

Practice Note: Mindfulness and Awareness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on September 7, 2011

Mindfulness is different from awareness, although teachers like myself will sometimes use the words as synonyms. Awareness is being conscious or openly aware. Mindfulness is more of a practice of clearly acknowledging what is happening in the present moment. It's not just a simple awareness of what is happening, but rather a clear recognition of what it is that's happening. If your mind wanders off, you can be aware of that, and then just realize that you have to come back to your breath. Or there can be a clear acknowledgment – a clear recognition: "My mind is thinking."

There can be a sound, and you can be aware on the periphery of your perception that a sound has happened around you. You can give it no heed and just stay with your breath. Or it might grab you for a few moments, and then you come back to your breathing. So that's in the field of awareness. Mindfulness is more a simple, relaxed, peaceful, non-judgmental recognition of what it is that awareness has taken in. You don't have to be doing that acknowledgment of everything that's happening in the field of awareness, but there are certain things that are useful to acknowledge or recognize with a little more precision or sharpness.

So if you choose to be with the breath, it isn't to be generally aware of the breath when we do mindfulness, but to have a relaxed, open recognition, "Oh, I'm breathing in, breathing out," and of the different sensations of the breath coming in and out. We're present enough that we register clearly that this is what it is.

You can be generally aware and afterwards you might have to stretch your mind to think, "I think there was a sound. What was that?" Whereas if you're mindful, you would clearly acknowledge the sound, "Oh, that was a sound," and then you would know what it is. It's a clear registering. The trick is to do it in a way that is not analytical or involves a lot of thought, but in a way where there is crispness and clarity. This is particularly useful with the distracted thoughts that pull us away. If we just casually let go of them and come back to the breath without clearly acknowledging them, then sometimes they have an easy tendency to creep back in. But if you clearly acknowledge them, then sometimes it is easier to put them to rest. I liken that clear acknowledgement of mindfulness to what it's like if you're talking with a friend about some challenge in your life, and you feel like your friend is really present, listening and there for you, as opposed to someone who is impatient and multi-tasking on their phone while you know they are only kind of listening to you. So it's the same thing when we offer that real "there-ness" to what we bring mindfulness to, to freedom what we receive mindfully in our awareness.

Mindfulness is a sub-aspect of awareness that involves a clear recognition and acknowledgement that this is what's happening. So you can try that and see if your acknowledgements can be a bit clearer today. See if that helps you feel freer in the midst of what's happening.