

Intro to Mindfulness Pt2 (11) Appearance Bundle of Clinging

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Hello from Insight Meditation Center. Today I am beginning a new series within the longer series on Introduction to Mindfulness Part 2.

One of the important areas of mindfulness is not just being present here and now with what's happening in our experience of body, breath, emotions, feelings, and thoughts. It is also being present for and recognizing the ways we are attached – clinging, grasping, clamping down, tightening up, or constricting. This is central to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness because attachment is considered to be the primary cause of optional suffering. This is the suffering that we add to our lives by clinging. Clinging itself is a kind of suffering. Attachment is a kind of constriction, a contraction, a resistance, a tightening up, a weighing down that we can experience.

To lighten up, release, and free up whatever we're attached to is part of the enterprise of the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness. To do that we want to start becoming cognizant of how we cling and what forms of attachment we have by becoming aware of the direct physical ways in which attachment is felt and experienced. Generally, even if we feel that it's valid to cling to and be attached to something, if we really feel the cost of the attachment and the impact it has on us, we can feel that it's stressful. We can feel that attachment is a limitation, an irritation, a burden, and it brings along a kind of contraction that doesn't feel good. And it leads to further contractions. Part of the problem of clinging and attachment is that one attachment gives birth to other attachments. They grow on each other.

The practice of mindfulness is a practice of radical simplicity. We're trying to be simple enough in the present moment, just being with our direct experience, so that direct experience can highlight the clinging and attachment we add to it. According to the Buddha, there are two things we attach to: what we cling to, and the clinging itself.

In the teachings of the Buddha, he put a lot of emphasis on five areas that we cling. This is not just any clinging. For the Buddha, these five areas are also the primary areas through which we cling to a sense of self. Regardless of whether you think there is or isn't a self, there is clinging to self, to identity, to who we think we should be, to roles, and a variety of things. That clinging and self-attachment can create a tremendous amount of suffering. People often act on their attachments and clinging. When they do, it's usually not very skillful or helpful.

These five areas are: first, appearances – how we appear and how others appear to us; second, the basic sensations of pleasure and pain, comfort and discomfort; third, the perceptions or conceptions by which we recognize things (the simple ideas we have of things that are often not that simple because they come along with a whole host of associations, meanings, and projections); fourth, the stories we live by – the larger constructions of the mind (interpretations, philosophies, memories, histories, and imaginings of the future); and fifth, our very simple capacity to know. This means not just what we know, but that we do know. It's such a fantastic capacity, and some people cling to this.

These are five areas of clinging. The Buddha referred to them, as I understand it, as “the five bundles”. Sometimes they’re called the “five aggregates” in English, but I think the word “aggregates” kind of obscures what they’re about. He said they are different experiences we have that we gather together into a larger collection through our clinging. This implies not only that we cling to something, but it is one of many clings. We start gathering them together.

The first one is appearances. In English it’s usually translated as “form,” but here we understand form to mean the shape of things, and how they appear. But because appearances also includes hearing, smelling, tasting, and the other senses, it refers to how things appear to the senses.

Appearance is in the eyes of the beholder. We’re not passive and innocent perceivers of things. Appearance is something we select. We select what’s important for us in the world of appearances. We see an attractive person. Maybe it’s the clothes they wear. It might be the shape of their nose or the quality of their voice. Somehow we’re predisposed to tune into certain aspects of a person and that’s what we find attractive. How they appear in our mind, the result of the selection choice we’ve made, is not just innocently seeing things as they are. Of all the things that a person is, we’ve tuned into a particular aspect of them. That happens to us as well.

As I grew up, there was a progressive increase in my concern about my appearance and how I appeared to others. I think the earliest memory I had of something like this was when I was maybe about six years old. Before that, I called my parents, “Mama” and “Papa.” But when I was returning to Norway to visit with my grandparents there, I remember getting off the airplane at the airport in Norway. It was literally time to get up from our seats and walk down the aisle, so it was a time to say something that there would be no conversations about. I turned to my mother and said, “From now on, you’re going to be “Mother” and “Father,” (*Mor og far*, in Norwegian).” I didn’t want to be embarrassed and look like a small kid in the eyes of my grandparents. I wanted to be a little more grown up by saying “Mother and Father.”

So how I appeared to people became a concern. When I was maybe eight, I remember that the first time I got glasses, I also changed schools. I didn’t want to wear my glasses in the new school because I thought I would look funny and people would make fun of me. As I got older, in the sixties there were concerns about how long my hair was, what kind of clothes I wore, and concerns with all kinds of things that progressively grew and grew and grew. I don’t know when they stopped growing.

But there was a concern about how I appeared and how other people appeared to me. When I was 19, I traveled with some friends to Morocco. Back then, most of the Moroccan men wore these beautiful long robes. I think they’re called “djellaba.” When I walked around the streets of Morocco, I had a strange feeling. Something was a little bit lighter or more open in my mind. I couldn’t understand it until one day I realized that because all these men were wearing clothes that I had no associations with, I was not associating or projecting judgments and ideas onto them. In other parts of the world, in the West and America, you could tell something about the people by the clothes they wore, so walking down the street, I had judgments about people and my mind was busy subconsciously evaluating and judging people as I went. In Morocco, I couldn’t do that. This freed part of my mind. That was a lovely feeling to have – to not have the ability to judge because I didn’t have a context for it.

When we sit down and meditate, we can start noticing that how we appear is what we’re attached to. We’re attached to our body parts, our hair, and how it looks. Some people spend more time and more care with the clothes they choose to wear, or the hair they arrange than they do with the words they speak, because how we appear is so important.

Appearance is important partly because others take it as important. People do judge us based on our appearances and how we are. So we get pulled into the world of being preoccupied with how we appear, and preoccupied with other people’s appearances. This is one area of attachment. Sometimes you can feel the way that clinging and attachment to appearances can be a heavy weight to bear. Clinging to how to be accepted can create anxiety.

There is a fundamental human need to belong and be accepted, with a fear of rejection. Because we navigate so much in the world of appearances, unfortunately, people put a lot of store in that world. We also become

concerned about the appearance of our hair, or the size of our nose, our fingers or hands, and our wrinkles as we get older. This can be quite depressing for some people.

But appearance is a construct. It's ideas. Some of them are culturally created. Our culture infects us with them, so we think in the way that the culture around us thinks. Instead, we can sit in meditation and be radically simple, and leave our body and our appearance radically alone. We can breathe and be quiet and just sense. Finally, leave the body alone. Free the body from the heavy weight of all the ideas, projections, imaginations, and concerns we have about rejection and dismissal and trying to build up a more important appearance for the world. Leaving ourselves alone is a radical simplicity so that something inside can evolve and flow. This can give us a feeling of being content, happy, and alive, free of any clinging to how we appear. We're allowed to be as we are, independent of what society tells us is good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

So there's a lot of self, self-making, and self-building related to appearance. The attachment to appearance is not an innocent thing. It's something that we gather together into bundles. There's a huge bundle of these attachments that people live with.

So appearance is the first of the bundles that Buddha talked about. Today, as you go about your day, you might get curious about how much of your time is spent concerned, one way or another, with your appearance, your clothes, with anything at all. Be curious, and tilt your head down a little bit: "Now what's this?" Ask, "What is this? What's this about? Is this needed? Why am I so concerned about it? What's the purpose of it?" Just explore it and get to know it more. Maybe in the process, you'll recognize one or two attachments you have to appearance. Maybe you'll look at the suffering and the stress that might come with that attachment. Thank you.