

Reconsidering Mindfulness III
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Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
March 15, 2012

Good evening, bodhisattvas!

Tonight we are in the third of a series of four talks about mindfulness. We began with the idea that, for the time being at least, the way the Dharma has landed in the West appears to be with mindfulness. That seems to be the thing that's caught fire here. I thought it would be worthwhile to take a look at mindfulness in its context : is it different if we look at it within its traditional context as compared to when it's been taken out of the context and made a thing in and of itself?

In the first talk, I asked you all what that mindfulness meant to you. People said the kinds of things you would certainly expect, like paying attention, a certain kind of presence, and doing ordinary things as a practice; It was Valentine's Day and we were eating chocolate with our tea, as I recall. Someone said, "When eating chocolate, just eat chocolate!" All of that, of course, is true about mindfulness, and if you don't mind we'll shorthand that whole constellation of ideas as 'showing up.' Mindfulness is, in the deepest sense, showing up.

If we're thinking about mindfulness as a Buddhist practice, showing up is going to be absolutely necessary, the thing that has to happen first. But it's not going to be the whole deal. The reason is that any Buddhist practice is going to include a strong element of what we call unselfing. It's going to do something that ushers the self off the high stool under the spotlight at center stage and turn up the house lights, asking us to consider that it isn't all about that, but that it's about the whole world in which it's sitting. So unselfing is that wonderful, surprising moment when the rug of the self gets pulled out from under us and we freefall a little bit; we have some experience of what it's like when the concerns of the self-under-construction are not paramount or not controlling the show. That's the first thing that a Buddhist practice is likely to contain.

The second thing that it's likely to contain is what we would call in the West a moral dimension. By that I mean some awareness, some working with the way we are both affected by others, affected by the world, and the ways we, in turn, affect it.

We could be forgiven for thinking that if mindfulness is just showing up, that's the act of an individual heart-mind, something an individual heart-mind decides to practice. But if we bring in these other dimensions of unselfing along with a question about the nature of our relationship with others and how we affect others, then maybe it begins to imply that mindfulness isn't actually the endeavor of a single heart-mind, but it is, essentially, a relationship; mindfulness requires a relationship.

In what ways? First I'll talk a little bit about unselfing. We had mentioned earlier the big unselfing that happens when mindfulness is in its original coupling with the practice of concentration, because traditionally you would always get those two things together. The deep point of both concentration and mindfulness is this unselfing : this revelation of how big and mysterious the world, the universe, this very moment, actually is. Concentration does that, generally — I'm speaking at a gross level — by allowing us to drop into very deep states of meditation. Sometimes, through the bottom of those deep states of meditation, we drop into the vastness itself. We can have a direct experience of how big things are. Concentration is a kind of focused, concentrated light.

Mindfulness does it, on the other hand, through a diffuse light. It puts us into a deliberate and mindful relationship with how big the world is, how big the field is that we're in all the time, how many others are in that field, and exactly what our proportion is to that large field. The conclusion is that with mindfulness and concentration practices hand-in-hand, you get an experience of reality as gigantic, mysterious, uncontrollable, completely and inextricably interpermeated, and asking something of us.

Mindfulness in particular unselfs us by lifting the meditator's gaze from the floor, or from the back of your eyelids, to the horizon, so that we can see how large and weird the world actually is. It makes us aware that we don't exist in isolation. That's such a large delusion, and a delusion that causes so much sadness in us; but we don't exist in isolation, and the field we're part of is very big and not under the control of our will. The unselfing that comes through mindfulness has to do with this raising our eyes to the horizon and taking in the true purport of the moment we're in.

After showing up, the next thing is a willingness to be permeated. Many English-speaking Buddhists talk about 'interconnection' and 'interbeing.' We use 'interpermeation' because of that sense of not just being connected up by lines like tinker toys, but permeating each other,

entering and mixing with each other. Mindfulness has to be a willingness to be permeated, to be affected, to not remain isolated and separate from the world, because how can you be mindful of things if you don't think you're interpermeating with them all the time?

How do we signal that willingness to be affected by the world in this way? It's here that I believe that mindfulness has to be more than careful observation. I notice in myself a desire for mindfulness to be described not just on the careful end of the spectrum — careful shading into preciousness sometimes — but that we might have some balance on the other end of the spectrum, where we talk about fierce mindfulness, or mindfulness with abandon, which is a great oxymoron. What's it like on that end of the spectrum? What's it like when there's an *all in* rather than a protective quality to that? If we're willing to be permeated, if we're willing to be in and affected, then it's got to be something more vulnerable than a careful observation of the world. It seems to me it's got to be something more like a love song that we're singing to the world.

That brings me back to the poem I mentioned last time, Amichai's "Gods Change, Prayers Are Here To Stay." The 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.

Amichai doesn't add anything; there's nothing extra. Are there any adjectives? I think the only adjectives are 'locked' and 'wooden' about the door; no adjectives, no adverbs, just an unvarnished, simple description of this moment on a Jerusalem street, which allows us to — I'll speak for myself — allows me to fall completely into it. There's the presence of a profound appreciation of how rich the world is just as it is, without embellishment, without opinion, without gussying up at all. Just the bare facts of the world are already miraculous.

In the koan salon yesterday we were talking about how things were described as 'mysterious' and 'wondrous' in the *Blue Cliff Record*. In Chan 'mysterious' refers to the 'dark mysterious,' the origin of all things, the *dharmakaya*, the source, emptiness. Then the manifest world, the world we're in and interacting with all the time, is the wondrous. Everything is simultane-

ously mysterious and wondrous, and what Amichai is doing, and what mindfulness does, is allow us to have this intimate relationship with the wondrous aspect of things. One of the things I love about this little snapshot of a moment from this poem, is that he includes the mindfulness of what we don't know, as well as what we know. He says, "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." Yet there's nothing missing in this moment; the moment is complete just as it is. That's another aspect of mindfulness : not just what we can see or taste or smell or touch, but what we can't know, the things we can't see that are in the dark for us. Mindfulness needs to include that depth as well as what is available to our conscious minds.

This love song to the world has a quality of appreciation about it. Whenever we talk about mindfulness we use moments like washing the dishes or cutting up the carrots for dinner, and we're just doing that. But when I think about cutting the carrots for dinner from the fierce and abandoned end of the mindfulness spectrum, then the experience becomes something like *Orange! Crisp! Fresh water splash! Hummingbird out the window!* Not that we would label things like that, but we would become so aware of all of them and so appreciative of this Now that extends from one end of the universe to the other, and is appearing before us as carrots.

Taking up the practice of mindfulness becomes the answer to a desire to develop our capacity to notice and to love in this way. That's a different way of holding it : mindfulness as our desire to develop the capacity to notice and to love. If we're thinking about it that way, each perception we throw into the world — these activities of mindfulness, like looking, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling — become questions. They're inquiries we're making about how things are, wondering how things are. And we're holding reality in mind not in the way of the self under construction — which can sometimes be a habitual replaying of reality, a rumination about reality — but by wondering about it, by considering it, by listening for what's new, what we didn't previously know. We're keeping company with reality in real time. Think about how much you actually do that.

One of the most wonderful writers on this subject is the twentieth-century philosopher Simone Weil. She talked about attention, which meant for her what mindfulness means for us. She called attention "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." She was writing in French, and *juste* means more than fair; it means accurate; perfectly matched to the situ-

ation. If we substitute mindfulness for attention, mindfulness is a just and loving gaze directed upon reality.

Somewhere else she said that the reality upon which we are turning our just and loving gaze is “that which is revealed to the patient eye of love.” So when we talk about mindfulness, we’re not talking about doing something because we want to be better people, or more at ease in our own skin, or any of that kind of thing. We’re talking about wanting to get closer to reality, and that patient eye of love, which is such a good description of mindfulness, becomes our focus, the thing we’re doing, the way we hold the practice. Our intention is, in our language, to become intimate.

Weil also talked about how we direct our attention outward by its nature. It moves away from the self towards what she called “the great surprising variety of the world.” The ability to direct attention that way is also love. She called this kind of attention unsentimental — which means not about us — but rather detached, unselfish, and objective. When she spoke of *détaché* she didn’t mean detached from the things of the world or detached from one’s feelings, she meant specifically detached from what she called “the ego’s needs and tyrannies.” That’s an important thing for us to understand in terms of the Dharma : to hold detachment as unattachment from the ego’s tyrannies and needs. Things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.

We might think that this would be fairly easy to do with people and things we enjoy, and maybe doable with things about which we feel neutral; and possible maybe to extend to things that we find merely annoying or mildly troublesome, but that it might be difficult to do with things that are of a ‘difficult thusness’ for us. Mindfulness of the kind we’re talking about doesn’t mean that you have to immediately feel completely wonderful about whatever’s happening; that’s not what a just and loving gaze means. When difficult things appear it might mean at first simply being willing to acknowledge that they are so, and to not flee; being able to stay with what’s uncomfortable or painful in the feelings they evoke in us, without immediately protecting ourselves by jumping to opinions and judgments. That might be exactly mindfulness; that might be a true just and loving gaze in that moment. Then, of course, we hold the possibility that it could change over time.

The poet Mary Oliver gave a great description of this. In a poem she said, “When it’s over, I want to say / all my life I was a bride to amazement / I was the bridegroom taking the world

into my arms.” To be ‘amazed’ means literally, etymologically, to be in the labyrinth, a-mazed. So when we are a-mazed by things, even if they are difficult, we are willing to be walking the labyrinth; we are willing to be inside the question and to walk there, and to actually become the question in our own lives. That’s a pretty intimate practice, the practice of being a-mazed.

All of these are part of that constellation of unselfings that can happen with mindfulness. The other thing I mentioned is the moral dimension, the way that we are willing to be affected and how we affect things. To continue with Simone Weil, she said that attention is the effort to counteract states of illusion, which we would call delusion. She described illusion as “convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world,” which is a great way of talking about delusions, too. Here’s where the moral dimension comes in : she’s saying that attention, what we would call mindfulness, is an effort to counteract illusion, or delusion.

The novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch says something similar : “It is in the capacity to love – that is, to see – that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists.” She’s linking loving with seeing clearly, with seeing things as they really are, and that counteracts delusion and allows us to unself; it allows us to uncouple from the ego’s tyrannies and needs and turn toward the other. I also hear something about compassion : compassion is not an emotion that we generate, or something that we practice hard to be able to bring to a situation; compassion, in her view, is a kind of realism. If love and seeing truly are right next to each other as part of the same thing, compassion and seeing truly are part of the same thing as well. Compassion is a way of seeing; it’s a fundamental kind of orientation toward life, rather than something we bring in or add on or feel in response to something.

Simone Weil pointed out that there’s nothing in simple attention or mindfulness that necessarily carries this moral dimension. We can think of plenty of activities that people do very mindfully and attentively that have very bad results and outcomes. Mindfulness by itself, without this moral dimension, has the potential to actually be problematic. You can become a better burglar if you are mindful. She said that it always had to be a particular *quality* of attention, this just and loving gaze.

For Iris Murdoch, by definition a good person was someone who had to know something about her surroundings, and “most obviously, the existence of other people and their claims.” One of the things that happens when we’re unselfed is that we see that the world and others in the world have some kind of claim on us, and that’s an important part of mindfulness. Weil

said, “to know that this person who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do, that is enough. The rest follows of itself.” For her, one of the points of attention / mindfulness is to experience, to see with a just and loving gaze, that the person who is hungry and thirsty exists as much as I do, and therefore has a claim on me. If we do just that, if we allow ourselves to be interpermeated and affected by others, that’s enough; the rest follows of itself. It’s easy to work out, from there, what to do, once we have accepted the reality of others.

Then Weil talked about will not as unimpeded movement, the ability to do whatever we want and make whatever happen that we want to, but will as something more like obedience to necessity. If we’re really attending to the reality of other things and allowing that to affect us, what needs to be done is going to become clearer and clearer. Where will comes in is our willingness, our obedience, to follow what’s become clear, what the necessity of the situation is.

Iris Murdoch said that this isn’t a grand gesture but a series of the small moments in our lives, and she said it in a particularly wonderful way : “The exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time, and it is not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments.” I love that description of self-will run riot, a “grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments.” Then she says that “if I attend properly I will have no choices.” Because, if I attend properly, the necessities of the moment, the necessities of the situation when looked at with a just and loving gaze, will become clear, or more clear, or clear enough to do something. The number of choices will be necessarily reduced to the necessity of the moment. She said that was the whole point of moral life, which is counter to our usual way of looking at things and it seems worth considering : if I attend properly, I will have no choices.

I’ll close now by looping back to the Amichai poem to talk in another way about mindfulness being not just an endeavor of a single heart-mind. The mindfulness here moves. It moves through Amichai, through the poem, to us, and if we’re mindful readers or listeners, we’ll hear that the whole meaning of the poem pivots on that word ‘locked’; that locked gate makes everything exactly the way it is.

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.

I love the paradox of the word 'locked' being the key to understanding the poem. Think about how much of our appreciation of art, our love and experience of art, is really about becoming mindful of something produced by someone else's mindfulness. In that way, mindfulness is gloriously contagious, which is, again, quite different from that single heart-mind, striding through the landscape with a certain attitude. It's a glorious contagion in this world of wondrous manifestations we share.

I'll stop there and welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1: I have a question about morality. How that is defined in this context.

JIS: Pretty simply, it's how we are affected by and affect others in the world around us. Then the qualities of the particular morality you're engaging in will depend on the nature of how you affect and are affected.

Q2 : Do you think that the way mindfulness was translated here in America was permeated by American individualism? Or is your point of view, which is relational, more inherent to Buddhist practice?

JIS : My take about what happened with mindfulness, especially initially, is this : I know some of the people who worked with that, and I think their intention was that here's an amazing treasure that's embedded in this whole dharmic system, but this could be immediately beneficial to people if they can just take it as a practice without having to take the whole context. I think the initial impulse was very much *This could help people right now. Let's use it. Excellent.* All I'm asking is that if we think about mindfulness in its context, how does it change? How do we understand it? Since we're willing to take on that whole dharmic context by virtue of our being here in this room together, what does it look like when we don't sever the relationship?

Q2 : So is that relational aspect inherent?

JIS : I think it is. If you want to understand any Buddhist practice, look at how it unselfs and that will explain what it's about.

Q3 : Could you say a little more about other beings having a claim on us?

JIS : In this idea of mindfulness, if we really experience others as real, it becomes impossible to think of them as unreal or something we don't have to worry about. If they're real, our attending, our care is automatically called forward. Simply by the fact that they exist, as we do, equally, they have a claim on us.

Q3 : So they become a part of us.

JIS : It's a funny, interesting combination, because they become a part of us, but also, it's their distinctness and their particularity that is part of the claim they make on us. We have to really look and see how this person or this tree or this ocean is both the same as I and different, and in the ways that it's different, what are the claims being made by those very differences? What does this being need, which might be different for what I imagine for myself?

Q4 : If you pay attention to that, how does detachment fit in?

JIS : Because what we're detaching ourselves from is not the supposed others of the world, or from our own feeling states. It's a detachment from what Weil called "the tyrannies and needs of the ego," which we would call the ongoing creation of a self. That's what we're detaching from.

Q5 : The first week when you asked what mindfulness meant to us, one of the things that popped into my mind immediately was options and choices. But I love the way you brought it back to no choice, when you're intimate and connected the choice is clear.

JIS : It would be interesting to explore how those are two sides of the same coin. If you're not reacting, not falsely limiting the choices, then anything is possible. Then when you look clearly, what of that range is the necessary thing? When you're stuck in reaction, there's only one thing that can happen, which is the reaction, right?

Q7 : That moment when we react to what's going on within ourselves is a creation, right? Our creation with our own minds, our own reality in some ways? Empty but co-existing and interwoven?

JIS : It's being co-created by everything, together. It's not just a projection of our own minds. There's a co-creation going on, and we see that more or less clearly. It's a subtle dis-

tion, but I think it's an important one, that it isn't just created by our minds; we participate in a co-creation altogether that we see more or less well. Then, for example, if we can stay closer to that, if we can continue the co-creation, that's a response. The minute we step back and do what you're talking about, which is substitute what's in our minds for what's actually happening, we're in reaction. And we're one step back from that co-created reality in that small room of our beliefs or thoughts about that.

Thank you all very much.