

Daily Life Practice Retreat

Cultivating mindfulness in our daily lives is often quite difficult. It seems so difficult to remember to be mindful!

The Pali word for “mindfulness” is *sati*, and the root for that word is memory, remembering. Mindfulness is about remembering. For daily life practice, it really helps to have some specific techniques to help us remember, much as we do for sitting meditation.

In sitting meditation, we have several things that remind us to pay attention. The sitting posture itself reminds us to be mindful. We sit still with our eyes closed: when we wake up in the midst of thinking, the stillness of the body reminds us of what we are doing! We also often focus on an “anchor” for our attention, such as the breathing. The anchor serves as something of a “reference point” that helps us to recognize when we have become lost in thought.

In our daily lives, we lose these reminders: we don’t have the stillness of the body to remind us to pay attention; instead, the busyness of our day often draws us away from remembering! We also don’t usually have any point of reference for knowing whether we’ve been paying attention or not. So, in our daily lives, it is helpful to pick some things to serve as a reference point, as an anchor for our attention.

One practice for daily life that helps to provide this reference point is to pick an activity that occurs regularly throughout your day to serve as a mindfulness “project”. The activity you chose for your mindfulness project can be any mundane task, preferably one that you take an action to initiate, such as standing up, going through doorways, etc.. The key is that it should be something that happens pretty frequently during the bulk of your day, say at least three or four times an hour. This task essentially becomes your reference point.

Set your intention to be mindful when the task happens. When you first start working with a mindfulness project, standing up, for example, probably you will stand up many times before you remember! You might remember only when you go to bed at night. The fact that you haven’t remembered all day long is not a problem. That moment is not an indication that you cannot do this practice, in fact it is just the opposite. The first time you remember that you been forgetting to notice your project is the moment that the practice can begin! In that moment, take notice of what is happening for you right then and there, and then resolve again to keep trying to “wake up” for your chosen activity.

For this week, I’d like to suggest that you pick two projects to work with:

1. Pick something that happens regularly in your day and use it as a mindfulness bell. (E.g. closing a window on computer, opening doors.) It is helpful to pick an activity that you initiate, rather than one that is a response to something in your environment. For example, opening a door is an activity that you usually initiate; answering the telephone is a response to something in the environment.
2. Pick a simple daily activity that takes several minutes (e.g. brushing teeth, unloading dishwasher, making bed.) Bring a simple, light mindfulness to the activity. Notice your posture, your mood, whether your mind is reacting to the activity, how your breathing is.

Another way to help bring mindfulness into your daily life is to put mindfulness reminders around your house, choosing strategic places to put a small note to remind you to pay attention, especially if there is a place or activity in which it is difficult to remember to be mindful.

Intention and Motivation

Intention is a subtle shift of the mind that precedes any act of body, speech or mind. We can know we are going to move before we move. We can know we are going to speak before we speak. Even more subtly, we can even know we are going to think before we think, or know we are inclining towards an emotion before it appears

In and of itself, intention is a neutral event – it is simply an energetic impulse, sometimes felt in the body, sometimes felt as a thought or leaning in the mind – it is the sense of knowing something is going to happen. Sometimes teachers call it the “about to” moment. We know something is about to happen. Accompanying that “about to” moment, there is always a reason for the action: the motivation behind the action.

When we know that something is going to happen before it actually occurs, we have a chance to see the motivation behind the action. We may be motivated out of compassion, or anger or greed, or perhaps out of simply physical necessity.

Seeing how often our intentions and motivations are less than skillful can be distressing, at times. This is not intended to be a practice that encourages self-judging, but rather one that helps you to learn from your experience.

With the exercise you are doing throughout the day (exercise 2, above), as your mindfulness begins to connect directly with the activity, you might start to recognize that you know we are going to do something before you do it. This is seeing the intention! In that moment, you might also be able to see the motivation – why are you going to do it?

When you find that particular motivations lead to pain and suffering, for yourself or for others, you have the choice to let go *before* you take action, if you are keeping track of your motivations.

The present moment is the only place where we can act, where we can choose how to respond to what life presents us with. The past is gone; it doesn't exist, except as memories in our mind in the present moment. The future doesn't exist, except as thoughts, in the present moment, about what might happen. All that exists is this very moment, brought about by a whole mix of causes and conditions, most of which were out of our control. How we respond to this very moment is our choice, it is actually the only thing we have a choice about, ever.

The Buddha taught that this choice point is the key to happiness. If we can see this choice point, we have a higher likelihood of choosing to respond in ways that will lead to happiness. One of the aspects of this teaching, though, is that while we have some control over our choice in the present moment, the results of our actions are out of our control. We need to let go of needing specific outcomes from our actions. We can't control the way others will respond to our actions.

Walking

Walking is an excellent place to cultivate mindfulness in our daily lives, because we because we walk all the time: from the house to the car, from the table to the bathroom or kitchen, from our office to a meeting room, through the grocery store, or around the neighborhood. As you consciously bring mindful attention to walking, the act of walking itself begins to remind you to be aware, and this practice helps to pull the thread of mindfulness through even more of your day.

When we practice walking as a formal meditation practice, often we slow down the pace of walking and carefully observe the sensations in the feet while we walk. But in our daily lives, we don't

usually have the time to slow down and pay such careful attention. Instead we need to learn how to be aware while walking at a normal pace, in our everyday activities.

My Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, was once asked: “How do you practice walking meditation?” His response was: “I don’t practice walking meditation, I practice awareness while walking.”

One way to practice awareness while walking is to see if you can feel what pace brings a sense of ease to your body. Explore the speed of walking, find a pace that brings you ease, and walk at that pace. Any time you notice the mind has wandered into thought, connect again to the pace, and whether you feel ease or tension.

You might try putting your attention roughly in the area of your heart, and see if you can notice a sense of relaxation or tension there. Often, there is a pace where the speed of your movement and mindfulness naturally gravitate together, bringing a sense of relaxation and ease. This pace can vary throughout the day depending on what is happening in your life. But at any given time, there is a particular pace of movement that supports mindfulness. If you can find that pace, it is easier to stay present.

We don’t always have the luxury of finding a pace of ease, sometimes we need to rush in our busy lives; in that case, we can explore what it feels like to rush! But if you have the option, explore the connection between the speed of walking and the feeling of ease.

While you play with the practice of exploring ease in walking, see if you can stay engaged with the world in a normal way: look around, notice what you see and hear, but see if you can stay connected with a feeling of ease at the same time, and notice what takes you away from that ease. Mindfulness in daily life is about connection to and engagement with the world.

I also like to suggest another technique to practice with walking, which helps us to more directly connect with our sensory experience. In this technique, you consciously shift your awareness between four different experiences: seeing, hearing, moving (the body moving through space), touching (the touching of the feet on the ground). Alternate the attention between these four areas, shifting the attention from one to the next about every ten paces.

For the first ten paces, focus your attention on the field of vision. Just notice that seeing is happening: notice what your eyes are drawn to look at. For the next ten paces, focus your attention on hearing. Take in the sounds: the sound of cars, the sound of your feet hitting the ground, of the wind in the trees, of people laughing in the distance. For the next ten paces, allow the attention to feel the experience of the body moving through space. For the next ten paces, notice the contact of your feet touching the ground. Then go back to seeing, and repeat the cycle over and over again.

To help you stay connected with the changing focus of attention, it often helps to use a mental noting in this practice: a soft label in the mind that encourages you to connect with your experience. You could use the labels of *seeing*, *hearing*, *moving*, *touching*. I remember the order by thinking of the awareness as moving from top to bottom: Seeing with the eyes, hearing with the ears, moving as the torso going through space, and touching as the feet touching the ground. You can also play with how many paces to stay with each of these areas. Some people find it helpful to shift the attention between them more quickly, others find it helpful to stay longer with each one.

This technique is often helpful because it gives the mind some specific things to pay attention to. Every ten steps or so, we change the focus of attention. If you use this technique enough, eventually you'll just notice the flow of awareness between seeing, hearing moving and touching, and you don't have to consciously try to do it. This practice helps to train the mind to be aware of many different things while you are walking.

When using these walking practices in daily life, see if you can let go of any extraneous thinking in favor of being with the actual experience of walking. In our daily life, we do have to think about things, to plan how to accomplish some task. But often we find ourselves thinking about something unrelated to the task at hand: remembering an argument we had this morning with our partner, or perhaps drifting into happy thoughts about the vacation we just returned from. Or, while walking in the neighborhood, our attention is caught by the sound of barking, and we end up thinking about the next door neighbor's dog. Our minds use an amazing amount of energy thinking about things that are not very useful. So as much as possible, when you notice your mind wandering, bring it back to the embodied experience of walking.

If you practice letting go of thoughts during walking, you might find that you don't need to think nearly as much as you assume! Even at work, we can often let go of thinking for short stretches of time while walking around the office. For example, if you are working at a desk, and realize that you need to use the bathroom, try using one of the walking practices as you walk there. If you can let go of the thoughts about work in those few minutes of walking to the bathroom and back, and just notice *seeing, hearing, moving, touching*, you might find upon returning to work that your mind is refreshed, and able to pick up the task again.