

Reading from Teaching on Loving-kindness

One who is skilled in good conduct
and who wishes to attain that state of Calm
should cultivate thoughts thus:

May all beings be happy and secure;

May their minds be contented.

Whatever living beings there may be – feeble or strong,

Tall, stout, or medium, short or small or large,

Seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near,

Those who are born and those who are yet to be born –

May all beings without exception, be happy-minded.

Let no one deceive another nor despise any person whatever in any place.

In anger or ill-will let no one wish harm to another.

Just as a mother would protect her only child

even at the risk of her own life,

Even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.

Let one's thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world –

above, below and across –

without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.

Whether one stands, walks, sits or lies down, as long as one is awake,

one should maintain this mindfulness.

This, they say, is the Sublime State in this life.

(tr. Walpola Rahula)

Throughout my wanderings, I have been fortunate enough to have a taste of mindfulness, that splendid quality to which Buddha refers in his teachings on loving-kindness. Mindfulness is the foundation of Buddhist practice; it is also the foundation of all genuine relationships. My wish is that I may share with you this gift of mindfulness, by offering you my understanding of what it is and how it can transform our understanding of ourselves and our relationships with others. Being mindful enables us to become more balanced, joyful, compassionate and loving.

The best way to introduce mindfulness is with a story. My wife and I recently became parents, and it is one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. At the same time, it is one of the greatest challenges that Julia and I have encountered. We are both very concerned about doing a good job taking care of this precious and helpless being - maybe **too** concerned, a standard trait of first-time parents. Add to that our both being sleep-deprived and the fact that our son's desperate cries are not always easy to interpret. Needless to say, sometimes tensions arise. I recall one instance specifically when a disagreement about parenting styles led to a shouting match, with neither of us listening to the other. For some unknown reason, I happened to **notice** that I was shouting and, for a moment, the shouting stopped. In that precious moment, I realized that the reason I was shouting was because I was hurt and I felt helpless. I also realized that my shouting was causing **me** pain, causing **Julia** pain, and that Julia probably also felt hurt and helpless. In that moment of noticing, the fight, and the pain and separation that went with it, lost its power and dissolved.

That precious moment of noticing is an instance of mindfulness. The best description I have found of this important quality is "bare attention" or "non-judgmental

awareness.” It is the ability to have experiences that do not contain any biases or preconceptions, more precisely, to “see clearly.” Most of the time, our self-centered preoccupations interfere with the chance to see situations for what they are. We end up seeing a world of our own construction, with our self at the center and everything else as separate and against us. When I was yelling, I was caught up in some self-centered drama. It is no surprise that it was hard for me to be balanced and compassionate and quite easy for me to see Julia as against me and my wishes, which were all that mattered for me then. I could not see clearly the pain, hurt and disconnection. All I saw was that I was not getting what I wanted. I was trapped in a prison of my own making, unable to express the hurt because I could not even notice it. Unfortunately, most people are trapped in a similar sort of self-centered prison.

It is to resolve just this dilemma of the human condition that Siddhartha Gautama underwent his heroic quest which resulted in his awakening and afforded him the epitaph “Buddha”, which means ‘One who is awake.’ Buddha was able to clear the dust from his eyes and see himself and the world for what it is. He was able to move beyond the bonds of the self or ego, and in this regard, his quest mirrors that of such renowned religious figures as Jesus and Mohamed. Yet Buddha’s diagnosis and remedy of the problem of self is radically different from most standard approaches to this problem, and because it is so radical, it has been gravely misunderstood. Clearing up this misunderstanding provides a deeper appreciation of the human condition and the value of mindfulness.

The usual way for moving beyond the self to selflessness is by suggesting that the goal is to lose the self. In this way, spiritual progression is a process of having a self and then losing it, to God or something else. It is this framework itself that Buddha

challenged. When Buddha examined his nature, he did not find a self, so it did not make sense to say that selflessness is the result of a process of losing the self. Rather, the important realization to make is that there never was a self to begin with. So selflessness involves seeing one's nature clearly - that the self is a fictional construction that we impose upon our experience, one that does more harm than good.

The way that Buddha came to this conclusion was by using mindfulness in an effort to see clearly the nature of experience. What he found when he stilled his discursive thoughts were five components. These components are hard to understand because they happen so many times in each second that they seem like a blur. I will offer them in a structured way so it is clear how each subsequent component depends upon the ones before it. The first essential component of each experience is that what is experienced has a form of some sort. This is just the simple idea that in order to have an experience, there must be something to experience. The second component is the fact that some form is registered. This is called simple consciousness. A good analogy for this type of consciousness is a thermostat, which can register the temperature, so it is conscious in this simple sense. There is no recognition at this point, just the idea that something is there. The third component is sensation. What is being registered is now experienced as having colors, sounds and so on, but still, there is no knowledge of what is happening. This would be analogous to the experience of an cat or dog, who experiences sensations but has little understanding of what is being experienced. The fourth component is perception, in which there is a mental registering of what is being experienced. The fifth component is reaction or judgment. It is at this point when the

flavor of the experience emerges and we react either positively or negatively, depending on the circumstance.

Take the example of being cut off while driving. In the usual course of this experience, one's heart rate and skin temperature increase, and we believe that the obnoxious driver was the sole cause of these negative feelings. All of this seems to happen so quickly that we fail to notice the several things that happened in order to create this experience. There is a form of some sort, that is noticed, then the sensations of red and horn-honking, the perception of a car in our path, and finally the mental reaction, usually negative. Notice that only the fifth component contains any chance of negativity, but because these five components occur so quickly, it is easy to just lump them together and see the whole experience as negative.

When mindfulness is present, it becomes possible to notice each of these components instead of them getting clumped into a quick and unskillful judgment. We gain the chance of noticing the role that each factor plays in each experience, instead of just focusing on the judgment and our positive and negative reactions. We gain the chance of choosing how to react, instead of just blindly reacting.

The other thing that we gain the chance to notice is that there is no sixth thing to which all these experiences happen, there are just the five components. That is, there is no 'I' to be found anywhere in these five components. To add a self to this picture does not help. It just makes matters worse. Anytime we are able to move beyond the fictional construction of the self, we can experience the world more fully and make relationships more genuine.

However, it is one thing to understand this theory of non-self intellectually and quite another to actually experience it first hand. What we do experience most of the time is a constant internal chatter with our thoughts jumping from one to another in rapid succession. The Chinese call this “the monkey mind.” It moves so quickly that it misses most of what is happening in each moment and just focuses on the least subtle elements. Then it gets caught up in what little it **does** experience and it moves further and further away from reality. This mind assumes a center of attention and then places primary importance on it. What is ironic is that the strategy that the monkey mind uses to resolve discomfort actually produces more discomfort. It sees itself at the center of experience and then takes steps to protect that center. It wants to be secure and if it can find something secure to hold on to, it will be content. But invariably, the thing that was supposed to provide security changes, and the discomfort returns. It tries again, grasping at something else, and then again endlessly trying to satisfy the assumed center of self. Buddha was able to see, and I have had the chance to glimpse, that the real problem is trying to find security through grasping. Grasping to protect the illusory self is the problem, so at moments when I am not aware, the medicine I use actually makes the condition worse. When I was yelling, I was sure I knew the answer and what **had** to be done, and each obstacle to it made my voice raise higher and higher. I moved further away from Julia, further away from reality, and further away from all that was happening to me, stuck in a self-centered fantasy.

Earlier I said that it was for some unknown reason that the shouting stopped, and I don’t think this is entirely accurate. What I do remember is that I did not **decide** to stop shouting. It seemed to happen on its own. I suspect, however, that one reason it may

have stopped on its own is that, for the past 15 years I have been trying to develop a new habit, namely mindfulness. Usually, mindfulness happens of its own accord. Now clearly I am not always mindful, but every time it does happen, the world is a much different place and I am a much different person. Instead of the monkey mind, there is an Awakening Mind. Notice I did not say that 'I' act with an Awakening Mind, because that would be to fall into the trap of self. To say this is not say that I am nothing, it is just to realize and avoid the trap of focusing on me to the exclusion to all else. To be selfless is not to have **no** self, because that would be going too far in the other direction. Rather, it is to see **all** living beings as equal and valuable. This rarely happens from the selfish framework of the monkey mind.

So with mindfulness or an Awakening Mind, it has been possible for me to be more balanced, joyful, compassionate, and loving. These attitudes are all possible at moments when I see past my limited self and its concerns and fears. For example, many people have a problem with public speaking and they experience it as very stressful. Being mindful has helped me see these situations in a remarkable way. One standard fear, I am told, is that being in the spotlight can highlight any mistake or slip-up, and then concern with protecting one's image leads to anxiety about messing up. Ironically, this anxiety frequently makes one act differently in an effort to cover up mistakes. We actually become a different person and we do not act naturally. I have been able to notice that, without this self-focus, it becomes possible to realize that mistakes **do** happen, and often they cannot be controlled, no matter how hard we try. So instead of trying to avoid something unavoidable, and trying to protect something illusory, the self, I am able to embrace the moment and surrender to it. The result is that I am more

balanced and am able to act more naturally, and consequently, I feel more complete and fulfilled. By being mindful, I can be genuinely balanced. Something is actually gained by letting go of who I **think** I am.

It is remarkably easy to be unbalanced, especially with regards to how we relate to others. We care about ourselves and forget to notice what other people are experiencing. This reminds me of a poem by Shantideva, an 8th century Buddhist saint:

Whatever joy there is in this world
All comes from desiring others to be happy
And whatever suffering there is in this world
All comes from desiring myself to be happy.

This sounds extreme but there is an important message here. There is a tremendous amount of joy in the world if we can see beyond our selves. Gift giving is a perfect example. Suppose a friend has a birthday and you buy them a present. Then your birthday rolls around. You may expect a present in return. If that happens, then you did not give that person a gift, you gave them something with strings attached. When one can move beyond selfish pre-occupations, it becomes possible to really feel that person's joy, rather than that joy being tainted with our **own** expected or delayed joy. Tainted because if we don't get a present in return, we feel bad about the present we gave. Being mindful allows the possibility of experiencing genuine joy because of the lack of over self-involvement.

Just as over self-involvement can hinder our appreciation of other beings' joy, this same over self-involvement can get in the way of being able to experience other beings' pain. It is hard to be compassionate when we cannot even notice the pain of others. When I was busy yelling at Julia, and she at me, I had no chance of realizing that she was in pain and no chance of being sympathetic to her pain. When mindfulness entered, all

that changed. One of the hardest times to feel compassionate is towards someone who is causing us pain. I am reminded of the example of the Dalai Lama and plight of Tibet. After he fled Tibet due to Chinese occupation he became very active in saving Tibet. It led to his being presented with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In his acceptance speech, he said that he did not harbor anger towards the Chinese. He realized that they were doing what they thought would make them happy. The Dalai Lama provides me with an excellent model of compassion, because he is willing to acknowledge the pain of others even while in pain himself. Or rather, he is able to move beyond his pain to see other's pain as well.

The most important quality that mindfulness brings is the ability to notice that all beings are undergoing the same struggle, leading to a type of love that does not discriminate. This feeling came most vividly to me after completing a 10 day silent meditation retreat. Since there were no distractions, I had no choice but to live with and try to understand my monkey mind. I was instructed to just watch it and to notice whenever it started jumping around. After ten days, my monkey mind did begin to change its natural pattern. Just watching it helped it to calm down. But **I** did not make it calm down. It calmed down by itself due to the activity of being mindful, of just watching and not **blindly** reacting. Now that I have started to develop this habit of mindfulness, I realize that everyone wants to be happy whereas before I was concentrating on my happiness alone. Being silent opened me up to this common struggle. I am now also able to wish other beings to be happy, as Buddha does in his teachings on loving-kindness, because I begin to realize that happiness does not **belong** to me or to someone else. To think that is to fall into the trap of self.

Mindfulness is the key to Buddha's insight into the human condition and an essential element for the development of genuine relationships. It is a gift which he gives to the whole world, not just to his followers. The spirit of mindful living can be found in each of the great religious traditions. It is a spirit which I hope to share with as many people as possible, and I thank you for giving me a chance to share it with you.

Benediction

With gladness I rejoice
In the ocean of virtue from developing an Awakening Mind
That wishes all being to be happy,
As well as the deeds that bring them benefit.

Thus by the virtue collected
Through all that I have done,
May the pain of every living creature
Be completely cleared away.

(Shantideva, tr. Stephen Batchelor)

[Bow]