

Sati (1 of 5) Simple Mindfulness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 30, 2020

Good morning. Thank you for the sitting together and for this opportunity to share with you a little about the Dharma. Today begins the third week of a five-part series on the Five Faculties – the five capacities or abilities we all have. These are so special in Buddhism that they are called the five *indriyas*, translated as “divine qualities.” It’s nice that we have these divine qualities inside ourselves.

Today’s faculty emphasizes mindfulness: *sati*. The first thing to appreciate is that *sati* – as awareness or mindfulness – is a faculty, a functioning ability of the mind or inner life. It’s important to say that because, distinct from mindfulness as a faculty, there is also mindfulness *practice*. Mindfulness practice takes the faculty we have – the simple capacity for awareness – and unites it with other supportive factors. The faculty of mindfulness itself then grows, develops, and gets stronger.

Classically, *sati* is connected to ardency and clear comprehension. There is a certain kind of enthusiasm for being aware. We use awareness to clearly recognize what is happening in the present moment. That recognizing or clear comprehension then is the feedback loop that supports more awareness. It supports the growth, stability, and strengthening of mindfulness.

But in and of itself, *sati* is the basic human capacity for attention, for awareness. We are using this very basic capacity we all have, and we are developing and strengthening it – highlighting it, purifying it, clarifying it, letting it become broader, letting it become a basis of trust, a place of rest, a place of abiding in the field of awareness.

We begin with the very simple act of just being aware, and then as the practice deepens, the simple thing remains simple – but it becomes more and more powerful, unique, and special – more and more a treasure. For the uninitiated, it might seem that being aware of things is boring, nothing special.

But as mindfulness keeps growing and developing, it becomes quite special, quite wonderful. I just delight in having spent my adult lifetime exploring, developing, playing, and struggling with awareness and mindfulness – exploring the ins and outs, and all that is revealed and clarified – all of the challenges it exposes, the parts of myself that need more work or attention – or places I get caught, or places I can become free. I can’t imagine ever coming to a time when I no longer want to be mindful. It’s one of the best things going. I trust mindfulness so much. Life seems to go so much better with mindfulness.

In the teachings of the Buddha, he often begins his instructions on developing mindfulness and awareness with the simple instruction to establish mindfulness to the forefront. Establish oneself in the present moment with attention. To do that uses the support of the first two faculties, which we have talked about over the last two weeks. There is faith or confidence that it’s worthwhile. There is trust that it’s worthwhile to be in the present moment with an awareness that keeps coming back to the present.

Then there is initiating effort. Many times in life, either because we are a beginner in practice, or because we’ve been involved with many concerns, it’s not so easy to be rooted in the present moment. So, we begin exploring how we can arrive in the present. This arrival in the present is kind of synonymous with becoming aware in a more sustained way. When we are keenly aware, we are aware of what is happening in the present.

If we are really in the present moment, then chances are there is a fair amount of awareness and attention, especially if we are at rest in the present moment. If we have a sense of ease and well-being, then the ability to be aware is just a natural functioning of the mind.

Initiating and establishing mindfulness has a number of supportive features. One is to be intentional about it with a sense of, “This is what I want to do. This is what I am committed or devoted to doing.” It has become really clear that to be present with awareness in the present is what I am going to try to do. I trust that more than being swept away in thoughts, concerns, feelings, and activities. There’s nothing is wrong with thoughts, feelings, and activities – but when we are doing mindfulness meditation, we are cultivating the capacity to be in the present moment.

Then, it's supportive to do something that is a little bit of a ritual of arriving. Here I am. Classically in Buddhism, there are people who chant the refuges or the precepts, as a way of bringing forth their intention or sense of purpose. Going through a ritual pulls them into the present moment. It takes intention to chant. For a number of years, I would do some walking meditation before the sitting meditation. That little bit of walking was like a ritual of being in my body, getting settled, letting go of the things of the day. Then I would go and sit down with a clearer sense of presence.

If you have an altar, you may bow to the altar before you sit. You might go and look out of the window, or go and have a cup of tea first, or go for a walk around the block. Shift things a little bit, so that you aren't rushing along in daily life and then plopping down to sit.

It could be that when you first sit down, you are not going to hurry to start being present. You might use deep breathing, movements of your body, rocking back and forth – something to remind you of arriving here, being here. So, intentionality, a little ritual, the process of arriving, giving yourself time to arrive can be supportive.

Then, awareness practice is helped a lot by relaxation. Not too much, but just some relaxing. Relax the tensions of the body – that which is easy to relax and soften. Some parts of the body you may not be able to relax, but there can be a softening.

And also softening the mind. I talk a lot about the thinking muscle. What I mean by that is the tension, the pressure, hardness, pulling, contractions, or swirling energy connected to thinking. Sometimes that energy around thinking needs to relax. If we don't do this, if the mind just keeps being tense and pressured – no matter how much we let go of our thoughts, we'll just keep pumping up more.

It's like a tube of toothpaste. You can keep wiping off the toothpaste, but if you keep squeezing, it will keep coming out. You have to stop squeezing the tube to stop the toothpaste from coming out. So, soften the thinking muscle.

Then, the next thing about initiating mindfulness and establishing mindfulness here is to remember that mindfulness is very, very simple. If it's not simple, it probably isn't mindfulness. It's a simple recognition and awareness of the present moment. Just this. Just this. Sometimes, I'll actually use the phrase, "Just this," to remind myself of the simplicity. Just be present for this. Just be aware of this.

Sometimes I use the word *here* for this initiating mindfulness. I just say *here* in a very kind way. H-E-R-E. It is a way of opening my attention to recognize what is here, without any preference for one thing over another. Just whatever is happening here. If it's a busy mind, then I recognize a busy mind. If there are a lot of sounds, then there are a lot of sounds. If there are a lot of body sensations, then here are sensations. If I'm tired, then here is tiredness. Nothing more complicated than that. I'll just do this in a nice rhythm. Here. Just this.

It's a way for me to settle in and arrive, beginning to let go of the energy and focus on thoughts, ideas, concerns, past, future. Rather than fueling those by staying involved with them, the energy – the fuel of attention – begins going someplace in the present moment, in the simplicity of *Here*. Mindfulness in its simplest form is just being aware, and then discovering what is here. Being more connected and aware of what's here. Not having a sharp line between inside and outside, especially in mindfulness of daily life. But to be relaxed and open, and just be established here. To be established here with mindfulness in the forefront.

I understand this to mean mindfulness in the center of it all. It's where we abide – established here and now. As that initiating effort begins to take root, then mindfulness begins to have other capacities. Mindfulness practice has a chance to come into play where the practice of mindfulness is not just the awareness, but it brings in associated mental qualities that begin to enhance the capacity for awareness.

I hope you will spend this next day being curious, and interested in the nature of your awareness, and how simple it is. See what happens when you stay very simple, and recognize "Oh, this is what is happening now." Establishing mindfulness throughout the day.

Thank you for being here, and I look forward to sharing more of this with you tomorrow.