

Mind Your Life!

An exploration of practices for daily life.

Excerpts from work in progress by Andrea Fella

Introduction

What does it mean to practice in daily life? Often we are told that we can apply our mindfulness in our daily life, but we are not really given very clear instructions about how to do that.

I find it helps to have some specific techniques for our practice in daily life, much as we do for sitting meditation. Specific techniques I have worked with throughout my practice form the primary subject of this book.

Occasionally someone asks me: Why are we doing this? Why should we work to bring mindfulness into our daily lives?

In our usual state of mind, we operate out of our habitual tendencies, our habits and patterns of mind, in a seemingly unconscious way. We often aren't aware of why we do things, or what motivates us.

The more I explore the mind through awareness, the more I think of the unconscious as things that are simply not yet in awareness, that there is not really a barrier between consciousness and the unconscious. The mind can go very deep into what we would call the unconscious. We can see our deeper motivations arising in the moment. We can witness what we would normally think of as an unconscious impulse. Through mindfulness and awareness, we can begin to uncover those habits and motivations that seem to arise from our unconscious.

You might have experienced for yourself that your habitual tendencies lead you into stress or suffering, over and over again. Daily life provides an ideal ground for exploring these tendencies with mindfulness, since daily life provides so much of the friction that triggers these tendencies.

Mindfulness is a tool through which we can uncover these habitual tendencies, and the conditioning that we carry around with us like baggage. By observing these habitual tendencies with mindfulness, we can begin to let them go. Actually, they begin to let go of themselves. Through this letting go, we experience more peace, more ease, more calm, and less suffering in our lives. The whole point of our mindfulness practice is to free ourselves from suffering, much of which is caused by our habitual tendencies. The tendencies go very deep, they are very strong, so it takes a lot of patience, dedication, resolve and persistence to keep working at it.

Patience and resolve are two key factors that support our daily life practice. We have to be patient because it is difficult, we'll forget over and over again: patience with the process of how long this takes, how hard it is to remember to keep doing this practice. Give yourself a lot of compassion for how difficult it is.

Every time you remember and want to give up, resolve to just keep trying, keep trying, keep trying. Keep trying to pay attention, no matter how hopeless it feels. That resolve begins to break down the barriers of the unconscious habits and patterns of mind that keep us lost, and not in the present moment.

Not a lesser practice!

Daily life practice is not a lesser practice. Actually I think of it as an advanced form of practice. When we go on a residential retreat, the conditions are ideal for being silent and for going inwards, and for being mindful. We have nothing else to do on a residential retreat other than to be mindful. That's it! When our mind wanders we remember that it has wandered and we come back. Retreat is a refined situation, where the conditions for mindfulness are ideal, and that is not our life! People come back from retreat and often say: "What happened to my mindfulness? I thought I understood something about being mindful, and it is just impossible to do this now that I am not on retreat."

So it takes some work, it takes some energy and it takes some dedicated resolve to actually do this. Bringing our practice into our daily lives is one of the most difficult things to do. But it is not a lesser practice. The degree of awakening that we can come to through our daily life practice is quite profound.

Recognizing mindfulness

As we engage in a daily life practice, it is helpful to become familiar with what it feels like to be aware, to have a very clear sense of what it feels like to be mindful and present. When we have a clear sense of what it feels like to be aware, moments of mindfulness start to point themselves out to us.

At times throughout the day, we come into mindfulness; it happens spontaneously, effortlessly, for just a moment. This actually happens to us more than we realize, but it's like the air we breathe: we don't notice it. It happens in little tiny moments through out the day. We couldn't live without mindfulness, without knowing what is happening while it is happening. Typically we get a split second of knowing what is happening, and then we start thinking about it, or planning about it, or remembering something we did yesterday that was similar to what we're doing now. We rarely take in the fact that we are mindful, and recognize the quality of mindfulness itself. In the typical way we live our lives, we use awareness to navigate our lives. We have an experience: the water is hot, we know it is hot, and we jerk our hand out. We notice a stain the linoleum, so we go down to clean it. We use the recognition of what is going on to plan, to further our days, to further our lives. We rarely notice the mindfulness itself.

The Buddha recognized the value of mindfulness. Mindfulness is an everyday, ordinary quality of mind, it is not esoteric or mystical; it is just an ordinary aspect of the way that our minds work. The brilliance of the Buddha was to notice it, to highlight it, and to say: this quality is worth cultivating, it's worth noticing, its worth seeing, and noticing what that actually feels like.

One of the best places to explore what it feels like to be present, aware, mindful, is the moment when you remember that you have not been attending to your experience. In sitting meditation, this moment happens to us over and over again. We intend to be present for our experience, and then notice that we have been lost in thought. That moment of noticing that we have been lost in thought is a moment of remembering mindfulness again. It is a moment of recognizing that you are now aware.

In your daily life practice, that moment of remembering might happen at any time! For example, you might be in the midst of reaching for a glass, and mindfulness arises. At that moment, you don't have to stop doing anything, you can simply keep reaching, pick up the glass mindfully, and notice the movement. You can notice that you are in the midst of that movement: "Oh, wow, I'm here. I notice my arm moving through the air." You don't have to change a thing. Mindfulness has arisen, and it is like the light has gone on. See if you can get familiar with what that feels like.

This moment of remembering is a good place to check in to the feeling of awareness, because in the moment that you notice that you haven't been mindful, there can be a slight memory of what was like a moment before, when you were not aware. You can get a sense of the difference between the mind that is lost in thought, and the mind that is present and engaged in knowing. We can't really know what it feels like to be lost while we are lost, but in the moment when we remember, there can be a lingering memory of what it felt like to be lost: confused, spinning in thoughts, hazy or disconnected. In that moment, there is also the clarity of actually being present. And it *is* like light, like illumination. There is a clarity to the mind, a brightness to the mind, that is pretty obvious once we start noticing it, once we start seeing that clarity, it becomes more apparent to us, it starts pointing itself out to us when it arises.

While the feeling of knowing that you are aware can seem like a subtle feeling, actually, it is a feeling that is very familiar to us, but we rarely pay attention to the feeling. If you know that you are reading this information, then the feeling of awareness is there in your experience. Don't look too hard for it. Just explore how your experience feels when you know that you are aware. Over time, you will begin to recognize the part of the experience that is the feeling of awareness.

As you become familiar with the feeling of mindfulness, you will notice yourself coming back into mindfulness many, many times throughout the day. In the midst of an activity, you will suddenly recognize that you are aware of what is happening. You might be reaching for something, walking across the street, finishing a meal, or driving the car. Appreciating these moments creates the conditions for you to recognize these moments even more frequently.

Self Reporting as Practice

As a weekly practice, take some time to reflect on how you have been practicing in your daily life: where has mindfulness been easy, where has it been difficult? Can you think of ways

that a Dharma perspective might support your daily life practice? Do you have any questions about practicing with aspects of your daily life?

The reflection itself is a practice. Essentially it is a form of “self reporting”, taking the time to describe your practice to yourself as you might describe it to a teacher. For now, see if using this reflective practice supports your daily life practice. If so, how does it support you?

I would suggest that you take some time to write down a few notes about your reflections. It doesn't need to be detailed, or extensive journaling, just enough to jog your memory about your reflection. You might consider using the same guidelines that we use in the class for describing experience: enough context to give us a sense of what is happening, but no need to bring in details about the content of the experience, about what people said or did.

Observing Habitual Patterns

We all have habitual patterns, and they run our lives more often than we would like to admit. Sometimes it feels like our lives are on auto-pilot, with our habits running the show, leaving us with suffering in their wake. Often these patterns are based on old and deep conditioning. We can illuminate these tendencies with mindfulness, understand them, and see whether they serve us, or lead us into struggle and difficulty. Taking an interest in our habitual patterns can lead to a deeper understanding of the undercurrents that motivate us, and mindfulness of these patterns begins to give us a choice about whether we engage in them.

We can practice with habitual patterns in our daily lives. To practice with this, choose an habitual pattern that you are interested in understanding. You can choose any kind of habitual pattern that you have noticed yourself engaging in. It might manifest as a behavior, as an emotion, as a thought pattern, or even a speech pattern. It can be a pattern that you have noticed throughout your life, or it could be a new pattern that you see yourself engaging in because of specific circumstances currently in your life.

For example, you might have a habit of procrastination that formed during your teenage years, or you might find that in the past few weeks, you get angry every time a particular person is around. While most people would agree that the first example as a habit, some might think that the second example seems more like a response to a specific situation than a habit. So, let's key on the word “pattern” more than “habit”. Choose a pattern that is currently unfolding in your life that you would like to understand more about.

Other examples of patterns: a tendency to think about what we are going to say when people are speaking to us, a pattern of checking and rechecking that we have done something (like turning off the stove), a tendency to intensify experience, a pattern of thought, such as planning or fantasizing, or any mind state that recurs frequently, such as anger, frustration, stinginess, spacing out, excitement, loneliness, boredom, irritation.

A key quality to bring to this exploration is *interest*. We are exploring the pattern to understand it, not necessarily to try to get rid of it. Through the process of understanding, you might uncover different aspects that hold the pattern in place, some of those aspects might be skillful, while others might be unskillful.

The main practice around patterns is to notice them! Choose one pattern as a project, and resolve to “wake up” when you are engaging in that pattern. It is most helpful if the investigation around the pattern has a very light touch: simply notice what is most obvious about your experience. There is no need to dig, or try to figure out *why* the pattern is happening. Just notice *what* is happening. You might notice a physical response such as tension or release, or you might notice an emotion, thoughts or images. You might also take an interest in what happens to the pattern while you are observing it. Using mindfulness to explore and understand patterns can be one of the most powerful fruits of daily life practice. When we are in sitting meditation, these patterns might not come up very frequently, but daily life offers endless opportunities to observe and learn from our patterns.

Working with the Five Faculties

In my experience with daily life practice, I have found some of the biggest benefits and insights while observing habitual patterns, in particular around those patterns that I am *really interested* in understanding. This blending of interest with observation is powerful, and can help us to appreciate the process of observation itself. We explored the practice of working with habitual patterns in the last section.

As an additional practice to explore as you bring mindfulness to a habitual pattern, I would also like to encourage you to see if you can recognize some of the beautiful, wholesome qualities that manifest as we pay attention to our experience with mindfulness. For example, as you are paying attention to the pattern, you might notice that the interest in observing it leads to a feeling of *confidence* in the practice, and an increased level of *energy* for engaging with the pattern.

These qualities can go unnoticed because we often tend to be more engaged with noticing the pattern itself, than we are with the qualities that awareness brings. As we recognize these qualities more frequently, that recognition helps us to be less caught in the pattern, and more interested in the process of observing it! This leads to less identification and less suffering around the pattern.

There are many such qualities we can notice; for this practice, we will explore how the five spiritual faculties are cultivated as we observe experience:

- Confidence (sometimes called Faith; *saddha* in Pali): confidence in the teachings, the practice, in ourselves. Can also manifest as a feeling of trust in the unfolding of your experience.
- Energy (*viriya*): energy applied to the practice, to observing and understanding our experience in terms of the teachings. Energy is not the same thing as effort, interest or investigation, but these qualities lead to increased energy, so it is helpful to also recognize effort, interest and investigation.
- Mindfulness (*sati*): mindful awareness of our experience. Knowing what is happening while it is happening.

- Concentration (*samadhi*): stability of mind. Other synonyms: composure, collectedness, settledness. This does not need to be stability on a single object (such as the breath), but can manifest as a *stability of awareness* on changing experience.
- Wisdom (*panna*): seeing our experience in terms of the four noble truths, and whether our actions are skillful (leading us away from suffering) or unskillful (leading us towards suffering).

For example, you might start to feel more *confident* in your ability to wake up for something that you were previously unaware of. Or the simple fact of declaring your intention to be aware might make you feel more alert (*energy*) and ready to notice (*mindfulness*) what comes up. You might *mindful* of more subtle aspects of your experience, or to pay attention for longer periods of time (*concentration*). You might begin to see "choice points", offering you previously unseen options for acting skillfully (*wisdom*) in difficult situations.

This practice can be quite light. Simply being informed that these qualities arise as we pay attention to our experience can help us to notice them! *So, you don't need to make a big project out of trying to find these qualities as you are paying attention to your pattern.* For now, see if you can simply take an interest other qualities that might appear when you are interested in understanding your experience and observing it with mindfulness. Don't worry if they are not obvious to you. Our habits and patterns tend to make us to overlook these qualities, and they can be subtle, so it can take time for them to become clear.

Cultivating Wholesome Qualities: the Paramis

The Buddha taught four aspects to Wise Effort: avoiding and abandoning the unskillful; and sustaining, and maintaining the skillful. Our practice often seems to highlight on the first two aspects, since we spend so much time exploring how we struggle! Part of our daily life practice can also include exploring wholesome, skillful qualities. We began that explore with the practice in the last section. In the practices I offer in this section, I'd like to suggest that you choose a wholesome quality that you are interested in cultivating, from the list of the 10 perfections, or the *paramis*.

The Theravadin list of the ten *paramis* includes: generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolve, kindness, and equanimity. (For further information about the paramis, here are several resource:

Gil Fronsdal's series on the Paramis at <http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-paramis.html>,
Andrea Fella's introduction to the paramis, given on 6/11/09, found at:

<http://www.audiodharma.org/teacher/2/?page=3>)

Thanissaro Bhikkhu's study guide on the paramis:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/perfections.html>

Guy Armstrong's historical background of the paramis:

<http://media.audiodharma.org/documents/paramis/HistoricalBackground.html>

Choose one of the paramis that you resonate with. I'd like to suggest that you begin the practice by reflecting on the quality a reflective practice.

I'd like to encourage you to start creating your own practices for working with the paramis. Daily life practice actually demands creativity of us, to find ways to bring the practice right into the midst of our lives.

We can use our ability to still and settle ourselves in meditation to support this creativity. I'd like to suggest that you use a reflective practice to reflect on ways that you can cultivate the quality in your life. You can also reflect on ways that you might be able to reframe aspects of your life in terms of the quality, or see your experience through the lens of that quality. For example, if you have chosen to cultivate generosity, many of the give and take exchanges that happen between people can be framed in terms of giving. You might also reflect on ways that you can reorient your life towards the quality you are cultivating. For example, if you have chosen the quality of kindness, you can practice having the primary motivation of your encounters with people be through the orientation of kindness.

I hope that these approaches encourage creativity and intuition to play a role in your practice of this quality. You might exchange ideas with your dharma buddies about practices that you are evolving.

Here is here is a short summary of how to engage with a reflective practice:

- Pick a topic for reflection. Chose a phrase or a question related to the quality you are working with, which you would like to reflect on.
- For the reflection itself, allow yourself to settle into a meditative state, attending to breath and body sensations for about 5 minutes. Then consciously bring up your chosen phrase or question. "Drop" the phrase or question into the meditation, as you might drop a pebble into a still pond.
- Observe what happens in your experience. Don't think about the question or topic, simply observe how your body and mind respond. (We are looking at the "ripples" that "dropping" the question produces.)
- Thoughts might come up, images, ideas, bodily sensations, moods, emotions. Simply notice what comes up, but don't think about any of this, keep practicing simple mindfulness.
- After a few minutes you can drop the question or phrase again.
- Repeat this process 3 or 4 times.
- After you finish the reflection, write down what you observed.

I'd like to share some words of the Buddha on the subject of cultivating wholesome qualities:

“Happiness I declare to be twofold, according as it is to be followed after or avoided. Unhappiness, too, I declare to be twofold... Equanimity, too, I declare to be twofold...”

And this distinction I have affirmed in happiness, was drawn on these grounds: when in following after happiness, one perceives that bad qualities develop and good qualities are diminished, that kind of happiness should be avoided. And when following after happiness, one perceives that bad qualities are diminished and good qualities are cultivated, that kind of happiness should be followed...”

(likewise with unhappiness and equanimity)

For example: the kind of happiness that comes from attaining something by acting on greed will ultimately lead to more greed, and probably also to aversion, such as worry about losing what you have gained. That kind of happiness should be avoided. On the other hand, the happiness that comes from being freely generous, from acting kindly without expecting anything in return, that kind of happiness leads to more wholesome qualities, and should be cultivated.

As another example: the kind of unhappiness that arises when we understand that we have acted unskillfully will tend to lead to the diminishment of unwholesome qualities and the increase of wholesome qualities. While the kind of unhappiness that leads to acting on anger should be avoided, since acting on unwholesome qualities tends to make them increase.

The same is true for equanimity, and, in fact, all of the other wholesome qualities listed above: if they arise from unskillful means or intentions, they will lead to suffering, and should be avoided; if they arise from skillful means or intentions, they will lead to more wholesome qualities, and should be cultivated. Allow these reflections to guide your explorations also.
