Dharma talk notes by Lili Fernandez – Dec. 06, 2023

# “Mindfulness on and off the cushion – Meditation and the five precepts”

Tonight’s talk will be about the power of Mindfulness practice on and off the meditation cushion. We will be talking about the five precepts and about how to include mindfulness into our daily lives

When life’s circumstances may be limiting our formal sitting practice or sitting is not possible at all, how can we still work on our spiritual development and nurture mindfulness until the necessary conditions present themselves again to sit regularly?

Before my second son was born I had established a daily sitting practice of 45 minutes, every night at 9pm, which I also kept rigorously throughout my pregnancy. The benefits I received from my daily sitting were enhanced calmness, patience, clarity, kindness, compassion and more insight into the workings of the busy mind. Daily sitting had also prepared me to be mindful, present, open and curious at time of birth.

Then it all changed. Even though change is inevitable, it can and probably will throw us off track until we find our new normal. And then the cycle repeats.

Due to the lack of sleep, changed priorities, and so on… my daily sitting got thrown out of the window. It helped me however, to still keep a certain level of mindfulness in those first few months. A few months in, the benefits of my daily sitting started to fade into the background and the voices of babyhood took over.

I had to look for ways to weave mindfulness into my day to day “doings”, as sitting quietly, undisturbed and foremost awake was nearly impossible. A lot of post-its with reminders like “back to the breath” “respond from a place of compassion” and so on were distributed around my house.

It is said that **“formal practice”** prepares us for our daily challenges. “The popular notion is that you need to set aside a special time or place to meditate. In actuality, if meditation is to help us acquire peace of mind as we function in our life, then it must be a dynamic activity and part of our daily experience.” so explains Dr. Thynn Thynn in her book “Living Meditation, Living Insight”.

She explains further, that if we want to understand and resolve anger, desire, attachments and so on, we should focus on practicing when they actually present themselves. If we want to understand the mind, we have to watch it when it’s angry, while it desires, while there is conflict. We have to pay attention to the flow of thoughts and emotions passing through on a moment to moment basis. The moment we pay attention to the emotion, it loses its strength. Often times however, only after the anger has subsided are we aware that we’ve been angry. By that time, we’ve either already made some mistakes or end up being emotionally drained.

# Thoughts and emotions by themselves are just momentary and possess no life of their own. By clinging to them, you prolong their stay.” Dr. Thynn Thynn

**Formal sitting practice**

The human condition includes the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. When we experience pleasant feelings or thoughts, we tend to try to keep them.

On the opposite when we experience unpleasant or painful states, we are conditioned to push them away. With neutral experiences, we tend lose touch.

**Mindfulness of Breathing** nurtures our ability to redirect our attention to our breath. The breath is always present and is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. We can experience our breath in different

areas of our body. The rim of the nostrils, the upper lip, the abdomen – and with practice we may soon notice that our whole body is moving when we breathe. In meditation, we practice redirecting our attention to the breath. At the same time, we accept the present moment as it is, without wanting it to be different.

We have a direct experience, we are aware of the current and ever changing state of mind and leave it as it is. Meditation is also called “non doing”, we practice staying present, rather than being swept away by mind habits that we ordinarily have and do.

In the book “Insight Meditation” by Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein, Sharon compares sitting in meditation with somebody walking the tightrope. Maintaining balance on the rope is the main purpose, not too tense, not too relaxed. When we encounter pleasant, unpleasant or neutral states, we will lose our balance and may risk falling. In order to stay on the tightrope, we have to pay attention to what is coming our way. When we lose balance, we fall onto another tightrope and get another opportunity to practice, we start over. Everything is in a state of constant change.

Formal sitting allows us not only to see things as they truly are and we practice to **pause**. This pause is crucial in our daily life. We practice non-reactiveness in order to respond to life’s events from a place of compassion, love and kindness, rather than impulsiveness. Over time, we develop viraga, dispassion, to the stories our mind is trying to sell us. We are able to experience and observe what is happening, however we do not become the emotion or the thought anymore.

# The two pillars of meditation practice

* concentration
* quality of mindfulness

**Concentration** is the **development of stability of mind**, the ability to focus our usually scattered energy. The state of concentration we develop during meditation is tranquil, at ease, relaxed, open and curious. We allow things to be as they are without wanting to change them. Tranquility does not mean to fall asleep, we are deeply alert and connected to what is going on right at that moment.

The second pillar is the **quality of mindfulness**. It means **being aware of what is going on as it arises**, instead of being lost in our hopes, fears, judgements or daydreams.

Through mindfulness we are able to pay attention to pleasant, unpleasant and neutral experiences, as they arise.

**Mindfulness** helps us to be aware of joyful, pleasant moments. It helps us to be aware of sorrow, sadness or physical pain in the body. We can be aware of sounds happening while we are meditating, and be mindful of our reaction/ response to it.

None of these states of mind is a problem, they all become objects of meditation in the field of mindfulness. We are able to be aware of them without becoming them.

# But what if sitting is just not possible right now? What can we do? Until formal sitting returns, we may focus on:

1. **Meditation and everyday life – ethical conduct “Sila”**

The more we are able to bring our experience from the cushion to our daily life, the sooner we see how mindfulness becomes part of our daily routines. We work on **aligning our actions in the world with the moral principles we aim to live after.**

Generally speaking, it is not possible to separate the formal practice from our daily activities. **Our lives are seamless.** What we do formally when sit is reflected in how we live, and how we live is reflected on the cushion during our formal practice.

So how do we live a life of integrity and wholeness? How do we live up to the values we are aiming for in our formal practice, especially in challenging times? Here, we step into **“Sila” or ethical conduct**. It is the reflection of deepest love and concern for ourselves and others.

In the noble eightfold path, as taught by the Buddha, right speech, right action and right livelihood (right lifestyle) are part of “Ethical conduct”. **We aim to pay attention in our daily activities and align our actions with our ethical values.** Practicing pausing is key to non-reactiveness.

Remembering **the five precepts** helps us keep our commitment to a life of high morality. They are an expression of our good heartedness. We show that we care for ourselves and the well beings of others. It is important to keep in mind that they are not rules set in stone, they are practices and each one of us should reflected on them and find out what works and especially how.

First precept: refrain from killing or physical violence.

This practice is to show our respect and reverence for life on a daily basis. It includes bugs, animals and people.

Second precept: Refrain from stealing, refrain from taking which is not yours, being at peace and grateful with what we have, not stealing from earth’s natural resources

Third precept: refrain from sexual misconduct. Being responsible with our sexual energy, not causing harm or suffering to ourselves or others. Refrain from being driven by our desires, so we are able to make conscious choices.

Fourth precept: Using speech in an ethical way. Words are very powerful and are a very important means of connecting, so we practice refraining from lying, harsh or idle speech, or simply put causing harm to someone with our speech

Fifth precept: refraining from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind.

The precepts help us to develop greater awareness and should be understood in the context of training the mind. They help us to get more clarity about our intentions and the degree of connection or separation from others.

If we undertake the commitment to the five precepts, we are willing to use them as guidelines and decide on a moment to moment basis on what is the right thing to do. If it a precept is broken, instead of blaming and shaming ourselves, simply accept it and renew your commitment to the precepts.

# Ways to include mindfulness into our daily lives by mindful activities

* + Mindful eating – exercise with eating a raisin (look, feel, smell, texture, taste, change of texture)
	+ Mindful walking – paying attention how weight of the body shifts on soles of feet
	+ Mindful movement (yoga, tai chi, qi gong,…)
	+ Washing dishes
	+ Driving – using stop signs as reminders to stop and breathe
	+ Stopping at red lights
	+ Body Scan
	+ Bedtime routines, sleeping children – being present and being aware of what is happening
	+ Weeding the garden
	+ Cleaning up toys (stepping on legos) – Simple experience of pain or is there a storyline involved?
	+ Mindfully walking from one side of the room to the other
	+ Stepping into another room, using doorsteps as gateways
	+ Daily practices of gratitude when preparing and eating food (where does the food come from, who picked it, what conditions must have been present in order for this food to grow,…)
	+ We may choose to reframe certain sounds (ex. phone ring tone, doorbell, alarm clock) to reminders of mindfulness
	+ Bell of mindfulness, Timer on your phone: I program it to sound every 60 minutes as a reminder to take a few mindful breaths
	+ Practicing understanding the mind by watching it and paying attention while it is silent

*Conclusion: As mentioned above, sitting practice and daily life cannot be separated, they are one. So by living our life in an ethical way, by performing as many daily tasks as possible with mindfulness and by being patient with ourselves, we discover the art of mindful living.*

*And hopefully, when our formal sitting practice returns, the merits of living mindfully will have a beneficial impact on our formal sitting practice. Like with the 5 precepts, we all have to find our own interpretations about how our practice exactly looks like.*