

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is paying close attention to what is going on around you and within you—in your heart and mind and body. It is not thinking about these things; it is about seeing what is happening without any judgment or interpretation. Mindfulness is being present and awake to our lives. As Suzuki Roshi said, “Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine.” It’s not about producing or doing anything; it’s just a matter of seeing what is already here. So, mindfulness is *seeing*.

So, no matter what our state is, we need to be aware of it and know it for what it is, without any analysis or judgment. Not justifying, not rationalizing, not evaluating, not denying - but just "This is what it is." All I have to do is to be wholeheartedly aware of what is—inside me, and outside me. In the *Satipatthana Sutra*, it says: *Thus, the practitioner dwells contemplating the consciousness in the consciousness internally or contemplating the consciousness externally.*

This formula is repeated over and over again, because we need to be careful to practice awareness constantly. St. Paul said we should pray constantly and Buddha is saying that we need to be mindful all the time. Meditation is the most intense time for practicing awareness, because we would have suspended all other tasks. But, ideally we would be practicing awareness all the time. But we need to focus on what is going on outside of us as well as inside us. We need to be aware internally and externally.

In the *Satipatthana Sutra*, or *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness Sutra*, the Buddha pays special attention to the first foundation: the body. He says that our practice is not rooted in the mind or the emotions but in the body. We can only access the spirit, the heart, and the mind through the body. Similarly, in Chinese medicine, emotional problems are treated as disorders of internal organs. This is an important point. Our Zen practice is an embodied practice.

Another way of characterizing this point is to say that our lives come from the earth. When Shakyamuni Buddha was enlightened he put his hand to the earth which roared: “I bear you witness!” One of the most fundamental mudras, or gestures, of the Buddha has his left hand, palm up, on his lap to represent wisdom, and his right hand touching the ground to represent the ground of reality. Our Buddha on the altar, although he is standing, has his left hand pointing toward the ground. When we

sit we can sense the intimate connection we have with the ground underneath us. We feel “grounded.” There is no separation between us at the ground. This is our reality.

So when we try an exercise such as trying to leave a particular space without leaving a trace of ourselves we become very aware of our body moving through space. And being aware of the sensation of our bodies has an effect on our emotions and thoughts. When we have a sensation of our bodies we become aware of everything that is going inside of us without being unduly bothered by them. As we mentioned in our discussion about the poem, *My Cottage at Deep South Mountain*, thoughts become clouds moving through the sky.

Mindfulness is more immediate than our ordinary state of self-conscious reflection in which we name our thoughts and feelings as my anger, as my unhappiness.

Mindfulness is a phenomenological awareness of exactly what is arising in our awareness from moment to moment. If we pay attention we will see that often we have a physical sensation of a tension in the body before we say to ourselves that we are angry.

So you can see why we start our practice with following the breath; it is the most immediate part of our life in this body at this time. In the Mindfulness Sutra, Buddha says: “Place mindfulness in front of you and start breathing. When you breathe in, be aware that this is breathing in. When you breathe out, be aware that this is breathing out... Breathe throughout the whole body with awareness.”

As we continue in our practice we will notice that there isn’t a lot of difference between a thought that seems to come from inside and a sound that comes from outside. From the standpoint of awareness, thoughts, emotions, sounds, and shapes and colors arise in our field of awareness before we can interpret them as mine or other. This is the basic reality of the interconnectedness of all things, everywhere.

So when we begin to practice mindfulness we begin to shift our experience from the standpoint of ourselves toward an awareness of things arising and passing away. This is really a big shift; it is the foundation of our training. When we do an exercise like not leaving a room with a trace of us or when we sit, we should not worry about getting it right, or any pre-ordained result. No, it’s just a matter of being aware of exactly what is arising and passing away before you. It’s just a matter of coming back to ourselves over and over again. It’s a matter of being present. That is what Buddha is asking us to do in the Mindfulness Sutra.

In, *Beginning to Pray*, a Russian Orthodox priest says that when a person comes to him, complaining that God is absent from their lives, he responds, “Where are you?” In Genesis, God asks, “Adam, where art thou?” This is a good question to keep in mind as we go through our days.