

Introduction to Mindfulness (22 of 25)

Mindfulness with Concentration 2

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Welcome to the second day of the fifth week of Introduction to Mindfulness. For the first few days, I want to emphasize the partnership of mindfulness and concentration (*sati* and *samādhi*). These two work together.

Concentration or *samādhi* brings the steadiness of mind needed for a continuous awareness of something. Mindfulness opens the space to be aware. Then concentration keeps us connected so that there's a chance to really feel and sense something, to really get absorbed in something, to really stay present without being distracted by the baggage we carry, as I talked about yesterday – without picking up baggage and becoming distracted from what we're paying attention to.

Mindfulness is the initial awareness or recognition of something. It can be engaged in different ways. It's helpful to see the knowing of mindfulness – awareness of something – in two ways: with the mind's eye or the mind's sense, we can get really close to something. We can be right there with the sensations in the body, or right there with the emotions as they're experienced in the body. Or, we can step back one, two, or three steps, and just be aware of something from a distance. We don't have to be enmeshed or right up against something. Sometimes it's helpful to step back.

For example, with fear, being close to fear might feel like too much, and almost as if it activates more fear. But if we can step back with a wide perspective and give the fear lots of room, maybe the fear is manageable. We can stay with it and feel it. When they did the exercise of imagining how far back they would have to be in order to be able to stay present for something very difficult, I've known people who, in order to be with it, needed to be across the street or up on a hill nearby looking back at themselves sitting and meditating. But if they were right in the middle of the challenge, it was just too much for them.

So mindfulness can adjust the lens that we're present for. The lens can be close up, or it can be almost panoramic, stepping back quite far and getting the big picture. It's possible for mindfulness to feel a lot like a close-up that's a very little piece of something. Or it's possible to take in the big picture. Learning how to adjust the aperture and the distance, the lens that we're using, is very skillful, because it is difficult to be present for some things. It may be much easier to be with some things, but even then, it is still useful to adjust the aperture or distance of mindfulness in different circumstances.

For example, if there's a lot of agitation in the mind, it might be best to step back and see the big picture, "Oh, here's an agitated mind. Here's an agitated body." Getting close to any one particular sensation of agitation just agitates us more. But at other times, there might be something very specific in the body and the mind is fairly steady. Then it could be interesting to bring the attention really close, in a little square centimeter in the body, and just be there to feel what's there.

Concentration is steadiness with whatever aperture or lens we're using for mindfulness. We stay steady so that we don't bounce off easily or get distracted easily. The function of concentration is to steady that awareness. Stay right here. It also serves to bring a kind of respect. Concentration is the act of respect that keeps us present for something.

I've been at social gatherings where someone who is greeting a lot of people sees me from a distance. They look like they're delighted to see me and they come over. But by the time they're shaking my hand, their hand has gone limp and their eyes have gone to the next person, so I wasn't met. It was like we were getting ready to meet and see each other clearly, but the person glanced off. We don't want to do that with our inner experience when we meditate. We want to give time to really know – here, this – with respect.

Concentration is a steadiness. The settledness and steadiness of mindfulness can be done at different apertures. The example I'm using of coming together like this [with hands in *anjali*] might not be what's called for. Maybe sometimes from a distance, we say, "Hey, hi. I see you over there." That sense of, "Hi, I'm here and you're way over there" can make it easier to be with sadness, anger, or a spinning mind. It can help settle something. It helps us to be with it and stay present.

I think of mindfulness as a little closer to wisdom. The knowing of mindfulness helps us decide what form of mindfulness and what aperture or lens we use. It also helps us to decide how to settle on the experience. Do we settle through our whole body being grounded here? That sense of being grounded and settled can give us an independent feeling that we can be here with whatever comes up.

Or is the steadiness more mental, where the attention of the mind relaxes or settles into the experience right there? Another way of thinking of all this is that concentration is the left hand and mindfulness is the right hand. They come together in cupped hands, like this. Then we hold the experience. Difficult experiences like a lot of fear can just be held by both of these. Because they're together there's a little more fullness and a little more settledness. There is something that can receive experience, both in the moment and *through* moments. There's a continuity.

All along, this continuity and settledness in attention can be supported (sometimes) by breathing with the experience, or into the experience, or through the experience. The continuity of breathing and its coming and going create something like the beat of the music. There's both the tune and the beat. The beat is the continuity of the rhythm of breathing. The beat just keeps going and steadies or grounds the music in a certain way. It protects us from getting caught in thoughts and reactivity. The rhythm also helps to keep the awareness a little present. It also supports concentration – the respectful attending, staying, lingering, and just being with experience.

The idea of a three-breath journey is, with whatever you're aware of, to just be aware of three breaths. Sometimes that's enough for an experience to be fully acknowledged and no longer need more attention. Sometimes we give too much attention to some things. We get confused about the difference between thinking about or trying to fix something and make it go away, and mindfulness itself. Taking just three breaths with something makes it easier to keep it really simple. Know it, let it be, and come back to being grounded in the breathing.

If that thing is still calling your attention, do another three-breath journey. Of course, you can stay longer with things, but there's something protective about just staying with three breaths. Then gently begin again with just the breathing. Then three breaths with something else (or the same thing), and come back. If that seems too complicated or too busy, then of course you don't have to do it. But it might be a nice rhythm for helping you stay here present, mindful and steadied, mindful and concentrated, mindful and centered – con-centered here, present now.

The blending, marriage, and partnership of mindfulness and concentration is a great support for this practice. With all the things we've been studying the last few weeks, each step along the way can be partnered with a little bit of lingering, staying, and steadying with experience. We can steady ourselves with body sensations, with breathing, and with emotions. We don't do it with thinking, so we think more, but we steady mindfulness with the experience. We steady all of ourselves with *here* – being here so we can discover how to be independent of what is known. We can know, but that knowing, that awareness is not entangled with what is known. It stands independent. In that independence, we can provide more respect for each and every thing. If we're entangled, there's no room for respect, even though you might think that being all caught up with someone is respect. When we're steady and independent, the meeting of whatever awareness knows can be done with respect.

May you keep mindfulness close to you throughout the day, so that whoever you meet, whatever activity you're doing, whatever objects you're involved in (like washing the dishes), you do so with respect for each and every thing. Thank you.