

Dharmette: The Mutuality of Mindfulness and Precepts

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 25, 2012

Here in the West, it's possible and very easy to receive mindfulness instructions cold. By that I mean that, without preparation of any kind, you can come to IMC or other places and receive teachings on mindfulness. And many people find this very beneficial in their lives.

Traditionally, however, in Theravāda Buddhism, mindfulness isn't offered by itself, but rather is offered together with other teachings that are considered foundational. One important foundation for mindfulness is ethical behavior. Mindfulness is built upon being careful with your behavior. Often, the simplest way to talk about it is to talk about the precepts. The precepts are not a requirement or something puritanical, but are seen as a foundation, a support, for being able to do the practice of mindfulness. So, if you are a lay person, sometimes even before you've learned to do mindfulness, care is given to emphasize looking at your behavior, and seeing if there are ways to align your behavior more with the five precepts.

The first precept is usually translated as *not to kill*, which is probably just fine. But the literal translation would be *not to hit anything that breathes*, or ***not to harm anything that breathes***. I guess plants breathe, but I think the idea here is breathing with lungs. So *not to harm* is a higher order than *not to kill*, and is more inclusive.

The second precept is ***not to take what is not given***. This differs from not stealing in that unless something is clearly offered, you don't take it, even though it may not necessarily be stealing.

The third precept is ***not to engage in sexual misconduct***. This connects to the first precept *not to harm*, which is the basic principle for all of the precepts. This means *not to engage in sexual conduct that causes any harm to anyone* – neither to those parties directly involved, nor to those indirectly involved.

The fourth is ***not to be involved in false speech***. Perhaps false speech is a little broader than just not to lie.

And then the fifth one is ***not to intoxicate the mind***, not to be involved in altering your mind state by intoxicating it.

There's a wonderful mutuality between aligning yourself – living by these five precepts – and being mindful. Generally, if people are going to break or violate the precepts, they do so with mindlessness – there is something they are not paying attention to, for example, being mindless of the impact of your behavior, and of the people affected. If you really took in how you are hurting someone, how you are betraying someone, and you really understand that, then you probably wouldn't violate the precepts. So, if you want to live by the precepts, then it's important not to be mindless.

One way that the precepts have this mutual relationship with mindfulness practice is that, since you now have a limitation on what you can do, that limitation becomes a mirror to help you see yourself better. If you have no restrictions in your life (no precepts at all), you can just act on every impulse you have, and not really see yourself. If you have an unfettered ability to do something, you don't really see what's motivating you, or what beliefs and attachments are involved. You can be very attached to something, but because it's easy to fulfill what you are attached to, you don't even see that you're attached. However, if you can't fulfill your attachment, then the frustration shows you, "I didn't realize I was so attached."

I'm sure none of you are attached to your computers or the internet (if you do have computers and access to the internet). It's as easy as breathing these days. I'm sure it's just an ordinary part of life, and you're not attached at all. But if the electricity goes out for three days, or the internet or your computer goes down, you can probably feel the frustration, the momentum, the desire, the wanting that's there.

Part of the function of the precepts is to create a limitation on the unfettered ability to do whatever you want to do. You may find yourself about to lie, or to exaggerate, or to not speak the truth in one way or another. Or you

are about to take a pencil from work. No one has offered the pencil, but you're about to take it. But because you have this precept, you don't.

Or a mosquito comes into your house [claps as though killing a mosquito]. You could easily just squash it and be finished with the mosquito. But because of the precept not to kill, you say, "Oh, I can't do that. I can't just swat the mosquito." That inability to swat the mosquito because of the restriction of the precepts then becomes an opportunity to look at what motivates you. What's going on for you that you want to kill the mosquito? Is it fear? Disgust? Annoyance? Impatience with other approaches where you'd carefully catch the mosquito and take it outside? I used to go around and catch mosquitoes using the cup of my two hands, and then I'd ask someone to open the door so I could release them outside because I didn't want to kill them.

Or the pencil at work. No one has offered you the pencil, so what's motivating you to take the pencil? Is it really innocent? What are the feelings, the motivations, the sense of self going on now that keep you from not taking what's not given?

Perhaps I find myself wanting to exaggerate. It can be as simple as telling someone, "I ate at the best Thai restaurant in the world." It's kind of a colloquial way of saying that it was really great. But it is an exaggeration. It can't possibly be true. What kind of a statement is it? So if I have this precept not to lie, it becomes a reminder to be more careful when I speak. What motivates me to exaggerate about the restaurant? Sometimes I've seen in myself that I've exaggerated, not because I thought they needed to know this was the best restaurant ever, but rather because by saying that I ate at the best restaurant, it's kind of like advertising myself. Look at me. I had this great experience. I was able to choose the best restaurant. I know something that you don't know. Actually it wasn't so innocent. So now, with this precept, I have to look at what's going on.

The precepts operate as a mirror, and this becomes interesting when you're going to transgress against them. It isn't necessarily that you are now a bad person. But it becomes an opportunity for you to look at yourself more deeply. And if you look at yourself more deeply, chances are that you will see that it's not in your best interest to behave in those ways. You're losing touch with some inner sense of peace, well-being, freedom, compassion – something that's actually quite valuable.

The mutuality of mindfulness and precepts also works the other way. As people do mindfulness meditation practice and feel better about themselves, and they feel a certain depth of peace, well-being, love, compassion, or no longer being caught by things, then this becomes a reference point for not wanting to give that up. You see yourself in another way. You have this deep appreciation for another way of living.

Generally when people break the precepts, they're not so peaceful – they're not so settled in themselves. It's much easier to violate the precepts when you're stressed out, caught up, angry, or filled with greed. When those things are not there, and you feel better about yourself, then that becomes a support to live ethically.

In fact, it's said that at some point when someone is deeply mature in their practice, they don't need the precepts anymore. They don't need them – not because they can now do whatever they want and harm people – but because, due to their deep sense of inner contentment, well-being, and peace, there's no inclination to do those things anymore.

Another direction in the mutuality from precepts to mindfulness is that unethical behavior tends to promote agitation. If you are agitated, it's harder to be mindful and settled for the mindfulness practice. So to live by the precepts is a protection and a support for the practice of mindfulness, peace, and freedom. And the practice of mindfulness is a support for the precepts. The two go hand in hand.

A classical Buddhist would be equally interested in both as they live their life and try to bring mindfulness into it. People often ask, "How do I integrate mindfulness into my life?" The way to do that is to have a heightened interest in ethics and ethical behavior.

I'm confident that all of you are conventionally quite ethical. So, the opportunity is to be more subtle or more nuanced in how you understand the precepts and apply them in your life – not in a moralistic, puritanical, judgmental, or even obligatory way – but in a way that supports you in your practice and in your life.