Mara gains no opening, Mara gains no foothold. And what, for a monk, is his proper range, his own ancestral territory? The four frames of reference. Which four? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself — ardent, alert, & mindful — putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves — ardent, alert, & mindful — putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. This, for a monk, is his proper range, his own ancestral territory."

-- <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn47/sn47.006.than.html>

Your domain is your ancestral territory, marked by the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

“You should live as a lamp unto yourselves, being your own refuge.”