

# *Sati* (4 of 5) Observing Change

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 2, 2020

I will now continue with the five-part series on the divine faculty of mindfulness, *sati*. This is the fourth of the five-part series. The first two days I talked first about the initiating phase of showing up, waking up to the present. The second day I talked about how mindfulness can include the clear recognition of what is happening in the moment. Both of these can be momentary phenomena. You can return to a moment of mindfulness, and that is valuable. But then we get pulled away, and then a little later we come back to mindfulness. Recognition also can be very powerful. The more clearly we recognize, the more freedom is there in the experience. But it also can be brief or momentary.

The third aspect of mindfulness comes along as mindfulness grows stronger, and the pull of the world of thoughts lessens. This is mindfulness as observation. We are able to sustain a perception in awareness of what is happening in the moment. This phenomenon of observation occurs in the present moment, but it is sustained through time. We are beginning to develop a capacity for concentration, for steadiness, and lingering in the experience.

It's like observing a river going by, watching it flow, sustaining the attention. It can be very relaxing and even absorbing to just watch the river go by. That sustained attention is nourishing and settling. It can be very nice. As mindfulness gets stronger, it takes on a quality of observation. That is the Buddha's word – observation – to look towards, to watch after, *anupassati*.

One quality of this observation is that, as it gets stronger, it builds equanimity. Observation is very simple. Observation doesn't interfere with phenomena. It doesn't judge. It's like watching the river flow by without judging it, preferring a different river, trying to stop the river, or make it flow a different way. It is just allowing it to be. Of course, there are times in life when that kind of awareness is not appropriate, but it's also very powerful as a way of building up equanimity.

The more reactive and judgmental we are – the more we're greedy, hateful, or attached to things – the more helpful it is to cultivate greater and greater equanimity. This is one of the functions of this observation factor of mindfulness. Equanimity is not just for its own sake, but it helps us see the world more clearly. Certainly when we are out in the world, we tend to be wiser if there is tranquility and equanimity as part of our engagement, our care and concern for the world.

In meditation practice, we are withdrawing, stepping back, and really settling into our experience. As we become more equanimous, we see experience less and less through the filter of our ideas, commentaries, judgments, and stories. The observation gets simpler and simpler.

Because observation is happening through time, and because there is less and less overlay of stories, ideas of me myself and mine and what it means for me, predictions for the future – there is a willingness to rest in the moment with the flow of experience. We start seeing that flow better.

We start seeing things arising and passing, coming and going, seeing things change. That change is not only the change of external phenomena, but there is a wonderful interplay between the changing nature of what we notice, and the changing nature of what is happening.

Attention doesn't generally stay fixated on one thing. It moves and oscillates. If you are following the breath, for example, and are really attuned to the stream of the flow of breathing, many different sensations come into play. The mind may settle on one sensation more than another – an inhalation more than an exhalation, the pushing of the diaphragm, the pushing of the chest.

The mind gently moves around. Even though it is settled on the breathing, it picks up different things. There is inconstancy, a changing flow of what we notice, because of the mind gently taking in different things. It's very interesting to tune into physical pain, if it's not too difficult. If you really pay attention, you might see the interplay between the sensations of pain like little pixels of discomfort or tightness, and the mind moving around between

them. When concentration is really strong, the mind doesn't pick up a solid mass of pain. There is a dance of sensations going on.

As the observation factor of mindfulness gets deeper and deeper, the mind switches from the story line, or the concept line of thinking about things to observing the changing flow of phenomena. It isn't so much that we are looking for change and inconstancy. It's more like we just keep settling, observing, and being – allowing the observation, the recognition to get stronger, and settling in and relaxing into the present moment.

Mindfulness has a lot to do with relaxing, opening, and allowing the natural function of attention to operate – and to observe in a simpler and simpler way. As we go deeper, we start to see the impermanent, changing nature of phenomena.

Some people wonder, "Why do that? Why is that important?" It may be that their concerns in life are important and need to be addressed. It could feel almost like a betrayal to step away, and do this very simple, rudimentary resting in the changing flow of sensations as they arise and pass. After a while, there is not even any clear sense of body, or time, or things in the world. There is only this flow of sensations. That can't be any good!

Certainly there are times when the world needs us, and it's more important to be taking care of what's going on around us. But as I said, this is a very common human process used in all kinds of secular or daily areas of life – in spiritual areas, in ritual. This is an integral part of human life. There are times of stepping away followed by times of stepping in – times of withdrawal and times of return. Meditation is like that. It's a time of stepping away from everyday life so that we can return in a different way. The different way to which Buddhism gives most emphasis is to return with freedom where we are not clinging or attached to things. We return with ease, openness, happiness, settledness, and a greater capacity for heart qualities – a greater capacity to care for the world with compassion, kindness, friendliness, empathy, appreciation, and delight for the goodness around us.

To come back to the world in that way, it really helps if we can let go of preoccupations, let go of the things we get caught in that stand between us and this open awareness, this presence in the world. One way Buddhism does that is through mindfulness meditation practice.

Each step I have talked about involves some letting go. In initiating mindfulness of the moment, we are letting go of something in order to wake up for that moment. To take the time to clearly recognize what is happening is a different activity of the mind than just going along with business as usual – keeping thinking. It is letting go in a moment of what is ordinarily happening in order to step back and recognize what is happening. To settle back and observe, we are letting go of what pulls us away. To be able to stay in the flow of observation of the moment requires a deeper letting go.

We start seeing and being in the river of life – in the flow of things appearing and disappearing, coming and going, and changing. At this deeper, primary, fundamental layer of our experiential life, it becomes clearer and clearer that clinging doesn't work. Trying to block and resist what is happening doesn't work. Clinging doesn't work. It doesn't work because it is suffering. When we really feel the stress and tension in the wanting or the pulling away, the desiring, the conceit, the planning – it becomes more and more evident that observing the flow of arising and passing, and settling back into it is a very effective way to begin letting go of some of our deepest places of holding.

We let go deeply – I would hope – so that we can come back to the world with open hands, an open heart, and an open mind. This process of mindfulness and meditation is one in which we are here to benefit the world. I think this is a natural process, to want to benefit the world if we have done the deep inner work of freeing ourselves.

We'll have one more, final talk on mindfulness tomorrow. I'm enjoying giving these talks, and I hope they are supportive for you. I very much appreciate the chance to be with you. Thank you.