

Introduction to Mindfulness (23 of 25) Flower of Wisdom

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Hello everyone, and welcome to the continuation of the Introduction to Meditation series.

The deepening of mindfulness practice is greatly helped by wisdom. Wisdom is the quality of understanding that protects us from getting entangled and caught in what our experience is, or what's happening. We don't get reactive, we don't get attached, we don't get resentful, and we don't become hostile. Wisdom supports us to meet things with a profound respect for ourselves, so we can hold our seat and take our place in a clear, upright way. Wisdom supports us to meet people with respect, kindness, and maybe with wisdom, because we've taken the time to really know what's happening here and now.

One advantage of developing some concentration with mindfulness is that concentration tends to quiet the thinking mind. As the thinking mind gets quieter, we can see the thinking mind better. When it does arise, we start seeing it in highlight against the silence and the stillness. In daily life, we're often so busy thinking that we don't even know we're thinking. We are distracted from distractions by distractions. The thoughts might be coming so fast that we almost don't have time to really assess what's going on.

But as we sit and meditate, there's a tendency to get calmer (not always) and then we can start to see the thoughts in highlight as they arise. We can start to see the nature of some of these thoughts. We can start seeing them for what they are. When we do that, we become able to see things free from the lens of the particular concepts, ideas, and paradigms by which we're living. We can see with fresh eyes, in new ways.

So, as practice develops, and we develop more and more wisdom, we understand better what's happening. That understanding makes it easier to not get caught in things. I want to do a little show and tell around this. First I'm going to hold up a flower. It's a little purple and green flower. If you hold up just a flower, it's just a flower. There's a famous mythic story about a flower that's often told, especially in the Zen tradition. The Buddha was in an assembly of people, and he held up a single flower without saying anything. But one disciple smiled. The Buddha recognized the awakening of that disciple and gave him permission to be a teacher.

The Buddha just held up the flower. One of the things about the flower is the suchness of the flower. The flower is just itself. Often we think flowers are beautiful and appreciate them. In Japan, they have a custom of having a single flower in a special alcove – a tokonoma – in the wall. In contrast to a big bouquet of flowers, a single flower highlights the specialness of the flower – the thusness, the suchness, the flower in itself. When we put out a big bouquet, it's beautiful maybe, with lots of colors, but the uniqueness and specialness of each flower is lost in the whole bouquet. Maybe we can appreciate just holding up a flower.

But then we can do something different. I can hold up a different flower. This new one is smaller. Now we can say something we couldn't say before: we can say that this flower is the large flower, and this other flower is the small flower. That's pretty straightforward and obvious. If I asked someone to get the larger of two flowers, if this is what they were looking for, they would bring this one to me. That distinction of calling one flower the large one and one the small one is very effective if I have something specific in mind.

But now look what happens. I'll do magic in front of your eyes and you'll see how the hand trick works with the magic. So remember, this is the small flower and this is the large flower. But now I bring this (third) flower. Now the flower that was the big flower before is the smaller flower, while this white one is bigger. What was large is now small, right in front of your eyes.

It turns out that largeness and smallness are not inherent in the flower. Large and small involves a dimensional capacity to compare one thing and another. So the flower in and of itself is neither large nor small. It just is what it is. With our human capacity to compare and our capacity to have desires and preferences, desires to make things happen in the world, we find it useful to compare the large flower and the small flower depending on the context. But comparisons don't exist inherently in nature.

It turns out that, one way or another, a fair amount of human suffering is born from comparative thinking. Many people suffer because of how their body looks. That means they're comparing their body to other people's bodies, their hair, their nose, their fingers, their belly, whatever. Or they're comparing it to some ideal they have about how it should be.

It turns out that the body parts that we have can exist happily in their suchness. Often they can just be. Our hair can just be our hair. Our hair is content to be what it is, whether we have a lot or little. But because of our comparisons, our values, our fears, and our stories, we begin to suffer. We compare histories and biographies. We compare people according to what they've done and not done. We compare our past self to our present self, and our present self to what our imagined future self is. We compare values. The comparisons go on and on. We have thoughts and we think that's the most beatific, wonderful thought that anybody's ever had. We have another thought and we think that is the most awful thought that anybody's ever had. That involves comparison.

Some of these comparisons have some usefulness. They help us to get things done in the world. But comparisons are also how a tremendous amount of suffering happens. When we sit in meditation, we might compare our breathing: yesterday I had a deep, long, sweet breath, and today the breath is shallow and tight. We're comparing it. In that comparison, we want yesterday's breath or we condemn today's breath.

The breathing is just like the flower. The "is-ness" of the breath is just what it is. A shallow, tight breath is just a shallow, shallow, tight breath. It's uncomfortable but that's just discomfort in and of itself with no comparison to how it could be or how it used to be. Something very profound can happen when we see, "Oh, my reaction, my way of getting tight, resistant, or mentally entangled is born from the mental capacity to compare things. That's an activity of my mind."

As we meditate and get quieter, that activity has a chance to quiet down, and we can see that it's somewhat optional. We don't have to always have these thoughts. Sometimes they're useful, as I said, but often they're a source of unnecessary suffering. Meditation is a time when we try to give ourselves the gift of letting ourselves just be in our "is-ness," our suchness: we are the flower. We are the single flower that's allowed to exist without any comparison to anything else. In meditation, the beauty, uniqueness, and specialness of each of us as flowers are allowed to just be as they are, regardless of the characteristics of our body, regardless of our belief systems, regardless of our past and future, and regardless of whether we're healthy or sick or have some limitation or not.

We can respect and care for all those things at the right time. But to live caught in them or oppressed by them is a major source of human suffering. Think of meditation as the place where we are allowed to just breathe, and just exist, as we are, and be the unique flower that we are. For a few minutes, put aside all the comparative thinking so that just being alive is wonderful – just being here and now free of all the comparisons.

Of course, that's easier said than done. When comparative thinking arises, part of mindfulness practice is to recognize it as such and step away from it so we're not entangled with it. We turn around and look at it clearly: "Oh, that's comparative thinking." Then we meet it carefully and steady ourselves on that. "Oh, that's how it is." We might do the three-breath journey with the mind that compares, then maybe feel the physical sensations of what comparative thinking is like. Feel the underlying emotion. Each of them is given their time. We meet each one with respect. We take our time.

Perhaps you'll discover the gift of letting yourself be a flower, letting yourself just be yourself – breathing, meditating, just being yourself, practicing with that. This is how wisdom can operate. As your practice goes along, there might come a day when this kind of wisdom becomes obvious and available, and it'll support the further development of the meditation. Thank you very much and I look forward to meeting tomorrow.

