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Here, Now, Aware: The Power of Mindfulness

It's the essence of the contemplative path and the key to transforming our lives. In this teaching from his new book, *A Heart Full of Peace*, Insight Meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein describes this simple yet profound expression of our mind's natural awareness.

MINDFULNESS IS THE KEY to the present moment. Without it we cannot see the world clearly, and we simply stay lost in the wanderings of our minds. Tulku Urgyen, a great Tibetan Dzogchen master of the last century, said, "There is one thing we always need, and that is the watchman named mindfulness—the guard who is always on the lookout for when we get carried away by mindlessness."

Mindfulness is the quality and power of mind that is deeply aware of what's happening—without commentary and without interference. It is like a mirror that simply reflects whatever comes before it. It serves us in the humblest ways, keeping us connected to brushing our teeth or having a cup of tea.

Mindfulness also keeps us connected to the people around us, so we don't just rush by them in the busyness of our lives. The

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Dalai Lama is an example of someone who beautifully embodies this quality of caring attention. After one conference in Arizona, His Holiness requested that all the employees of the hotel gather in the lobby, so that he could greet each one of them before he left for his next engagement.

Mindfulness is the basis for wise action. When we see clearly what is happening in the moment, wisdom can direct our choices and actions, rather than old habits simply playing out our patterns of conditioning. And on the highest level, the Buddha spoke of mindfulness as the direct path to enlightenment: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearing of pain and grief, for the attainment of the Way, for the realization of nirvana."

I began to practice meditation when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. At the time I was very enthusiastic about philosophical discussion. When I first went to visit Buddhist monks, I arrived with a copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* in my hand, thinking to engage them in debate. Then I started going to discussion groups for Westerners, held at one of the temples in Bangkok. I was so persistent in my questions that other people actually stopped coming to the groups. Finally, perhaps out of desperation, one of the monks said, "Why don't you start meditating?"

I didn't know anything about meditation at the time, and I became excited by the prospect of what I saw as an exotic Eastern practice. I gathered all the paraphernalia together, sat myself down on a cushion—and then set my alarm clock for five minutes. Surprisingly, something important happened even in those few minutes. For the first time, I realized there was a way to look inward: there was a path for exploring the nature of my mind.

This realization is a turning point in everyone's spiritual life. We reach a certain point in our lives when something connects, and we acknowledge to ourselves, "Yes, I can do this." All of this was so new and interesting to me that, for a while, I'd invite my friends over to watch me meditate. Of course, they didn't often come back.

THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

We can start the practice of mindfulness meditation with the simple observation and feeling of each breath. Breathing in, we know we're breathing in; breathing out, we know we're breathing out. It's very simple, but not easy. After just a few breaths, we hop on trains of association, getting lost in plans, memories, judgments, and fantasies. Sometimes it seems like we're in a movie theater where the film changes every few minutes. Our minds are like that. We wouldn't stay in a theater where the movies changed so rapidly, but what can we do about our own internal screening room?

This habit of wandering mind is very strong, even when our reveries aren't pleasant and, perhaps, aren't even true. As Mark Twain put it, "Some of the worst things in my life never happened." We need to train our minds, coming back again and again to the breath and simply beginning again.

As our minds slowly steady, we begin to experience some inner calm and peace. From this place of greater stillness, we feel our bodies more directly and begin to open to both the pleasant and unpleasant sensations that might arise. At first, we may resist unpleasant feelings, but generally they don't last that long. They are there for a while, we feel them, they're unpleasant—and then they're gone and something else comes along. And even if they come up repeatedly, over a period of time, we begin to see their impermanent, insubstantial nature and to be less afraid of feeling them.

A further part of the training is becoming aware of our thoughts and emotions, those pervasive mental activities that so condition our minds, our bodies, and our lives. Have you ever stopped to consider what a thought is—not the content but the very nature of thought itself? Few people really explore the question, "What is a thought?" What is this phenomenon that occurs so many times a day, to which we pay so little attention?

Not being aware of the thoughts that arise in our mind, nor of the very nature of thought itself, allows thoughts to then dominate our lives. Telling us to do this, say that, go here, go there, thoughts often drive us like we're their servants.

Once, when I was teaching in Boulder, Colorado, I was sitting quite comfortably in my apartment. Thoughts were coming and going, when one arose in my mind that said, "Oh, a pizza would be nice." I wasn't even particularly hungry, but this thought lifted me out of the chair, took me out the door, down the stairs, into the car, over to the pizza place, back into the car, up the stairs, and into my apartment, where I finally sat back down to eat the pizza. What drove that whole sequence of activity? Just a thought in my mind.

Obviously, there is nothing wrong with going out for pizza. What does merit our attention, though, is how much of our lives is driven by thoughts. Unnoticed, they have great power. But when we pay attention, when we observe thoughts as they

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arise and pass away, we begin to see their essentially empty nature. They arise as little energy bubbles in the mind, rather than as reified expressions of a self.

Just as there was no all-powerful wizard behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz,* the only power our thoughts have is the power we give them. All thoughts come and go. We can learn to be mindful of them and not be carried away by the wanderings of our mind. With mindfulness, we can exercise wise discernment: "Yes, I will act on this one; no, I'll let that one go."

WORKING WITH EMOTIONS

In the same way, we can train ourselves to be mindful of emotions, those powerful energies that sweep over our bodies and minds like great breaking waves. We experience such a wide range of emotions, sometimes within quite a short period of time: anger, excitement, sadness, grief, love, joy, compassion, jealousy, delight, interest, boredom. There are beautiful emotions and difficult ones—and for the most part, we are caught up in their intensity and the stories that give rise to them.

We easily become lost in our own melodramas. It's illuminating to drop down a level and look at the energy of the emotion itself. What is sadness? What is anger? Seeing more deeply requires looking not at the emotion's "story," but at how the emotion manifests in our minds and bodies. It means taking an active interest in discovering the very nature of emotion.

The America monk Ajahn Sumedho expressed this kind of interest and investigation very well. He suggested that in a moment of anger or happiness, we simply notice: "Anger is like this," "Happiness is like that." Approaching our emotional life in this way is quite different than drowning in the intensity of feelings or being caught on the rollercoaster of our ever-changing moods. To do this takes mindfulness, attention, and concentration. We need to take care, though, not to misunderstand this practice and end up suppressing emotions or pushing them aside. The meditative process is one of complete openness to feelings. From the meditative perspective, the question is, "How am I relating to this emotion?" Am I completely identified with it or is the mind spacious enough to feel the grief, the rage, the joy, the love without being overwhelmed?

THE PRACTICE OF LETTING GO

As you meditate, keep bringing your attention back to what is happening in the moment: the breath, a feeling in the body, a thought, an emotion, or even awareness itself. As we become more mindful and accepting of what's going on, we find—both in meditation and in our lives—that we are less controlled by the forces of denial or addiction, two forces that drive much of life. In the meditative process we are more willing to see whatever is there, to be with it but not be caught by it. We are learning to let go.

In some Asian countries there is a very effective trap for catching monkeys. A slot is made in the bottom of a coconut, just big enough for the monkey to slide its hand in, but not big enough for the hand to be withdrawn when it's clenched. Then they put something sweet in the coconut, attach it to a tree, and wait for the monkey to come along. When the monkey slides its hand in and grabs the food, it gets caught. What keeps the monkey trapped? It is only the force of desire and attachment. All the monkey has to do is let go of the sweet, open its hand, slip out, and go free—but only a rare monkey will do that. And similarly, the twentieth-century Japanese Zen teacher Kosho Uchiyama speaks of "opening the hand of thought."

Another quality that develops in meditation is a sense of humor about our minds, our lives, and our human predicament. Humor is essential on the spiritual path. If you do not have a sense of humor now, meditate for a while and it will come, because it's difficult to watch the mind steadily and systematically without learning to smile. Someone once asked Sasaki Roshi whether he ever went to the movies. "No," he replied. "I give interviews."

Some years ago I was on retreat with the Burmese meditation master Sayadaw U Pandita. He is a strict teacher, and everyone on the retreat was being very quiet, moving slowly, and trying to be impeccably mindful. It was an intense time of training. At mealtime, we would all enter the dining room silently and begin taking food, mindful of each movement.

One day, the person on line in front of me at the serving table lifted up the cover on a pot of food. As he put it down on the table,

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it suddenly dropped to the floor making a huge clanging noise. The very first thought that went through my mind was, "It wasn't me!" Now, where did that thought come from? With awareness, one can only smile at these uninvited guests in the mind.

Through the practice of meditation we begin to see the full range of the mind's activities, old unskillful patterns as well as wholesome thoughts and feelings. We learn to be with the whole passing show. As we become more accepting, a certain lightness develops about it all. And the lighter and more accepting we become with ourselves, the lighter and more accepting we are with others. We're not so prone to judge the minds of others, once we have carefully seen our own. The poet, W.H. Auden, says it well: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." Spacious acceptance doesn't mean that we act on everything equally. Awareness gives us the option of *choosing wisely*: we can choose which patterns should be developed and cultivated, and which should be abandoned.

Just as the focused lens of a microscope enables us to see hidden levels of reality, so too a concentrated mind opens us to deeper levels of experience and more subtle movements of thought and emotion. Without this power of concentration, we stay on the surface of things. If we are committed to deepening our understanding, we need to practice mindfulness and gradually strengthen concentration. One of the gifts of the teachings is the reminder that we can do this—each and every one of us.

PRACTICING IN DAILY LIFE

In our busy lives in this complex and often confusing world, what practical steps can we take to train our minds?

The first step is to establish a regular, daily meditation practice. This takes discipline. It's not always easy to set aside time each day for meditation; so many other things call to us. But as with any training, if we practice regularly we begin to enjoy the fruits. Of course, not every sitting will be concentrated. Sometimes we'll be feeling bored or restless. These are the inevitable ups and downs of practice. It's the commitment and regularity of practice that is important, not how any one sitting feels. Pablo Casals, the world-renowned cellist, still practiced three hours a day when he was ninety-three. When asked why he still practiced at that age, he said, "I'm beginning to see some improvement."

The training in meditation will only happen through your own effort. No one can do it for you. There are many techniques and traditions, and you can find the one most suitable for you. But regularity of practice is what effects a transformation. If we do it, it begins to happen; if we don't do it, we continue acting out the various patterns of our conditioning.

The next step is to train ourselves in staying mindful and aware of the body throughout the day. As we go through our daily activities, we frequently get lost in thoughts of past and future, not staying grounded in the awareness of our bodies.

A simple reminder that we're lost in thought is the very common feeling of *rushing*. Rushing is a feeling of toppling forward. Our minds run ahead of us, focusing on where we want to go, instead of settling into our bodies where we are.

Learn to pay attention to this feeling of rushing—which does not particularly have to do with how fast we are going. We can feel rushed while moving slowly, and we can be moving quickly and still be settled in our bodies. Either way, we're likely not present. If you can, notice what thought or emotion has captured the attention. Then, just for a moment, stop and settle back into the body: feel the foot on the ground, feel the next step.

The Buddha made a very powerful statement about this practice: "Mindfulness of the body leads to nirvana." This is not a superficial practice. Mindfulness of the body keeps us present—and therefore, we know what's going on. The practice is difficult to remember, but not difficult to do. It's all in the training: sitting regularly and being mindful of the body during the day.

To develop deeper concentration and mindfulness, to be more present in our bodies, and to have a skillful relationship with thoughts and emotions, we need not only daily training, but also time for retreat. It's very helpful, at times, to disengage from the busyness of our lives, for intensive spiritual practice. Retreat time is not a luxury. If we are genuinely and deeply committed to awakening, to freedom—to whatever words express the highest value you hold—a retreat is an essential part of the path.

We need to create a rhythm in our lives, establishing a balance between times when we are engaged, active, and relating in the world and times when we turn inward. As the great Sufi poet Rumi noted, "A little while alone in your room will prove more valuable than anything else that could ever be given you."

At first this "going inside" could be for a day, a weekend, or a week. At our meditation center, we also offer a three-month retreat every year, and at the new Forest Refuge, people have come for as long as a year. We can do whatever feels appropriate and possible to find balanced rhythm between our lives in the world and the inner silence of a retreat. In this way we develop concentration and mindfulness on deeper and deeper levels, which then makes it possible to be in the world in a more loving and compassionate way. ♦