

## *Mindfulness Gets Intimate*

*April 15, 2022*

We focus our attention on the present moment because of the way the Buddha taught karma. He said that our actions influence the future, and they also influence the present moment. In fact, it's our present actions that will determine whether we're going to suffer in the present or not. So we want to look into the present moment to see exactly what we're doing.

The way we approach the present, as it's defined in the first stage of mindfulness practice, is to focus, say, on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Notice the two activities there: keeping focused on the body, in this case the breath, and then putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. We're looking at the breath on its own without any reference to the world outside. That has to do with the Buddha's analysis on how suffering is caused.

He says that we suffer because of the type of craving that leads to becoming. Becoming is a sense of your identity in a world of experience. But he also warned that one of the types of craving leading to becoming is craving for non-becoming. In other words, hoping to destroy what you've got here in terms of your identity in this world—that's going to lead to more becoming, too. That creates a practical problem. So what do you do? It sounds like you're damned if you do, damned if you don't. But the Buddha found the way out of that dilemma. He saw that if you could see the processes that lead up to becoming simply as steps in a process of origination, then you could develop dispassion for them. And in developing dispassion, you wouldn't put them together into a sense of you in a world of experience anymore. In that way, you'd be free.

When the Buddha teaches mindfulness, he teaches it on three stages. In that first stage—keeping track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—you're letting go first of the world outside. You're focusing on the breath. But you're not totally without reference to the terms of becoming, because if you look at the way the Buddha describes how you talk to yourself while you're focused on the breath, on feelings around the breath, on the mind states you can develop around the breath, or on the mental qualities that either get in the way of staying with the breath or help you, you see that you still use the concepts of "I" and "me."

This means that the basic terms of becoming are still there: "I will breathe in long. I will breathe out short. I will train myself to breathe sensitive to

rapture. I will train myself to breath sensitive to pleasure.” “I, I, I” — still there. That’s because you’re taking a responsibility for your actions.

Similarly with analysing, say, the presence of the hindrances or of the factors for awakening. “Sensual desire as a hindrance is present in me. Mindfulness as a factor for awakening is present in me.” “Me, me, me.” But you’re using “I” and “me” in a skillful way, because it’s on this level that you’re making an effort to get the mind into right concentration.

In fact, you could read that instructions for keeping track, say, of the breath—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, as instruction for how to get into right concentration. There’s even a passage where the Buddha seems to equate that description with being in the first jhana. When the mindfulness is really established in that framework, then he says you keep track of the body in and of itself, but don’t think thoughts of the body. Don’t think thoughts connected with feelings or mind. Just be present with the experience. As you drop those thoughts, that can get you into the second jhana.

But then the Buddha says there are two other stages of mindfulness practice beyond that. One is being aware of the phenomenon of origination and passing away with reference to the body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities. He calls that developing the establishment of mindfulness. Here you’re looking at cause and effect. When the Buddha uses the word “origination,” he’s talking about things arising from causes in the body and the mind. And to see causes, you have to manipulate things. Only then will you know what’s a cause and what’s not a cause for a particular phenomenon in the mind.

As he describes the different levels of jhana you can get into, he’s talking about how you can use the framework of mindfulness to get the mind into different feeling tones. And it’s interesting to note that the jhanas are defined in terms of their feeling tone. Sometimes you see the first jhana translated as, “The first jhana, accompanied by pleasure or rapture.” But the Pali doesn’t say “accompany,” it just says, “the first jhana: pleasure and rapture born of seclusion. Second jhana: pleasure and rapture born of concentration. Third jhana: you sense pleasure with the body. Fourth jhana: purity of mindfulness and equanimity.”

On this stage of the practice, you focus on the feeling tone and look to see how it’s originated. Now, the feeling tones that are “of the flesh,” as they’re called, have to do with ordinary pleasures, pains, neutral feelings. But then there are also feelings not of the flesh. These are feelings that you manufacture through concentration. You give rise to them. This is where mindfulness takes over as a governing principle.

As the Buddha said, when you have mindfulness governing things, if there's something that's skillful that you don't have yet, you mindfully give rise to it. Once it's there, you mindfully try to keep it from passing away. So, you're not just watching things coming and going willy-nilly. You're getting involved. And here you're consciously giving rise to deeper stages of concentration as you begin to realize how you can manipulate causes and effects in the mind to get the mind to settle down even more firmly.

This is where you use concentration to develop both insight and tranquility. Nowadays they talk about insight and tranquility as different meditation methods, but the Buddha never describes an insight method or a tranquility method. He talks about tranquility and insight as mental qualities that you develop in the course of doing right concentration. And the breath is the primary example as a focal point for right concentration.

He calls the breath "bodily fabrication." When you talk in terms of fabrication, you're talking in terms of insight. You get sensitive to the breath. You energize the breath. And then you calm bodily fabrication. The calming: That's the tranquility side. So, you gain practice in stilling and insight into the process of fabrication at the same time.

In this way, you're beginning to see things in terms of the description of the causes of suffering listed in dependent co-arising. And you're stripping away a few more of those terms of becoming. After all, to get out of becoming, you have to stop thinking in terms of "self" and "world," and start thinking more in terms of events simply arising, passing away through causes, and seeing that whatever you can make out of them is all going to fall apart. That's how you can develop some dispassion toward them.

So, as we're exploring origination and passing away, there's no mention of "I" and "me" in the instructions—no explicit mention. But you've still got the implicit world of the concentration. You're now in a becoming of form or the becoming of the formless level. The "I" and the "me" are still implicit, because you still have to make decisions as to what to do, what not to do.

It's only on the third level of mindfulness practice—when concentration is really solid and your insight is really good—that you can drop all reference to any kind of term regarding becoming, whether it's the world outside or the world of the body as you experience it from within. And the sense of you being there is put aside as well. The description is: mindfulness is established simply to the extent of recollection, "There is a body." You're independent, not clinging to anything in the world—although the word "you" is not mentioned there. Just, "There is a body." There's independence, and there's no clinging. This is on the threshold of awakening.

There are some descriptions of mindfulness practice nowadays where they glom all the three levels together to make it sound as if you're doing all three at

once. But the Buddha definitely distinguishes among the three by using the word, “or.” You do this *or* you do that *or* you do that. It’s not all the same.

It’s important that you realize there is a time and a place in the practice for having a sense of “I” or “me” doing the practice, so that you can be responsible for what you’re doing and sensitive to what you’re doing. It’s only when things get really, really mastered, and the mind reaches a state of equilibrium, that you’re ready for that final practice: just being independent, not clinging to anything in the world, with no reference to a self, no reference to a world. That’s how you work your way through that dilemma.

So, as you’re practicing here, try to strip away as many of the terms of becoming as you can, because as long as you’re thinking in terms of becoming, even in terms of wanting to destroy becoming, you’re stuck. The cravings that come will just keep leading you on, as you fall again and again for more and more becoming.

As the Buddha describes rebirth, you’re a being because you’re clinging. And as you go on to a new life, you’re going to be clinging to craving, and that craving will carry you on just like wind carries a fire clinging to the wind from one house to another. We know how uncontrollable and unpredictable wind can be. But if you can let go of the terms of becoming, so that you’re not thinking in terms of you as a being or a world that you’re in or a world that you’re going to, there’s a chance that the fire can go out.

So, you want to get really good at looking at your experience in terms of events as events. The ajans would often say, “Sit here as if there’s no world out there. It’s just you and the breath.” And after a while, it’s not even you and the breath. Just awareness and the breath.

As you depersonalize these things, you actually get more and more intimate with what you’re actually experiencing. It seems odd. For a lot of us are, we think that our most intimate experiences involve a personal sense of us. But the Buddha’s pointing out there’s something even more intimate than that, and it’s just the events happening in a causal chain, a causal sequence, without reference to a world, without reference to who’s there in the world. That’s even more intimate.

So, try to get really intimate right here. You’ll find that you’re creating less and less suffering for yourself here in the present moment. And it’ll be a really good skill so that you don’t keep on continuing to create suffering after death.

The Buddha’s got everything covered. He doesn’t cover just the present moment. He doesn’t say, “Don’t worry about the death. Just focus on the present moment.” He says, “Think about death.” But that should get you focused back here, because once you’ve got right here really taken care of, that can insure your future as well. No suffering now; no suffering on into the future.

That's why the Dhamma is a complete teaching. It's not like an ostrich that says, "Okay, I'm going to pretend that death is not going to happen, or that it isn't relevant to my life." After all, the Buddha wasn't an ostrich. He was said to have the all-around eye. And he took care of the problem of suffering in an all-around way.