

Introduction to Mindfulness (25 of 25)

Freedom

February 23, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS absence, silence, stillness, lake, spaciousness, softness, diffuseness, self-centredness, self-concern, self-referencing, self constructs, selfing, measuring, clarity, contraction, independence, entangled, caught, reactive, nourishment, refuge

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Hello. As I start the last of 25 talks on Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation, I'd like to say that I plan to continue with this series starting next week. Maybe we'll call it Intermediate Mindfulness or Introduction to Mindfulness Part 2. But I think that there's much more to say about the heart of mindfulness practice that builds on what we've done so far.

Today, maybe it's poignant to be at the very end, coming to a conclusion. This leads us to the truth that all things must end. All things come to a time when they are not there (except when saved on the Internet). All things are not there at some point. What follows the end of things is an absence. When things come to an end and we miss them and love them, that absence can lead us to loneliness, sadness, and grief. There's also something very poignant in the absence that we can sometimes find in this practice. Maybe that depends on what the absence is.

One of the key absences we're looking for in the Dharma is the absence of suffering. When that absence is there, it is sweet or freeing. It is very nourishing to feel our existence without suffering being part of it. So one of the things that we want to be attuned to and recognize when we do mindfulness is, in fact, absence. There's a very strong instruction in mindfulness practice to pay attention to what is happening. What is happening is certainly central to this enterprise. But we want to also pay attention to when things are no longer there.

When we're caught up in distracted thinking and it goes on and on, then when it's absent – when it finally stops, don't just go on to the next thing happening. Take time to register, "Oh, that feels good." Pay attention to the way that absence of thinking is good. If you're filled with anger and the anger dissipates and disappears, take time to register the goodness of that absence. See what's available then, and what it feels like to have that absence.

Absence doesn't make for a very sharp object of attention. It's more amorphous or diffuse, almost bordering on imagination. In our imagination, we have a memory that something was there and is not here now. When we carry tension in our bodies, if the tightness in the body dissolves, there's the absence of that tension. How does the body feel without it?

So as we sit and meditate being mindful of what is, part of what is, is absence. Among the qualities of absence that can stand out, sometimes really strongly, is the absence that is this marvelous sense of silence in the mind when the mind is not thinking much or at all. There is a marvelous sense of stillness. I love the image of a very still, quiet morning lake before the sun rises. All the animals and birds are quiet, and there's no wind. It is so peaceful and still. Sometimes you can feel that way inside.

Sometimes there's the absence of claustrophobic objects – all this stuff happening, sensations, and this and that. Instead, there's a sense of spaciousness in awareness. A lot of thinking can make the mind claustrophobic, but the spacious mind has lots of room.

I associate the nourishing aspect of stillness, silence, and spaciousness with those times when there's softness or diffuseness, and where there are not a lot of constructs of self – where even self-centeredness and self-concern drop away. There's kind of a selfless quality in it. In this absence of self-concern, self-referencing,

and self-ing – constructing a self, being a self, measuring everything according to the self – there is an experience of the absence of self. This is soft and wonderful and peaceful.

Absence has a quality of freedom in it. All these wonderful absences can be experienced in mindfulness itself. When mindfulness is just a clear awareness of what is, in that clear awareness, almost in the clarity itself, you can see the clarity is the absence of smudges, the absence of obstacles to see. In that clarity, there's the absence of noise, the absence of agitation, and the absence of contraction. The clarity of mind that is mindfulness, when mindfulness is really strong and centered, is characterized by these absences. They are almost synonymous with freedom – a sense of clear independence, where mindfulness knows what's happening, but in knowing it, is independent of what is happening. Mindfulness is not entangled, caught, or reactive.

That absence of being caught and entangled and the freedom from suffering that's there are some of the great experiences that mindfulness can bring. What's wonderful about this is that this kind of freedom is portable in a certain way. We can bring it with us into the world. When the experience of freedom is strong enough, then we probably always have a reference point. Maybe we're too busy sometimes to notice it, but we can turn toward it and say, "Ah, there's that freedom, there's that refuge of stillness, spaciousness, silence, softness, this refuge of freedom right here. It's with me." Then mindfulness becomes a wonderful nourishment that promotes greater and greater freedom.

Thank you for being part of this 25-session Introduction to Mindfulness. I hope this has supported you. Some of you have probably been practitioners for a long time. Some of you are beginners and some of you are experienced beginners. Either way, I hope that the introductory instructions are useful for everyone.