

Reconsidering Mindfulness II  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM  
February 23, 2012

Good evening, bodhisattvas!

Because mindfulness seems to be the way that the Dharma has first and most successfully landed in mainstream American culture, I thought it might be interesting to be mindful about mindfulness, and take a look at that from our perspective. We started that last week and it looks to be an ever-growing series.

This week I want to continue with that exploration of mindfulness as we might hold it in our tradition. We think of our practice as a three-legged stool, and one leg is certainly mindfulness. Another leg is concentration practice, which is that deeply focused practice that leads into *samadhi*. The third leg is what we loosely call inquiry, which is the way of the koan that involves a lot more than asking questions; it involves a deep engagement with the mystery of things.

Concentration as a practice tends toward our having an experience of the vastness, of emptiness. Mindfulness tends toward our having an experience of the embodied world, of the world outside our own skulls and skin. Inquiry then becomes a way of looking at how we take the understandings we get from concentration and mindfulness practice, and make a life out of them.

Mindfulness and concentration have traditionally been coupled in the Mahayana and all of Buddhist practice. If concentration tends toward the vastness and mindfulness tends toward the embodied world, then deliberately there is a tension set up between those two things. If that feels abstract, pretty much everybody who engages in practice at one time or another feels a tension between *my peaceful, happy place* and life; there is that tension between what we can experience in meditation and on retreat and what happens every day of our lives when confronted with the complexities of being embodied beings. The idea is not to choose one or the other — which is a common error that people in our line of practice make, thinking that one is better than the other and you have to fall down on one side or another.

Actually, what we're looking for is the way to bring the two together. What it is like to

have that as a one whole practice with, say, concentration as the inhale, mindfulness as the exhale; or concentration as the laser light, the very focused pinpointed light, and mindfulness as a more diffuse light. We talked about it last week as though concentration is standing on a stage and there's a spotlight on you, and then suddenly the house lights come up and you see everything else that's in the theater — that's the light of mindfulness.

We're looking at how we hold that creative tension between those two different ways of experiencing things, and how we resolve that tension in a way that includes them both. One of the things we touched on last week was what might get lost when mindfulness is extracted out of its context. Certainly one of the things is that very creative tension in its relationship with concentration. Another thing it's important to be aware of is that there can be a tendency in the way mindfulness is looked at to actually reinforce the self : *Here I am attending carefully. Here I am really noticing what's going on around me. Here I am really paying attention.* I, I, I ... That's problematic from a dharmic perspective, as the whole thing is supposed to be a subversion of that focus on the self, and something to be aware of.

I want to start tonight by saying that both concentration and mindfulness are intended to actually pull us away from that self-centered view and experience of things. They both do it by showing us a much bigger world. They both do it by saying that things are way bigger and way more mysterious than the small story we narrate inside our heads. Concentration does that by bringing us to an experience of emptiness or the vastness, so we see the whole, big, giant thing, which puts the self in a mighty different perspective.

Now I want to turn to how mindfulness also pulls us off of that self-centered position. With a practice of mindfulness as we understand it, our allegiance begins to shift from that individual narrative, that story that's running in our heads that's telling us not only what's happening all the time, but what it means and how we should feel about it — that multi-layered narrative. It begins to help us move our allegiance from that that narrative of our lives, to life itself; from the story to the actual thing that's happening, to what is visible or imaginable beyond the realm of the individual and the personal story.

Mindfulness shows us that awakening is something that happens in relationship. It happens in the space between us. It happens in what we do together. It doesn't happen behind our eyes, and we have to be able to get out of the personal narrative, out of that self-centered position, in order to notice that the juice is in the space we share and the space we make

together. That's where reality is. Reality is not in the story; it's in the shared space between us.

Mindfulness gives us an exquisite experience of the differences and the particularities of each thing. In taking in the particularities of each thing and how each thing is different from every other thing, and unique and precious in that particularity, we begin to see the other as real. It's a shocking concept! Emerson said we should treat women and men as though they are real — they just might be. Mindfulness offers that to us : when something is so vivid to you it's hard to ignore it or pretend it isn't real. I'm going to talk a few times about 'the other,' and by that I don't just mean that postmodern sense of what is unfamiliar and strange. And I don't just mean people. By 'the other' I mean everything in the world that is other than ourselves, all beings of all kinds, from humans to rocks.

We see the particularity of things. It begins to dawn on us that things are as real as we are, and that in western philosophical language, they have a moral claim on us because of their reality. We'll explore that some more later. If they are real, we have to take seriously their moral claim on us – to allow and support their existence, to have decent, kind relationships with them.

In distinction to the way that mindfulness is sometimes marketed in this country, the goal here is not (this is shocking) individual happiness; that's not what this practice is for. The goal is to more clearly see what reality is. The goal is to come into a more intimate and direct relationship with the way things actually are. It may well be that happiness is a byproduct of coming into a truer relationship with the way things are, and that's a good thing, but we're aimed at the real, intimate, and unobstructed relationship with the way things are, which is, in this view, gigantic, mysterious, uncontrollable, and completely interpermeated (everything much more than interconnected, everything affecting everything else all the time).

It's a reality that asks something of us; it's impossible to separate ourselves out because everything's interpermeated. I've seen that for some people this does immediately lead to happiness. To see that intimacy with reality more clearly, to come into a relationship with that and live with it more and more all the time immediately leads to a happiness that has awe in it, and a sense of the poignant, heartbreaking beauty of things. If that is so for any particular one of us, great, carry on ... and there's something to do after that.

Once we are aware that that's the way the universe is, we have to discover how each of us as an individual lives in *that* universe. Not the universe of our personal narrative, not the

universe of our thoughts and feelings only. Not the universe that we've been making up our whole lives, but the universe as it actually is. That's the next move.

If this engagement with how things really are doesn't lead immediately to happiness, then it shows us where we need to work to enable us to come into that kind of relationship. Why doesn't it make us immediately happy? What happens instead? Someone commented in the koan salon yesterday that every time she touches emptiness, every time she touches the vastness, the self arises again and is afraid. If that's the experience, which is quite common, then the question becomes, what is the nature of that fear? Where is it that we bounce off of the experience of the reality of things? That's good information, too; even if it doesn't make us immediately happy, it tells us something really important about where our work is in this time.

To continue with this un-self-centered function of mindfulness that's so critical, often we think of mindfulness as how we're seeing things. Are we being attentive? Are we being careful? To use another light metaphor, it's as though we're wearing a miner's headlamp, and mindfulness is a light we're shining on things. But in that common imagination it's very much an event that's happening *from* us into the world. We're walking through the world with our miner's lamp on, and we're noticing the quality of the light we're casting.

In the koans, it's made quite clear that life is much weirder than that, and that the gaze is actually going in both directions. Not only are we gazing, mindfully or not, at the world, but the things of the world are gazing back at us. The thread here is that we're talking about how mindfulness un-self-centers us. This is one of the ways. One of my favorite koans involves someone talking about something like this, and someone asks, "What's that like for you?" And he answers, "It's like a donkey sees a well." We're the donkey with our miner's headlamps and we see the well. That's one view. The other one says, "Well, that's part of it, but it's not all of it." So the first one asks, "Well, what's the rest of it?" And he says, "It's like the well sees the donkey." There's a mutual gaze going on.

Something we might experience in retreat or in other times that are similar, is that we begin to feel the sentience of the trees and the rocks, and sometimes they even begin speaking to us. We really are aware of their living presence, and of their gaze on us. There's something happening in both directions. To be aware of the sentience of all others — rocks and trees and everything else — and to be able to begin to feel your way into a relationship with all of those others is another form of mindfulness quite different from the headlamp theory of

mindfulness.

There's a relationship beginning that will become crucial to what we understand as being mindful. If we are courteous in our relationships, we will listen, we will pay attention. This is where we get into a sense of the moral claim that other things have on us. It's the claim that we *will* listen, the claim that we *will* pay attention – that our gaze, to use the author Simone Weil's wonderful formulation, will be a “just and loving gaze” on each thing. What I think she meant by “just” was “accurate” – looking carefully, paying attention to what's actually there; and “loving” is, of course, loving as we understand it. That's a good definition of mindfulness as long as we understand that there's a gaze coming back at us and a relationship happening.

Here we might bring in a great Theravadin definition of mindfulness, which is letting other things speak for themselves without first interrupting. It's not just about interrupting with our words, but how we interrupt with our stories. Think how we interrupt with our personal narrative : something is beginning to speak, beginning to become apparent to us, and [snaps fingers] we're making meaning out of it right away. We're slotting it into the grand narrative of our lives. That's interrupting, not letting things speak for themselves. Try withholding meaning for a while and see what happens to the quality of listening. This way of being mindful of the others of the world is what is technically called in the Mahayana tradition *tathagata*, which is seeing the thusness, the suchness of things; seeing the particularities of each thing; letting them be vivid and speak for themselves, without being dragooned into our story.

The more that we're attuned to these relationships, we begin to experience the self less as the location of the narration, less as the arbiter of meaning and importance, and more as something in a very large field of awareness. There is the field of everything that we're experiencing, and our mindfulness becomes a part of that field. It's not something moving through the landscape with the miner's headlamp on anymore. We come to see how we are continuous with the field, not separate from it. We're not having an experience of the field of our awareness, we're now aware that we're part of that field of awareness, and that there is an identity between ourselves, our awareness, and what we're experiencing.

If we experience the self in this way, then perhaps we begin to experience ourselves not as observers, not as commentators, not as pilgrims through the landscape, but as a warm intelligence suffusing the field. We become equally aware that there are other warm

intelligences suffusing the field. In fact, the field is made of the confluence of all of those warm intelligences. That field is as big as you let it be. It will include as much as you allow it to include, because it itself has no natural boundaries; the boundaries that we experience are the boundaries that we place on it.

The self gets put into perspective because it's now part of something so much bigger, and so a sense of what the self is changes. There isn't one, and it's vast! We see who and what we are in relationship to everything. But when we turn that same mindfulness inwards, there's a contradictory movement. When we see things as tathagata, they become vivid and startling in their reality, but that's not what happens with our thoughts and feelings. Instead of the thoughts and feelings we find in the interior landscape being elevated to a vivid and startling reality as we experience the outer world, they're actually made less substantial. The same gaze that looking outward sees things as *Whoa! That's so vivid, so real, so there!* when looking at our inner thoughts and feelings says, *Oh. That's so insubstantial, so empty, so ephemeral.*

Why this contradiction in what the same gaze does, depending on whether it's turned outward or inward? I think it's because there is a great leveling going on, which we have called the wisdom of equality. What we've done is we've so elevated the vividness of thoughts and feelings, and so downplayed the vividness of the other, that what has to happen for them to come into a kind of equality is for everything else to become much more vivid, and for us to become a whole lot less vivid, a lot more insubstantial and temporary. It's the same gaze, and it's bringing those things into equality so that we are experiencing the outer world and the inner world in the same way. We can see how amped up our experience of our thoughts and feelings have actually been in the past, and in some way how muted our experience of everything else has been.

When that happens, our thoughts and feelings start to not feel so personal anymore. We begin to see them as rising and falling in the field with everything else, not more special, not more important. Trees rise and fall, conversation rises and falls, the candlelight flickers and rises and falls, geological ages rise and fall. And thoughts and feelings rise and fall in exactly the same way, and we begin to dis-identify with them. They begin to seem less personal and like just another thing rising and falling in the field. Sometimes, when we're lucky, we can even begin to forget why we thought we should give them a particular pride of place in our lives, or be most particularly concerned about them as opposed to anything else.

The other startling thing is that we realize the extent to which we have been continuously telling ourselves lies about the way things actually are. When we experience ourselves as an individual moving through the landscape, when we think of ourselves as separate, alone, and perhaps even fundamentally alienated, when we think that things don't change, or we think that things change too much, if we think that our thoughts and feelings are more important than anything else that is happening, all of those are lies we are telling ourselves. We begin to see that very clearly, and it becomes painful to lie to ourselves like that, and much easier to let that go and look at what's actually happening.

If we begin to feel this sense of dissatisfaction with the unreal picture we've had of reality, what's a genuine antidote to that? As the Buddha lay dying, he had some final words of advice. Part of it is usually translated as, "All conditioned things are subject to decay. Strive untiringly!" Or, "Accomplish earnestly!" But one translator, Roberto Calasso, whose work I admire tremendously, renders this final admonition not as "accomplish earnestly" or "strive untiringly." He says, "Act without inattention." This isn't even an admonition to be attentive : it doesn't add something like "attention." It doesn't say *be mindful, be attentive, be aware* as a practice. It takes something away. It says, take inattention away, and then what's it like? It's a viewpoint that has a certain weird freedom. Then you're free to experience what the pure act without the added inattention is like, because once you've taken the inattention away it's just 'act.' What is acting like when you take the inattention away? What is looking, tasting, loving, suffering when inattention is gone?

That got me thinking about our permanent inattentions. We're familiar with our momentary inattentions, the things that we allow to distract us from what we're doing. Some of you may feel this talk has gone on quite long enough and are experiencing momentary inattention as we speak! But there are also permanent inattentions. For example, we all have had at some time relationships in which we're still dealing with the other person as if it's five years ago or thirty years ago. That's a permanent inattention. If we're stuck on what someone was like five years ago or five minutes ago, we're not attending to what's actually going on in the moment. We're not alive to what's actually happening now. Another kind of permanent inattention is an obsession with something, where we're now in relationship with the obsession and not with the thing anymore. We've permanently unattended to the thing, and moved into our obsession.

I will leave you now with an example of all of this, which speaks so much to acting without inattention. Not surprisingly, it's art, because there are many enactments of acting without inattention in the arts. Here's a bit of a poem, and a few words about that poem to take with you. This is the beginning of a poem by Yehuda Amichai, and it has one of the great titles of poems : "Gods Change, Prayers Are Here to Stay." This long poem begins :

In the street on a summer evening, I saw a woman writing  
on a piece of paper spread out against a locked wooden door.  
She folded it, tucked it between door and doorpost, and went on her way.  
And I didn't see her face, nor the face of the person  
who would read what she had written  
and I didn't see the words.

Here, in Amichai's beautiful evocation of an ordinary moment in the street, there are a number of themes that we'll be coming back to in the weeks to come. The first is that mindfulness, as I hope is becoming apparent, is so much more than observation; true mindfulness is really a love song we're singing to the world. That just and loving gaze is a song of appreciation that we're singing to the ordinary world, the world of our daily lives. It's an appreciation for everything that the world gives us.

Another theme : if the world is a dream, which is Dharma 101, what is it like to awaken *within* the dream, not *out* of the dream? What is it like to accept that it's a dream, and wake up inside of it, rather than trying to get out of it? How do we do that through mindfulness? Amichai's language is so spare, direct, and simple, but in those spare and simple words I can completely enter the dream of that Jerusalem street on a warm night. My dream enters its dream, the dream of that locked wooden door and of the woman writing something against it. There's nothing added, nothing extra, just a profound report of a just and loving gaze at a moment. And within that an appreciation of how rich the world is, without adding anything, without putting anything extra in. Just as it is, the world is so rich, if we look at it mindfully, in this way.

The third theme that appears here is that mindfulness crucially includes an awareness of what we don't know as well as what we do know.

And I didn't see her face, nor the face of the person  
who would read what she had written  
and I didn't see the words.

That's what couldn't be known in that moment, and that is as real and important as what



can be known. There's no sense of loss there. There's no sense that something's missing. There's no sense that we have to do anything about that. We can love that — love what we cannot know as much as we love what we can see and what we can know — so that mindfulness in any moment, or that part of the moment which we don't know about, is tremendously important as well. Everything complete, just as it is, including what we don't know.

I will leave it there for tonight, and as we close, would welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : I never realized mindfulness was such a complicated subject.

JIS : Yes.

Q1 : I thought it meant just being in the moment.

JIS : Well, being in the moment's a pretty complicated subject!

Q2 : So that notion of going through life without inattention — the implication is that being mindful and attentive is our natural state. And being inattentive is something added.

JIS : Yes.

Q2 : What is the date of that text that was translated?

JIS : The Buddha's last words? That's pretty early, 2,300 years ago or so.

Q2 : So I wonder, what may have been true 2,300 years ago — is that still our human state today? Just given the blizzard of impulses, sensations, impressions, static, everything we're bombarded with today, the nature of modern technology and communication was not true 2,300 years ago. Is it possible that part of what it means to be human today is that we really do have to make a much more proactive, focused effort to turn on the headlamp? Because life involves this blizzard of impressions coming at us that is something new.

JIS : I think there's something really true about that. Fasting is really important in regard to that. I just watched Werner Herzog's documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, which is about the so-far oldest cave paintings that have been found : 35,000 years old. I really recommend it on a big screen. To the extent that we can dream our way into what those images show us, it's

so much *this mind*, it's so much this just and loving gaze, so much this sense of not-separation. At one end of the human spectrum, there was a time when that really was, as much as we can project backwards, the natural state of mind. But then things have progressively changed over the years. You're saying something important, that it is much more difficult to do that ... I think it's possible to do it, but I think it probably requires a fair amount of fasting and really getting that strong in yourself, so you can take it anywhere, including into the media blitz, and not be overthrown by it.

Q2 : So that would be one of the purposes of practice? There's really a lot more at stake today than 2,300 years ago, even though it might have been really important then as well.

Q3 : And we don't know if nature as they experienced was a 'media blitz' at that time. There must have been a need for meditation already.

Q4 : Is it complicated — the difference between awareness and mindfulness? Or does concentration lead to mindfulness, and vice versa?

JIS : They have always been seen as distinct practices that need each other to make a whole. Neither is whole in and of itself. What becomes apparent to us as we practice them both is that they come together, they do become that whole. That seems to happen when each has done its work on subverting the self, and it's from that position of the overthrown self that we can see how they're one, they're the same thing. Then that's just what life looks like : it's that place where those two things intersect.

Thank you all very much.