

Reconsidering Mindfulness I
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Good evening, bodhisattvas! Happy Valentine's Day from Awakened Life!

Over the last couple of years it's become apparent that what the western world intends to assimilate from the Dharma is mindfulness. I'm curious : When we talk about mindfulness, what does that mean to you? What does it bring to mind?

Assembly responds :

"When eating chocolate, just chocolate." [Everyone is eating Valentine's Day chocolates with their tea]

"Presence."

"To be with what is."

"Pop Buddhism."

"Consciousness."

"Heightened awareness."

"Making a meditation out of everyday tasks."

It seems obvious why we would be attracted to this and want to assimilate it. What situation wouldn't improve from the inclusion of the kinds of things that you all have mentioned? The other day I read somewhere, "Buddhist meditation, which is also known as mindfulness ..." Meditation and mindfulness are now synonyms for each other. That's interesting. Maybe it would be good for us to spend time being mindful about mindfulness and see if that equation is as absolute as it is becoming.

If the virtues of mindfulness are abundantly clear, beautiful, important, and a great gift of the Dharma to other people in other places, it's also true that something can be lost when taken out of context — and mindfulness does exist in a context, it doesn't float free. I thought we might look at the context out of which mindfulness has been drawn, put it back in that context, and then look next at what a mindfulness fully resting happily in its context looks like. Is that any different than what the growing consensus is becoming here?

When something is separated out from its context there can be some pitfalls. Some of the pitfalls I see with what's happening with mindfulness are as follows :

Something we have to pay attention to is whether there's a way in which mindfulness, free of everything else, tends to reinforce the idea of a self, the idea of an observer, the idea of a doer. Do we become hyper-aware of *Here I am being mindful or not being mindful? Here I am cutting the carrots mindfully. Here I am being present. Here I am not being present.* And when that becomes the only practice, is there the possibility that that would reinforce a sense of the self lining itself up, choosing to do the right things, choosing not to do other things? Is there a sense of *Here I am acting in the world, which is out here somewhere?*

Another thing is an implicit assumption that we can bring everything into our conscious awareness, and that the space of our conscious awareness is the place we ought to be working, the place of our practice. I wonder, is that true? Is it true that, A : We can bring everything into our conscious awareness? Are there possibly things that by their nature are not susceptible to being put under the spotlight of our conscious awareness? And B : Is that necessarily a good thing? Might it rather be important to attune ourselves, first of all, to those things we can't know? What does it mean to be mindful of what we can't and don't know? Also, are there things that happen underground? Are there things that happen outside of our conscious awareness? Perhaps the movement is to embrace them to the extent that we can, and even if we're not, by their nature, aware of them, to honor and recognize that they're going on, that not everything is within our conscious control.

The third thing I wonder about is whether this might tend sometimes to reinforce a sense of practice as an act of will – *I'm going to be conscious now! I am going to be present now. I am going to be mindful now.* – rather than as a surrender to necessity. I'm going to talk more about what I mean by that next week, particularly in bringing in the European philosopher Simone Weil, who said such beautiful things about attention. (What she called attention is what we would call mindfulness). She said things like, the more you pay attention, the more you attend, the fewer choices you have, because things become blazingly apparent about what there is to do, what is going to happen next. There aren't so many acts of will; there aren't so many choices. There's more of a surrender to the necessity of what's happening. We will talk more about that and also, in honor of Valentine's Day, her idea of attention as a form of love we offer to the world.

Right now I want to put mindfulness back into its context, because meditation is not just one thing. Meditation is a multiplicity of things, and it is a kind of fundamentalism to say that

meditation is one particular thing. Rather than imposing a particular practice on any situation, there's more a sense of listening to a situation, listening to the question that's being asked, and seeing if the answer to the question or the response to the situation doesn't arise out of the situation or the question itself. Again, there is a trust, a surrender to what is actually happening. When we're listening to see what the situation is asking for, we're going to need a multiplicity of ways to respond. There isn't going to be a one-size-fits-all response. That requires trust in the life around us, in embodiment, and of being in this world. It requires trust in our own ability to listen, read, and respond in good ways; or to listen, read, and respond in ways that are not skillful, but to come to understand that and learn from it.

Our practice, our koan way, sits on a three-legged stool of rustic manufacture, and sometimes it can feel wobbly, but actually it's as old as the world and just as reliable. Wobbly doesn't mean not reliable; it means reliable in a different way. The three legs of this stool of koan practice are mindfulness, concentration, and what we shorthand as inquiry, which doesn't really do it justice. It's the whole constellation of ways of being and practice around koans that have to do with inquiry, including creativity and a creative engagement with the world. So, concentration, mindfulness, and inquiry.

I'm going to concentrate on concentration and mindfulness now, because they're like the inhale and the exhale. Concentration is a kind of inhale and mindfulness is a kind of exhale. Another way to think about them is that the quality of attention with concentration is like a laser light, and the quality of attention with mindfulness is like a diffuse light. With concentration you have a laser-like focus – usually, at least initially, a focus on some thing. In a lot of zen meditation that would be on the breath. At a certain point, even the object of concentration falls away so that there's only a pure state of concentration, and it has a laser-like quality. It's a practice initially of exclusion; we don't follow our thoughts and feelings, our moods and our reactions to things. We consciously set them aside. In zen this is called cutting off the mind road. It's the *I'm not going to go there* practice, and that can be tremendously important and powerful at times. We learn to let everything else go, to not be distracted, to keep coming back to this quite deep, narrow practice, and, with any luck, the bottom falls out of it at some point and we find ourselves in the vastness itself.

In contrast to that, mindfulness is as though we've been standing on a stage under a spotlight — the spotlight of concentration — and somebody just put the house lights up, and sud-

denly we're aware of everybody else in the theater. That's the diffuse light of mindfulness. Our attention doesn't go down and in and then fall out of the bottom of that into emptiness; it goes out toward everything and everyone else around us, so that we have a kind of horizontal or lateral awareness of the world around us. Maybe you can see why I say inhale and exhale : inhale into that deep concentrated state, exhale into that awareness of everything around.

Roughly speaking, and this is too crude, concentration tends toward the vastness, toward emptiness. It tends toward giving us an experience of the vast, eternal, unchanging nature of things. And mindfulness tends toward the embodied world. It tends toward showing us the nature of stuff and matter, the forms that things take, the activities of things, the way the world moves and changes. It's the aspect of things that is impermanent, transitory, changing all the time. Inquiry, or the koan way, is about how to engage both of those things – the aspect of the vastness and the aspect of embodiedness – and how to make a life out of that. It's not enough to sit on the cushion and experience these things; how do we make a life from that? That's the third leg of the stool.

When we're doing a concentration practice, when concentration seems to be what the situation is asking for, or the question is calling from us, we tend to see the vast, empty aspect of everything, where everything co-arises, everything comes into existence together, equally. That might have an echo of what we've been calling the wisdom of equality, that ability to see that everything co-arises in absolute equality with everything else. We don't just read about or think about or believe in it, but through concentration practice we actually experience that spaciousness and equality and radiance of everything, and the thusness of the whole universe, just as it is. That experience is not only heartening, supporting, beautiful, and awe-inspiring, it is also truer. When we include that experience, we're getting closer to the way things actually are. I want to be clear that I'm not saying that that's truer than our experience of embodied life; it's just another *aspect*, like embodied life is an aspect. But we have to include it. We have to experience it for ourselves. That's the key to concentration practice. It allows us to know it for ourselves, to feel it for ourselves, to be changed by it through the experience of it.

Q1 : Joan, could you explain that again? What is it about concentration as opposed to embodiment?

JIS : Everything is embodied, everything is particular, everything is exactly what it is in the way that it is. Simultaneously, everything is empty, eternal, unchanging it's moving and changing all the time in one aspect of itself; and in another aspect of itself, it's not changing at all : each moment is perfect, each moment is eternal, so it's just moment after moment after moment of perfect eternity appearing before us. The thing about a concentration practice is you don't have to listen to me say that. You know that, you experience that for yourself, and that's a tremendous gift, to actually sit in that perfect presence of eternity.

I mentioned that a common object of concentration is the breath. When we spend time focusing on our breath, when we get intimate with that, when we follow the breath down through the bottom of everything to that place where it's roaring with stillness and very spacious, then that breath can run like a silver thread through our lives all the time. Wherever we are, whatever we're doing, whatever situation we find ourselves in, we can touch that silver thread of the breath because we have experienced what it is attached to through concentration practice. We've followed it all the way down to the bottom of things. It's not just a matter of experiencing that silver thread through our own lives; we know that it's connected to infinity; we know that that silver thread has been running since before the beginning of time and will run long after that, so every time we touch it we're touching the silver thread that runs through eternity and that's always available to us anytime, anywhere — no matter what's happening, no matter how difficult or painful. When we return to the breath, when we return to that thread, we are connected to that, immovably. Whether we're full of joy or sorrow, even when we're dying, we're connected to that.

That sounds pretty nice! As with mindfulness, if we concentrate on concentration to the exclusion of everything else, it also has a danger. Its danger is the territory of what we've come to call the private buddha — withdrawal from the world, sitting only for our own awakening, that sense of moving away from that which is difficult and challenging toward that really beautiful place where everything is eternal and shining and there are no problems. But

that's a withdrawal into the world of the private buddha, and to use the language of the koan we're looking at in the koan salon, "it has no power for the path." There's nothing that can happen with that; it is static and unchanging.

That's the potential difficulty with concentration. Of course, mindfulness is the perfect antidote to that. From that movement down and into the world of the private buddha, we're then pushed right back out into the world of the other, the world of embodied others, the particularities of things, the changing nature of things, and we are required to come into relationship with them, which is a good thing.

The other thing that can be a difficulty with that move into the territory of the private buddha is that we don't just withdraw from the messiness of the world *outside* ourselves, we don't just withdraw from the difficulties and challenges of life around us, we also have to withdraw from the same things *in* ourselves. If concentration is a practice of exclusion, if it's the practice of *I'm not going to go there*, what's happening to all that stuff where you're not going? It doesn't disappear. Because we choose not to come into relationship with our thoughts, feelings, moods, experiences, karma, and all of that doesn't mean it goes away. It's still acting on us; it's still affecting us. It's still there, it's just that we're not dealing with that anymore. That's the other danger of that kind of concentration practice : by excluding we do not annihilate. We just let it act in the dark; we let it act without having any kind of relationship to it, without coming into any kind of engagement with it, and we lose two things. We lose both the power of what is there, the power of our own thoughts, feelings, moods, karma — the stuff that resides there that could be really juicy and important and essential to us, we lose that power; and we also lose the ability to transform it. If we're not going there, we can't transform it. There's nothing we can do about it. It's just going to sit there and act on us in its own untransformed way.

When we bring in both mindfulness and concentration together, if we have both the inhale and the exhale, the virtue of concentration is that we don't have to get caught up and obsessed with our emotions and our moods, on the one hand; but we also don't have to pretend they don't exist, on the other hand. So, we can turn our mindfulness inward. It's not just something we extend into the world; it's something we can turn inward on ourselves. We come to understand the vast interior spaces that all of us carry in us, all of the angels and the capering vultures that live inside, and come into a relationship with them, which allows them to have pow-

er *for* the path. It allows us to make use of them, it allows us to live them fully, rather than denying them.

If that's concentration practice, then mindfulness practice is the experience of the differences and particularities of each thing, seeing everything else as real. Another thing that Simone Weil talked about was the claims that others make on us simply because of the fact of their existence, and that it's our moral obligation to try to understand what those claims are. We understand those claims when we get that it's real out there. It's as real as ourselves, and that's what mindfulness does. It gives us an experience of the particularities, the differences. In contrast to the wisdom of equality that we explore with concentration practice, through mindfulness we explore the wisdom of differentiation. We explore the beautiful, tangled, infinitely complex, exasperating thusness of everything that exists along with us.

One of the results of doing mindfulness practice is that our allegiance begins to shift from the individual narrative we all run all the time, which is bounded by skull and skin, to this sense of the vastness of life itself, the complexity of it, all the narratives going on. One of the koans talks about how every time we speak, scrolls fall from our mouths, which is a wonderful image. Out of our feet run the scrolls of the things we do. With the wisdom of differentiation and mindfulness, we begin to see the scrolls falling out of everything's mouth, the scrolls running out of every thing's toes, the sense of how much there is that's going on, how real it is — that it's just as real as what's happening with us, and that it has a claim on us. We begin to see that reality doesn't happen in here or in there; reality happens in the space between us. Reality happens in what we make together. We are in reality; it's all around us, and it is the lines of connection among all of us, among us and all other things.

I'll add one other thing. With the third leg of the stool — inquiry or artistry or whatever we want to call it — what we're doing is taking something that can often be a tension between these two ways of experiencing, concentration and mindfulness. How can it be that stuff is so [raps the floor] hard and unmoving, and how can it also be completely empty? How often in our lives will one or the other of those aspects be in the foreground and the other will fall into the background, and how often do we experience trying to hold those two realities simultaneously as a kind of tension? Inquiry says that tension is a creative tension, that it's not a problem.

The solution is not to choose one or the other. The solution is to hold them in tension and see what happens when you do, when you don't let either of them drop but you let them act on each other. What is the life that gets made in the doing of that? How do we learn to not just live with the tension but navigate between the inhale and the exhale, these different ways of experiencing the world? How do we notice when we're tilting one way or another, and when it would be good to bring in the other or tilt the other way? How can we find a way to live fully with both the wisdom of equality, that sense of the vastness holding us up that we receive in concentration practice, and the wisdom of differentiation, the sense of connection to the complicated, chaotic, impossibly beautiful embodied world? Completely present, or as present as is possible in any moment? How are things simultaneously infinite and very particular, and how do we live exactly at that intersection where each moment, each activity, each encounter, each engagement happens where what is infinitely large and what is completely particular and irreproducible intersect?

That's a beginning of putting mindfulness back in a larger context. We'll keep going next week, but for now I would love to hear any comments or questions that you have about this much.

Q1 : I understand that you're saying Simone Weil basically said that trusting in reality leads to conclusions, that you don't have to struggle as much with it, but that it just manifests itself. I'm struggling with this idea of fateful reality happening, and having the answers in the truths.

JIS : What's the struggle? Where do you struggle?

Q1 : I look at the reality and it seems so very conflictive and chaotic that there's a tendency for me to want to problem-solve.

JIS: Okay, so what is driving that impulse? That's a perfect way of describing it : wanting to problem-solve rather than waiting for something to emerge. Is there an anxiety there?

Q1 : Yes.

JIS : So, you're not actually trying to problem-solve. The problem you're trying to solve is the anxiety, it's not the situation in the world.

Q1 : Probably. That's pretty self-centered, but that's probably true.

JIS : Well, that's what we do, right? So the idea is to make that shift from where we're not doing everything because we're trying to manage our own anxiety, but we're actually trying to listen for what the world needs, for what the situation requires, and do that. That's the whole shift.

Q2 : You said something that really put me at ease. You said, "If this is a dream that we're having, I've decided to love the dream. All of it." It made me feel so peaceful and so thankful. I've suffered most of my life from wanting to change the world myself. *I've got to do this; I've got to do that.* But it's so futile for me to exist like that, it creates stress and the sense of self and ego. I've come to that bottom sometimes myself, but when you said that I just exhaled.

JIS : Thank you. That's wonderful to hear. One of the things I want to talk about next week is what it means to be mindful in the dream. What does it mean to be mindful of the dream?

Anybody's sense of mindfulness beginning to shift at all? Or does it still seem pretty much what you thought it was?

Q3 : What do you think about the way mindfulness is being introduced as something that is completely secular, as a way to introduce mindfulness into the schools, into psychology, into counseling, into so many things now?

JIS : I actually think it's great. It is a tremendously powerful tool. When you look at the work people are doing in medical settings, educational settings, or in prisons — all different kinds of places, and you see the results it has so quickly, you can feel the power of it. That's a tremendous thing. I'm just saying that if we have this as our practice we're really looking to bite the whole apple; that's what I'm trying to do. But, yes, I think it's a hugely powerful tool, clearly. And it is secular.

Q3 : But it seems like a gateway.

JIS : It's something that it is accessible and is immediately effective, and I think that's important.

Q4 : I work in education, and we actually do use the term ‘mindfulness.’ This has been a fascinating exposé of the weaknesses of vocabulary, and the misinterpretations, and the way that in the secular settings of schools, people are paranoid about proselytizing and so forth. I’ve been glad that this happened tonight, because I’ve really been trying to figure out how to indicate something more powerful than just another form of discipline around, “Pay attention, you guys.” Teachers are clever that way. But I do think that in a rush to be secular, things become extremely superficial. The problem of proselytizing is very real, too.

JIS : Well, it’s a pretty new experiment, so it’s probably going to take us a while to shake things down. But I think the questions you have are really good questions to hold. Which is mostly what we get, right? Better and better questions.

Q5 : I have a question about being called to action. From what you have said I think that you’re not talking about passivity, but the way you’re called to action is somehow different or rising in a different way.

JIS : It’s absolutely not passivity. The bodhisattva way is about pushing up your sleeves and putting your hands in. This is more a question of technique : how do you do that, and with what attention? As we were just saying, how much are we attending to our own impulses, our own motivations, what we bring to the mix? To have a humility about that, so we turn the mindfulness inward; we notice what we’re bringing to the party. Then we act with the humility of that knowledge. That’s one piece of it. The second piece that is so hugely important is to shift from problem-solving to listening. To get used to slowing down and listening, and trying to hear what’s being called for, rather than what we think ought to happen. And then to act.

Then the act takes less of the quality of an imposition of a skill or an idea or a belief on a situation, and more the quality of a participation in the situation. *What is my participation here?* rather than *What am I going to do about this?* Those are two really different kinds of stances.

Q6 : When it comes to meditation and mindfulness I tend to go toward thinking about the hindrances. It’s an easy way to see I’m not concentrating. I’ll be sitting and then my mind will start going and going, and then I use my mindfulness of *Oh, there I am ...* Even tonight I was

doing a mantra : “it’s grasping and aversion, and sloth and restlessness,” and ... I was almost chanting to myself!

JIS : Lions and tigers and bears!

Q6 : Exactly. These are little monsters. The thing is I have this unbelievable tendency to plan while I’m meditating. And tonight, I thought, what does that mean? It’s a hindrance. Which one? Then I think it could be restlessness or could it be grasping. Because, literally, I think, *Tomorrow I’m going to get up earlier to meditate!*

JIS : Instead of meditating now.

Q6 : Yes! I’m planning to meditate! I get so intellectual about this stuff, it’s kind of crazy. But just the expression ‘mindfulness’ helps me take a deep breath, because in a way there’s no judgment. So attention is being paid.

JIS : Thank you for doing that phenomenology. That was great. Can you see how there is the usefulness of becoming intimate with the way your own heart-mind works? And you’re walking an edge where you’re reinforcing the observer. The observer is pointing and labeling and judging and all the rest. So who’s the observer and what is it you’re observing? That’s the pitfall that I was wondering about at the beginning. Does it reinforce the sense of a self, because you’re trying to use the self to manage the self? Which just reinforces the self. It’s a completely circular process.

The koan question in that circumstance would be, “Who’s planning? Who’s agitated?” Which is a very weird question, but it’s great because it knocks out all that sense of evaluation and judging, but it’s asking the fundamental question. Who’s the self who’s so busy doing all this and observing and labeling? Then, boom! You drop right out of the bottom of that. Something else you can do is notice, with a combination of concentration and mindfulness, the very large field in which each of those thoughts is rising and falling. So you’re not having to address each thought, you’re putting it in its context. When you put each thought in this large field, which stretches from one end of the universe to the other, and here’s your little grasping thought and here’s your little distracted thought, and here’s your little pang of heartache ... It’s rising and falling in this gigantic field! It’s hard to take it quite as seriously as you did thirty seconds ago. It’s hard to feel like it should be more important than anything else. It’s just one little thing rising and falling in this really big field. We don’t have to kill it, we don’t have to crush it, we don’t have to fix it, we don’t have to improve it, we don’t have to replace it with

a better thought. All we have to do is notice the field that it's actually rising and falling in, and let it just do that. And it will do it in a simpler and quieter and less distracting way.

Q7 : It also brings up this question that I've been grappling with. If we think that we're always existing in a field or multiple fields, how do we become more mindful of the field? What is that practice like?

JIS : That is the combination of concentration and mindfulness. As we go along we can talk more about the technique of that. The concentration practice gives us the extent of the field, how really vast and spacious it is. The mindfulness gives us the sense of how much stuff there is rising and falling in it all the time. Those two things together puts our thoughts and feelings in their proper perspective.

Q7 : So the awareness of the field can come through concentration practice, but not actually through the practice, but as a gift that arises out of it?

JIS: Yes. It's a way of making ourselves available to the experience of the field. It's a way of slowing things down, simplifying them, clarifying them, so we can see what's actually there.

Q8 : I'm thinking about the pitfall of reinforcing the observer : when you talk about noticing, or waiting and listening, and the question comes to mind, Who's listening? Or, who's noticing? There's a trickiness of, *where is that?*

JIS : That's great. You can ask that question *Who's listening?* and it will make you smile in whatever the circumstance is. You can also see if it's possible to drop the "who" out of that and just have listening going on, just taking place with the listening.

Thank you all very much.