

Exhale & Inhale : Mindfulness & Concentration
Joan Sutherland
Desert Rain Zen Group ~ Tucson, AZ
March 3, 2012

I want to start tonight by talking a little bit about mindfulness practice, particularly in relationship to concentration practice. This seems like a good thing to take a look at as we approach the threshold of moving between retreat and non-retreat life, because there's something a little bit like the relationship between mindfulness and concentration, and between retreat and non-retreat life, although there doesn't need to be quite as strong a distinction.

When we return to the other things we do in our lives besides spending time on retreat, generally when we're walking around off the cushion, we're doing some form of mindfulness as opposed to a concentration. But perhaps we can expand and deepen our sense of what is possible with a mindfulness practice if we return it to its natural coupling with concentration.

It seems to me that the way the buddha dharma had landed in the West is as mindfulness; that seems to be the thing that's caught on. You see mindfulness programs in everything from Fortune 500 companies to medical schools and elementary schools, and that seems like a good thing. The version of mindfulness that has caught hold in the culture is something like paying attention, being aware, noticing what's happening around you, being present when you do things. It would be difficult to argue against that as something to do.

Then a couple of weeks ago I heard someone on the radio talk about "Buddhist meditation, or as it's also known, mindfulness". And I thought, well, hold on a second. I'm not sure those are exact synonyms. It seems to me that when you separate out mindfulness from concentration, you do get the ideas of paying attention and being aware and present, etc., but I was interested in putting mindfulness back in its context, back in its coupling with concentration, to see what might happen. There are some things in that that might be helpful to us in our non-retreat, walking-around kinds of lives.

Traditionally we've thought of our practice as a three-legged stool; the three legs are concentration, mindfulness, and inquiry. Inquiry is what the koans bring. I'm speaking in very broad strokes here, but generally, concentration practice is that which brings our attention in and down, so that our attention is extremely focused. We tend to pull it away from stimuli around us in the world. You might think of it as everything getting concentrated into this bright laser light. When we do that we can sink into those quite peaceful and still places that are beloved by us during a retreat. With the grace of the meditation gods, sometimes we can even fall out of the bottom of those samadhi states, into the vastness itself. Concentration practice can take us right down through an intense stillness into the vastness.

On the other hand, mindfulness is spreading our attention and our awareness outward to take in the other—all the others—that are around us. We might think of that as a diffuse light in contrast to the laser light of concentration. It's as though our awareness is moving out into the world and looking to touch what's around us, and we come into some kind of awareness of those things around us.

There is a natural tension between those two practices. One moves in and down and is very focused; the other moves out and is more diffuse. But the tension is a creative one. It isn't a problem, and I don't think the resolution of the tension is to choose one or the other—although that often seemed to be the case in the history of meditation traditions. We can look for the ways the two actually deepen and enrich each other.

Another way we could think about the relationship is between inhale and exhale. If concentration is a kind of inhale, mindfulness becomes the necessary exhale. We can alternate back and forth between them in some way.

Both practices work to do what may be the most important job that a buddhist practice can do, which is to un-self us, to knock us off our self-centeredness. They do it in different ways. A concentration practice un-selfs us, un-self-centers us, by bringing us down into states of samadhi and, eventually, into the vastness. Suddenly we see how large and spacious and eternal things are. We're knocked right off any sense of the special importance of the self when we see the self in its real context, which is something so large, so eternal, so infinite that the idea of a self becomes ... funny.

Mindfulness also un-selves us, un-self-centers us, but in the opposite direction. As our awareness moves out into the world, we necessarily encounter all of the others who, surprisingly, share this world with us. Who knew? We begin to take note of those others, which is to say really notice them, really feel them, really begin to have a sense of them. As we do that, as we take genuine, sincere note of all the others, our allegiance begins to shift from the individual, personal story that is generally running most of the time in our heads, toward a larger narrative, which includes all of the many beings and selves there are in the world. We move beyond that small story of our own lives into something that includes everything that is not only visible to or experienceable by us, but everything that is imaginable as well. So on a mindfulness of our imagination we ride out into this vastly expanded sense of what reality is, and that contrasts starkly with our previous sense of the personal story that seemed to define reality.

One of the things we discover is that awakening is not an introverted, internal, solitary event, but something that happens in relationship. It happens in the reality—the space that all of us make together—that we begin to see through mindfulness.

If in concentration we see the unity of all things—the way everything is one large, radiant thing—with mindfulness we see the differences and the particularities of things, and they become real to us through those very differences and particularities. We come to love things for their thing-ness, which is what we call *tathagata* : their thusness, their suchness; the complete connie-ness of Connie is her *tathagata*. Through mindfulness we come to love not Connie-in-the-abstract, but Connie in all her specificity, in all her particularity, which mindfulness brings to life. Mindfulness brings the *tathagata* of Connie to life, and that becomes something we love. It becomes the sense of the real : the taste of it, the look of it, the smell, the touch, all of that particularity becomes real.

Then, because we haven't uncoupled mindfulness from concentration practice, we're simultaneously aware that everything is real because it is an equal manifestation of the vastness. It's real because it's particular, it's itself, it's unique, it's irreproducible, it's beautiful for all of those reasons; and it's real because it is a manifestation of the vastness equal to every other manifestation, including ourselves. So when you don't uncouple mindfulness and concentration, you get both senses of what is real, and I think those are important together.

If we bring in Western philosophical language, we might say that because things are equally real as manifestations of the vastness, and equally uniquely themselves, they have a moral claim on us. By their existence, by their particularity, they *ask* something of us. So mindfulness becomes, in part, a way of trying to discern and be sensitive to the claim that each 'other' has on us, our responsibility toward them.

When you bring these two senses of reality together—the one of the largeness and mysteriousness of things you get from concentration, and the reality from mindfulness of the particularity and uniqueness of things—you get a view of reality as this : gigantic ... mysterious ... uncontrollable ... completely and inextricably interpermeated ... and asking something of us. We need both concentration and mindfulness together to get that whole, big picture we touch so deeply in retreat. We can take that back across the threshold into ordinary, walking-around life and make it part of our mindfulness : to remain mindful of that experience of reality, all the time.

When we look at it that way, it becomes clear that, contrary to what you might believe reading some of the marketing, the goal of mindfulness is not personal happiness. The goal of mindfulness is getting closer and closer to reality-as-it-is. Happiness might well be a byproduct of that getting closer to reality, but getting closer is what we're trying to do. We are trying to be real. If in becoming realer, closer to reality, you find that what immediately rises in you *is* a sense of happiness—which is perhaps made up of awe at the largeness and mysteriousness of things and joy at the beauty of the particularity of things—that's great. So then, go to the next step, which is, *And how do I live in this reality?* If I can hold on to this sense of reality, what does that ask of me in terms of how I live my life? What's the realistic way to live inside of that reality?

If it is not immediate, spontaneous, and overwhelming happiness that arises when you contemplate this experience of reality, that's important, too, because it shows you where you need to work. Often people will say they get close to the vastness, they get close to that aspect of reality, and they get scared. The self recoils. Something happens where things constrict again, out of fear. That's good to know, because it means it's in that place of constriction and fear that the work needs to be done so the fear can be released and you can experience the kind of reality we're talking about. It's a no-lose situation : if you think you are going to be

catapulted into great happiness, or you're going to get to work with the very things that keep you from great happiness, so you can be catapulted into great happiness — not a bad deal.

We want to move away from mindfulness as observation, as a miner's lamp of practice : you've got a miner's lamp on your forehead and you're moving it around and looking carefully at things. That's a common idea of what mindfulness is. *I am walking through the landscape observing what is happening. I am being careful. I am doing this with great attention ... I, I, I, I, I, I, I.* The danger there, of course, is that it reinforces the sense of an *I* : *Here I am being mindful.*

If we drop that miner's headlamp sense of what mindfulness is, what do we find? We find that things are gazing back at us. It's not just a matter of us walking through the landscape noticing stuff. Stuff is noticing us, all the time. The trees, the rocks, the goats doing that beautiful display. (You think they didn't do that for us? Absolutely.)

There's a wonderful Yunmen koan with a monastic, whom I imagine as having that look that some of you had today, deep into a retreat, a little bit spacey and a little bit blissed.

Yunmen asks, "So where've you been? What have you been up to?"

The monastic replies, "I've been talking to a rock!"

Yunmen says, "Well, good. Did the rock reply to you?"

The monastic doesn't know how to answer, so Yunmen says, "That rock was nodding at you long before you spoke."

That's something we know from retreat, and that's something we can carry with us : a mindfulness not just from our heads out, but of what is gazing back at us. What is our mutual gaze? That, too, is *tathagata*, the thus-come, the arrival of everything into our sensory field, into the field of our hearts, into the field of our imaginations. Tathagata.

More than this *here I am walking through the landscape* feeling, we become aware of our experience as a field of awareness. There's a field radiating off us, and it's entering a much larger field made of the fields of awareness of everything else around us. We are part of, we are interpermeating and interpermeated by, this field of awareness made up of all the warm intelligences of everything — all of the others, as well as of ourselves. This field of awareness is as big as you will let it be. It has no natural boundaries; it has no self-limitations. It will include as much as you're able to allow it to include in your imagination.

I want to mention one other thing. When we turn this kind of mindfulness inward—toward the inner landscape of our thoughts and feelings, the terrain of our heart-minds—something different happens. Turning mindfulness out toward all the others of the world tends to increase their vividness for us; we tend to become more aware of their tathagata. There's a vivifying of our experience of the world. Interestingly, when we turn that same sort of mindfulness inward, the opposite happens. Our thoughts and feelings become less substantial, less vivid, less assertive, less compelling. I've been wondering if there isn't a great leveling process going on with mindfulness, where it's amping up our perceptions of everything else and amping down our perceptions of our own thoughts and feelings, so that they're meeting in a field of equality, where we can experience the field of awareness extending into us as well as from us, and among everything else.

All the same valance, inside as well as outside—and when that happens, when our thoughts and feelings become more suffuse, less preemptory, less insistent, they take their natural proportion in that field of awareness, becoming things among many things, rising and falling in that field of awareness. They lose their pride of place. We begin to forget why we ever found them so almighty compelling over everything else. That also is a movement toward realism, toward a truer and realer experience of the way things are : everything rising and falling, together. That awareness is absolutely something we can take with us walking around; every day in every thing we do, we can hold that field, we can hold that equality of inside and outside, and change our sense of what is real, what is important, and what it means to live a life in that reality. Nothing special, no special practice, no special circumstances necessary : that's a walking-around practice we can take with us from the retreat right across the threshold and into wherever it is we find ourselves in the weeks and the months and the years after that.

Thank you.