



Mindfulness in action

Let us consider the role of mindfulness and meditation in our active daily life. It is the nature of the mind that it can only be on one thing at a time. It is also the nature of the mind to wander from one thing to another. So to develop mindfulness most of us need to simply develop the skill of keeping our minds from wandering, hence the meditation practise. Mindfulness also requires a clear conscience, a sense of acceptance and commitment to what we are doing and also clear decision-making, yes or no, so that the mind is not full of regret or continually wavering and doubting.

There will then be times when the mind gets tired and needs a break, again we can use the meditation to let go of our task and rest the mind, and if that is not enough we can more actively withdraw in some way. Becoming aware of the body and relaxing is a good way – relax the body and the mind will follow.

One way in which we lose our mindfulness, perhaps the main way, is that our feelings about something draw us away from our task or situation. Often these days we are then given the advice to be aware of our feelings, but this divides our attention. But if we instead ignore our feelings, then we can also go wrong since they may represent valid feedback – the solution is to acknowledge the feeling and check to see if this is the case. If we feel averse to something we can ask ourselves what exactly we are averse to, and similarly when we are attracted to something. In this way we regain our attention to search for the source of the feelings and find some perspective. A neutral perspective is what leaves our minds calm and best supports our mindfulness. If we find it difficult to find a new perspective for ourselves we can talk to someone else, preferably a neutral person, to help find clarity.

It is considered healthy these days to get out of “being stuck in our heads” and instead feel our feelings. The quality of this attention to feelings, however, is also important. Anxious attention will make anxious feelings worse, for example. So there is a need to calm the mind or find someone else with a calmer mind to help us before we go to such feelings. We need to recognise that it can be hard to stay calm and clear around negative feelings, or that we can get hooked on pleasant ones that are not taking us in a good direction. A calm mind is one that is sensitive as well as one that is not easily overwhelmed.

Many of our feelings constitute an alarm ringing in response to an event – whether real, remembered or imagined. Going to a feeling with a calm mind, a calm touch, can be like resetting the alarm. This is skilful once we are confident that we have noted the danger or realised that there is no real danger. But to reset the alarm in the face of danger is just heedless.

There is also a tendency to get drawn into feelings to the point where we lose track of what they are really about, we focus down on them, fishing for meaning, when it is by this very act of focus that we lose our awareness of the context in which they are arising. All feelings are perfectly clear when

we can step back and see the whole picture. When we say that we are not sure how we feel about something, this does not actually mean that the feelings are not clear; but that our perceptions, as they shift around on something, our feelings change. A good question to ask is “how am I seeing things, that make me feel like this?” Getting to the perception behind the feeling will always clarify. Often too we are not sure what we want in a situation, but if we can get to a clear perception we will know the answer.

It is interesting how we think and speak in terms of feelings, when what we are really talking about is perceptions and desires. Perhaps we are not being very up front even to ourselves, and this gives so much power to feelings – how can they be questioned when we constantly let them operate in the dark? And its not at all the case that giving them such power makes them any more pleasant.

So, stepping back from and opening up around feelings to gain the full picture can be the key. This can also help us discover bigger feelings. In my mind, when it comes to feelings, the bigger the better. So is it in the spiritual life, we are prioritising bigger and more lasting feelings, and we are careful not to sacrifice these for short term gratification. We also recognise that spiritual feelings associated with letting go are more pleasant than sensual feelings.

When our minds are very clear and quick, it can be possible to note pleasant and unpleasant perceptions of things without the arising of feelings of attraction or aversion in the first place. Actually we can protect ourselves from feelings of suffering with the perception 'suffering'.

So much for the more transitory and particular feelings, what about the underlying stress of life? Let us take fear as an example of acute stress. By momentarily placing our awareness on the feeling rather than running from it, we can steady ourselves and look for a course of action. If the course of action is clear but we are still afraid, then the solution is to reflect. We can ask ourselves what are we afraid of, in that way taking our minds back to the task or situation, looking for a change of perception; and if we find a new one, we can feel out the change, relaxing into the new perception.

In a deeper sense and in the long-term, fear has its roots in anxiety as to our physical safety. This is very often misplaced, arising through a wrong perception, but none the less very hard to shake as the perceptions involved are preconscious and very deep-rooted. The feelings as well have always been around. The meditator can discover that the ultimate solution to fear and stress is to let go of our attachment to the body. This is protecting our minds from the arising of stress by establishing a different perception. This comes through deeper meditation practice and reflection, it comes gradually and is not an all or nothing thing to begin with. If we manage to let go a little bit we will be a bit less serious about life. If we manage to let go of the body completely (this may also be transitory or permanent) instead of stress, our minds will be full of joy and a sense of liberation.

I offer this for your reflection.

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