

Sunday, January 6th, 2013

## Practice of the Week – Mindfulness as a First Resort

The series on letting go of unskillful habits begins with mindfulness of emotions. This is the foundation for changing our behavior, as addictive tendencies are generally strategies for avoiding difficult emotions. Mindfulness cuts the avoidance by helping us turn towards and take care of the difficult state underneath the behavior. In essence mindfulness helps us let go of unskillful habits by helping us let go of troublesome emotions.

In relating to our emotions, we tend to fall into either indulging or rejecting the state. True letting go involves neither. It is common in spiritual circles to mistake aversion to one's experience as letting go. We judge emotions such as anger, desire, shame, or impatience as being very un-Buddhist, and end up using our spiritual practice as just another way to beat ourselves up. This is not letting go because we don't allow the state in the first place.

### Turning Towards

The first move in working wisely with an emotion is to allow the state and turn towards it. This, ironically, is the beginning of letting go of it, counteracting the tendency to judge our difficult states as a kind of defense against them. We know we have really accepted the emotion when we have an "of course!" attitude towards it. It can help to silently say "of course" after recognizing a difficult state to help the acceptance process along.

The second wise move is to not believe the thoughts in an emotion as rock bottom truth. Believing the thoughts and feeling the need to act on them can be a way of indulging the state. When we work with emotional states over the long haul of our practice, we see more and more the insight that emotions or thoughts are mental fabrications that are conditioned and impermanent and therefore do not have to

have any absolute hold on us. Have you ever noticed how much your thoughts can change after drinking caffeinated tea or coffee? You may have found that suddenly the thoughts lean towards the positive. It's not that the thoughts are true; they are conditioned by the effects of caffeine. Sure, it is helpful to counteract our negativity bias and focus on the positive, but this is different from believing in the absolute truth of the thoughts. While the first move can be characterized as "Of course," the second can be characterized as "We'll see."

The essence of these two moves in working with a challenging emotion can be summed up as "Accept it more, believe it less." These moves do much to rebalance ourselves in the midst of a difficult state and help us let go and experience the underlying sanity and well being of who we really are.

### Turning Away

All this being said, there are times when an emotion feels too overwhelming or the present circumstances don't allow for you to be mindful of an emotion. In this case, letting go involves turning away from the emotion. We need to do this without aversion, acting instead with compassion and clear seeing that the time is not right. I recommend mindfulness as a first resort in working with difficult states. We can actually be mindful of dark emotions way more than we lead ourselves to believe. But if one has tried repeatedly to be mindful of a state and one keeps getting caught by the storyline, then it is very wise and compassionate to turn away. We do not want to deepen the neural grooves of the state by spinning around in it without being truly mindful.

In this case we let go just as we do in meditation practice – by turning our attention to something else. It can be turning our attention to sound, or to metta

practice, or maybe it simply involves calling a friend or taking a walk outside. In the context of changing unskillful behavior, it is, of course, unhelpful to use such behavior as the way to distract ourselves.

## PRACTICE

I encourage you this week to orient to difficult states and be as mindful of them as your interest and life circumstances allow. In the midst of any given challenging emotion, remember to employ mindfulness as a first resort, being willing to test out the possibility that mindfulness, rather than suppressing or acting out the emotion, can take care of it. Please refer to these essays on my website for more specific instructions on working with emotions (my "essays" webpage):

[http://truehomewithin.net/psych2/Dharma\\_essays.html](http://truehomewithin.net/psych2/Dharma_essays.html)

and scroll down to:

"How To Meditate 4: The RAIN Technique for Working Wisely with Emotions"

"How To Meditate 5: Practical Principles for Working Wisely with Emotions"

I'd particularly encourage you to try, maybe just once, to push your edge and try to be mindful at a time when you think it would be difficult to do. We really can wake up in the midst of tears or fear or guilt or shame

and be curious about the experience, with an attitude of "What is this like?" As always, grounding attention in the pure physical experience is the best way to regain composure in a difficult state. See if you can be a real sensation expert, seeing exactly where the sensations are and what happens to them as you continue attending with kind attention. In tears, one could feel that wetness moving down the face and the tension in the brow and the eyes. If there are not obvious sensations, ground your attention in the breath. In either case, you are not pushing away the thoughts and images, but you are letting go of them, returning your attention to the body every time you get pulled away. Doing this at least once challenges our doubt in the practice. The doubt that we can do it can become the very thing that prevents us from doing it. Mindfulness really can be with a lot, if we willing to trust it and really stay aware of sensation.

Remember, the more you can take care of your emotions with mindfulness, the less ruled you are by compulsive or addictive behavior. When we work with and let go of our emotions wisely, we let go of troublesome habits as well.

I send you every good wish with this practice.

Metta, Peter