

Mindfulness for Just About Everything Question and Answer Session

by *Paramabandhu*

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1: Two books to reference on mindfulness

Audience Member: The reference to the two books, one of which we might have out here, could you repeat what those were?

Paramabandhu: The two books I referred to were '*Living with Awareness*' by Sangharakshita [*Windhorse Publications*: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com>], and the other one is by Bhikkhu Analayo and it's called... I can't remember! But it's something about mindfulness, anyway. It's got a nice picture of one of the stone Buddhas from Sri Lanka on the front cover! [*Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization* – from *Windhorse Publications*: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com>]

2. Working with depression: discrepancy monitor and rumination

Audience Member: I was thinking about 'stickiness' and this idea of staying with your negative experience, if your difficult experience is depression. There is this tension that I'm sensing, which is – you know – you talk about how these things are a 'spiral'. So how are you 'with that' without going down that road?

Paramabandhu: Ok – so how can you be with negative or difficult experience when you are prone to depression? I mean, first...

A.M.: – It's when that's the difficulty.

P: Yes – I mean I suppose the first thing to say is that this has only been shown to be useful for preventing recurrent depression in people who are currently well. So I think, if you at a particular point in time are very very depressed, so that you can't go on with your daily activities, I think this sort of approach isn't terribly helpful. You need to do things like activate yourself – you know – do things... probably distract yourself to some extent – yup?

However... if that *isn't* the case, but nevertheless you start noticing a depressed mood

coming on, I think the way to 'be with it' is to investigate it. And I think particularly the body is very useful. So you can investigate, 'well, what is that like in the body?'

Because basically what happens with depression is that there's two things that tend to happen with depressed moods: there is what is called a 'discrepancy monitor' – so people who tend to get recurrent depression have this tendency to compare themselves with, usually, some kind of ideal, and usually they come out not very well. It's almost like there's a sort of antennae looking for, 'oh, I'm not doing that as well as I should be', sort of thing.

And then the other thing is that there is a tendency to rumination. 'Rumination' is sort of going round and round a problem, and the idea of rumination, or why you do it, is because you are trying to solve a problem: you're trying to solve the problem of why there is this discrepancy. So, it's like: 'my mood's gone down, I'm feeling depressed... why am I feeling depressed? Oh, no, what have I done? Does this mean I'm getting depressed again? Oh, dear...' – etcetera.

And the rumination, as I say, tries to solve [the problem], but actually it makes the mood go down. They have done little studies where they get people to do problem solving, and rumination comes out as being... a bad strategy, basically! [LAUGHTER]

...So you need to cut out of all that. So when we're 'staying with' that, we're not staying with rumination; we're not staying with the discrepancy monitor. We are stepping out of that. But we can, as I say, particularly investigate the physical sensations. That gives another way in – a way of actually being with the experience without getting sucked into it.

3. Knowing what you can and cannot change – considered action

Audience Member: I heard what you just said... [inaudible] ...you know, there's something a little bit dangerous, in a way, because when you get depressed and you are with your thoughts for any length of time, and maybe... You're giving very nice examples of something that may bother you, but if you have things in your life that are traumatic or cruel or life-threatening, or, you know, a lot of things that are not nice...

Paramabandhu: Mm...

A.M.: ...and they would cause one to be angry or depressed... they are outside things that you don't have control over, for instance...

P: Mm...

A.M.: ...and... some take action... but I don't think sitting and experiencing yourself – it may not be, in that moment, the thing to do.

P: Mm...

A.M.: ...The other thing is, I would think that at some point you really need to – like you said – re-route your thoughts. And like you said, maybe it's true that if you are in a certain mood this is not a good thing to do, because you are 'with your thoughts' to the point of those thoughts becoming dangerous to yourself. You know – there are thoughts that feed on... even if you intend this meditation to interrupt them, which is what I hear you saying... and maybe that's good practice. But this 'investigation' is very innocent, it sounds so innocent, like you investigate in your conscious... but, you know, for me, maybe I think I'm conscious and maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm only conscious of some things and maybe I'm not conscious of other things, because... well... I'm not sure. But, you know, in some ways, thoughts do become sort of your own enemy. You know – they race themselves, they take on a life of their own... and what you said I thought was very interesting, that you do that to try to solve what it is. And maybe this is not the thing to do for everyone... I don't know...

P: ...Can I pull out a couple of things from what you said there? I think, first of all, just to reiterate: if you are in a really depressed mood, then doing mindfulness meditation isn't going to help – yeah? – because you need to activate yourself.

The second thing is: you've also said that sometimes there will be real, serious big events that have happened in your life, or maybe *are* happening in your life. What I would say about that is, in a way, that comes to the fourth point about making wise choices. So – you know – there is a time for sitting meditation, and there's also a time for taking action. I don't know if you're familiar with the Serenity Prayer – which I can't remember now! – but it's something like basically knowing what you can change and knowing what you can't change, and learning to be with what you can't change, and taking action where things *can* be changed. But the point that I was making is that the important thing about taking action is that it is *considered*, rather than just a knee-jerk or habitual thing which you may have tried many times before and which hasn't actually got you anywhere.

So you somehow need a new way of doing things. And I think meditation can offer a space which can allow those possibilities to arise. Again – but *if* you are in a reasonably ok state of mind, so you're not just going to go further down into the pit.

4. Difficulty doing mindfulness work when actively depressed; noticing subtle shades of pleasant and unpleasant

Audience Member: I recently took the mindfulness thing that they have here for

depression. I'd been in a pretty significant depression for the last three years, and I had some considerations about it because I didn't realise until I'd started the course that they didn't actually recommend it if you were currently depressed – I didn't know that when I signed up. But when I talked with my doctor, she said that at the U.C. San Francisco – U.C.S.F. – they were actually seeing that it was very beneficial for people who were actively depressed. So I continued with it.

But I do have to say that there were certain aspects of it which I still find extremely difficult to do, because I *am* depressed. One of the things they have you do is a 'pleasant events' diary, and I can't even imagine what that is! I don't have a list, because everything is very flat. So I can see, abstractly, if you could imagine, if you have a sense of joy about one activity as opposed to another, it would be easy... and I read their lists and I thought, 'are they out of their cotton-pickin' minds?' – you know – what is pleasurable about whatever this list was? – I can't even remember, some of the things were so... weird to me!

I guess I am just trying to say that for me as a person who's depressed, meditating, listening to the thoughts... I don't want to listen to those thoughts! I don't want to have anything to do with them because it's just like what you said – the rumination. Whether it's a particular thing that recycles – I don't think that's what I experience – it's just this endless chain of negative crap in my head. It's not a particular thought that's on an endless loop – it's just a LOT.

I have a lot of trouble with the whole idea of meditation, because I don't want to listen to those thoughts. I want to get away from them. I mean, I sit down and listen to the [meditation] CD's, and I... I want to check out of my cotton-pickin' skin! – because I'm sitting there listening to this 'stuff', you know? Every once in a while, maybe there might be a second where there is not this junk going on...

Paramabandhu: Ok, can I just take a couple of things out of that? First of all, you mentioned the 'pleasant events diary', or 'calendar', as I think it's referred to. Interestingly, actually that comes straight from C.B.T. – that's not a mindfulness-based thing particularly, so actually that is using C.B.T. for depression – and I don't know what examples were given. Actually if you do pay close attention to your experience all the time, it is varying degrees of pleasant/unpleasant. It may not be, 'whoopee, let's go and have a party' pleasant, but there will be a variation, and in a way that's what you are trying to notice, for two reasons: one, because when you are depressed you tend to not notice even the very slightly pleasant things, so to actually just start to even notice the very slightly pleasant things can just change things a bit. It's very easy to fall into, 'it's all rubbish' – so it can be useful. And the other thing about that is, again, those shifts in 'unpleasant' or 'pleasant' can also be triggers to thoughts that can be useful to be aware of.

Of course you want to get away from the thoughts, and that's what we do. The trouble is,

always fleeing from thoughts is problematic. I think this is where it's a question of practice, and building up... I think of it in terms of building up your muscles – your mindfulness muscles – so that you *can* be with more and more difficult experience, or more and more continuously unpleasant experience.

Just to give you a little example from my own life: when I first started meditating I was a medical student and I was doing my finals, and I would sit and meditate, and think, 'argh, they're going to ask me about this...' and I would think of all the horrible things that they could ask, and I would just get more and more anxious, and I just gave up – I stopped meditating – because I was getting more and more anxious in the meditation.

Then a couple of years later I was doing some more exams (which is what happens in medical careers!) and I noticed the same thing happening, but what I noticed is that I was just able to think, 'oh yeah, this is me getting anxious about (whatever)' and I could let the thoughts be there without getting so identified with them as I had been before. I had been able to just get a bit more space around them, to be able to make a difference. And I know similarly with other people who describe really persistent negative thinking, that although it's quite a battle, actually it is possible to make a difference in terms of not getting so completely caught up with them and believing them.

But as you say, it's completely understandable that you don't... you know... you're fed up to the back teeth with [the negative thoughts], of course. Your immediate response is, 'no, I don't want to spend lots of time with them, thank you very much!' But, as I say, it may be a case of just sort of building up – just doing a bit at a time – a little bit; a little bit.

5. Can mindfulness initiate depression? Stepping out of patterns of thinking; difference between rumination and 'staying with'; body awareness

Audience Member: When you've gotten some practice under your belt and you can get that distance, that's a great thing. But in the short term I'm curious about how likely it is to actually *induce* a mentally depressive state by doing mindfulness meditation: even if you're well, and not depressed, but you're just starting into this, and maybe you really get going into it... but I can kind of see how having the thoughts and being aware of them and not trying to run away from them... if that's a risk, I don't know... I mean, I know from what the research is that it's about preventing recurrence, but what's the flip side of actually inducing depressive states?

Paramabandhu: Scientifically speaking, I don't know – from what I've read of the studies, it didn't say, 'X number of people were provoked into depression by the practice' – but then, how do you know? So...

A.M.: ...Why I'm curious, and the reason I say it, is because with traditional C.B.T., as I

understand it, it's about sort of intervening and developing a response or reaction to those thoughts, whereas this is not about... [inaudible] ...it back, but it's about just taking it in and being with it, and... it's a different sort of C.B.T...

P: ...Well, except that – you see, you're saying about 'being with the thoughts' – but actually the first thing you're doing is just practicing *stepping out* of them, because, as I said at the beginning, you notice your mind has gone off somewhere, you notice where your mind has gone, and you come back to the breath. So you are actually practicing stepping out of those ways of thinking, and this is why it is so important, because you're stepping out of rumination, rather than staying with rumination, which would be a misunderstanding of the 'staying with' bit, if you see what I mean.

A.M.: Could you clarify the difference between 'ruminating' and 'staying with'?

P: Again, I think what you are doing in 'staying with' – again, coming back to this thing of the body – is you're stepping out of habitual thought patterns and exploring your experience in a different way. So you're 'staying with' the raw sensations, particularly the physical sensations. It just gives you another angle in.

A.M.: Could you give an example of that? ...You mentioned before that when you said, 'oh, here I go being anxious about my exams again,' you let go of the thought that you're anxious about what they're asking you, and you're observing, 'oh, there I go again – me being anxious!' and you're just observing... I think that's...

P: Well, just to give you an example, say, for me, on that – on the 'being anxious' – so I might fall into ruminating about, 'what am I going to be asked in this?' and start thinking about all of that: so what I would notice is that actually – oh, look – my shoulders are tensing up; my heart is beating faster; I'm sweating a bit. And I would bring my awareness onto those aspects of my experience, and that would take me out of the rumination, but actually I would be staying with the experience. I wouldn't be trying to get away from it, I would be staying with it – but staying with it more sort of 'bodily' rather than on a cognitive basis.

6. Over-active mind; 12 step program; expectations and suffering; having your own experience; the truth as sometimes uncomfortable

Audience Member: My question is, I've meditated off and on for a few years, and as other people have said, it's just kind of sitting with your thoughts, especially when you're not in a great mood or whatever. So I guess my question is: do you have any tips or suggestions about how to habituate this behaviour to incorporate it into your life? Because I still struggle with it. Some days I can sit for forty minutes and it's no problem; some days I can sit for a minute and it's like, 'it's not going to happen today; I've got to

get out of here!' So...

Paramabandhu: ...So what specifically do you find difficult? Can you just say a bit more about what it is you find difficult?

A.M.: ...My mind is just going... I just can't bring it back – you know – I've got so much on my mind, it's just like, you know... work, or bills, or pain, or whatever... it's just stuff that comes up, you know, it's just there...

P: My hunch – and I may be wrong, but this would be very common – is that somewhere there is an expectation that it should be easy; that your mind should settle down. Maybe not... but actually if your mind's going all over the place... then your mind's going all over the place! I mean I sometimes do that. My favourite thing is I like planning. If my mind can do anything, it will plan. So I can, you know, plan lists of lists, and things like that... [LAUGHTER] ...and in a way that can be unpleasant, but actually that's just what my mind is doing, and sometimes, for me, I just recognise that actually I haven't given enough time to sit and think! – you know, you need some thinking time.

A.M.: I'm in recovery, and I go to the [12] Steps – actually, _____ is my sponsor – and one of the things that... I mean, I tried Buddhism just strictly for recovery and it didn't really work. So now I sort of use both Buddhism *and* the Steps, and the reason is that somebody had suggested to me at one point, 'the Steps give you something to *do* – you know – you do this, and you do this, and you do this, and you do this.' And that kind of worked for me – you know – actually having incorporated the two together, not just sort of taking it verbatim but trying to make sense of it for myself. So the idea of having stuff to *do* was helpful, as opposed to just sitting and kind of hoping stuff happens, or...

P: Yes – so, just a couple of small things on that – so, again, hoping for something to happen suggests an expectation, but every time we have an expectation we are setting suffering up for ourselves, so we need to watch out for that. And it's so, so, so easy to do that in all aspects of life, not just in meditation.

The second thing is, it *will* be painful sometimes – that is just the way it is – because life *is* painful sometimes. And you've got a choice: you can either face it, and in a sense deal with it, or you can avoid it... and it will deal with you. And actually what you are doing in meditation is you are having *your* experience. It's all yours; it's no one else's, no one else can take it away from you – it is YOUR experience – and that is going to be painful sometimes.

So you know, maybe sometimes you say, 'look, I've just... I've done it up to there! I'm going to go off and do something else now for a while,' and, you know – sure. But I think if you're doing that, it's good to do that as a conscious choice rather than an unconscious fleeing from experience which, of course, is what we so easily do.

Again it's kind of interesting: with Kisa Gotami, the Buddha didn't bring the baby back to life. He didn't make a rosy ending. He showed her the truth. And the truth is sometimes uncomfortable.

7. Letting go of what you don't have; relationship break-up; staying with unpleasant experience – the Buddha in the 'Dart Sutta'

Audience Member: What I've been grappling with for quite some time now is these 'expectations', and setting myself up and wanting things to be a certain way. The other night in a meeting such as this, but more 12 step oriented, they said the hardest things to let go are the things you don't have. To be more specific with this, and maybe to give an example (and you can tell me if I'm right about this)... it's like when you have a relationship break-up and you're heart-sick, and you *feel* it – you feel it in your stomach or your heart or your solar-plexus... so, rather than ruminating about the situation, rather turn your energy to where it actually hurts in your body – am I correct in that?

Paramabandhu: Yes, I think that is really good, because again, when something unpleasant happens our mind very quickly proliferates off, and actually if we can stay with the raw unpleasant experience, that can be very helpful and cut through a lot of the unnecessary extra suffering. There is a traditional analogy the Buddha talks of in a Sutta called the Dart Sutta, where he basically says: a person gets shot by a dart, and then they get shot by another one. And actually, the first dart is the unpleasant experience – like somebody we love leaving us – and the second dart is our rumination and bashing ourselves up about it! [LAUGHTER] ...Actually [the second dart] is entirely optional! – although it can be very difficult to let go of. So... just stick to the first dart, and try and let go of the second dart.

8. Not identifying with one feeling; sexual addiction; recovery from addiction and mindfulness practice

Audience Member: First I just want to comment that one thing I've found helpful in terms of this whole mindfulness cognitive behavioural thing is when I'm sitting and I'm feeling angry, and I find my mind saying, 'I am angry', I realise that my identity is totally fused with the emotion, and it really helps me to say, 'I am having a feeling of anger' – so it isn't completely me. There's part of me that is having this feeling. It really helps... I do sexual addiction counselling, and I haven't used mindfulness, because with people in early recovery I think it's kind of risky to say, 'if you're having a sexual addiction impulse, then sit with it...' because it can be very... you know... there's a cycle, and it reaches a point where... there's almost a point, you know, where you're trying acting out on the impulse. So, I suppose you might explain this at the weekend, but I'm really curious about what

stage you would introduce this to someone who was recovering.

Paramabandhu: Ok – so, when can you use it with addiction? I can't speak specifically for sexual addiction – that's not an area I work in – I specifically work with alcohol. But what I've found – and I've run a few courses, both at the Centre and where I work – is that some people 'get it' amazingly quickly and early on in their recovery, and other people have fed back to me that they're just trying to do too many other things and it has all been too much at this point in their recovery. So I don't think there's a hard and fast rule from that point of view. But I think the specific thing about, 'would it, in a way, trigger the addiction?' again comes back to this question we had earlier about, 'how do you 'be with', in this case, an urge to act in a particular way?' And again, I think it comes back to you starting with just 'stepping out of' the experience, and 'staying with it' comes a bit later.

9. Rumination in the body; working with internal sensations; using metaphors to work with your mind

Audience Member: I definitely find value in bringing awareness to the body in periods of some anxiety or some negative emotion going on, but how would you respond if your rumination is being expressed in the body, in a body-focused repetitive disorder, where it's very present in the body?

Paramabandhu: Let me see: so the question is if your rumination is to do with something about the body? Or...

A.M.: ...Or if it's being expressed in the body – like, I have trichotillomania, which is hair-pulling, so it's already very present in the body, so bringing awareness to the body is... it's sometimes already there...

P: Ok. I suppose the first point is, you know, there are different parts of the body... so particularly an area that is generally useful is sort of from the chest to the belly – and in a way we're more thinking of internal sensations, rather than skin – so is there knotting in the belly, for example? Or is the heart beating fast? So there may be sensations that you are not paying attention to, that you could usefully stay with, that aren't related.

That's just one way of 'being with it' – there are other ways of being with it. If you have repetitive thoughts you could try using a metaphor. So you might for example think of your thoughts as being like a current, like a waterfall, and just, in a way, stepping just behind the waterfall... So they're still going on – you're not trying to stop them – but you're not getting wet; you're not getting caught up in them.

Or it may be that there is some emotion that's not being fully acknowledged, and so again

what we sometimes put in the instructions we have is this idea of opening to whatever you're feeling – and, if you find it helpful, saying to yourself, 'whatever is happening, let me feel it'. So again, it's paying attention to a different area of your experience. I think it's probably generally true that if you're habitually paying attention to *this* bit of your experience, you want to pay attention to *that* – so you're putting your attention somewhere else.

A.M.: When you brought in the waterfall example just then... I think part of helping to separate from thoughts, feelings, experiences, just like you were saying, you know, turn it into, 'I am feeling this right now,' – I think the pedagogical stories that the Buddha used, or these metaphors like the waterfall, or the wild animals tied to a post, I think they are really helpful in creating this mental picture, that there IS a thought, yes, but it does help you to separate and give a different kind of... [inaudible]...

P: Yes – so metaphors can be very useful to change your experience a bit.

10. Psoriasis and mindfulness

Audience Member: You mentioned psoriasis earlier: do you have any more specific information about techniques that have been used for that, or is [an improvement in psoriasis] just one of the consequences of relaxing...?

Paramabandhu: Well, I don't know – I haven't looked at it closely – but what I remember of the study is that people were doing the same mindfulness-based stress-reduction, and as far as I can remember they did a comparison between people sitting in those light-chambers for treatment for psoriasis, and one lot of people were doing relaxation and one lot of people were doing mindfulness, and the people with mindfulness, as I understand it, did better.

A.M.: ...Oh, ok. I know I have a thought and I already... [inaudible]... my skin! So I think that's why I thought maybe there was a particular technique...

P: That would sort of make sense, wouldn't it – to try and, in a way, first of all notice that thought and actually *not* immediately act on it – in a way, trying to get a bit of space in between the thought and the action.

A.M.: I am really, really aware that when I 'stress', within hours it just comes on my skin...

P: ... That's interesting, yes...

A.M.: ...so I thought maybe you had a special thing...

P: ...Ha!... No.

A.M.: ...never mind!

11. What is meditation? A brief introduction and exercise: the 'Three Minute Breathing Space'

Audience Member: I don't think I really understand what meditation is! I know one thing I do is that I breathe... I breathe and I am aware of my breathing. I'm just aware of that often because I don't have any place to go, and so I kind of come back to that and it's kind of a soothing thing – but are you supposed to be mindful like... are you only supposed to do it where you're sitting and you're still? Or do you do it when you're in line, or driving, or... how does that look? I didn't quite understand how you *are*, or, you know, how...

Paramabandhu: Yes – so what is meditation? I didn't go into that, you're quite right – partly because we've got a weekend workshop which in a way is more practical on that; and even that is a condensed version of what we would do if I was doing a course. However – in brief – if you remember, I was talking about 'formal' and 'informal' practice. So formal practice would be when, for example... there are lots of different meditations but one example would be you're sitting on a chair, or on a cushion, you're not doing anything else but just bringing your attention onto your breathing. And then when your mind goes off you notice where it's gone, and you come back to the breathing.

But, very importantly and usefully, you can also do what is called 'informal' practices, which is just where you try and pay attention when you go about your daily life. So when I'm doing the course we'd do various things, like I'd get you one week to choose an activity, like having a shower, taking out the garbage – something you do every day – and just to pay attention when you're doing that; just notice how your body is, notice where your mind is.

And then the other thing that we do, which is really, really useful, is something called 'The Breathing Space', which is like a mini-meditation. So I thought we'd all do that just to end with, as a final thing – ok?

So – Breathing Space. It's got three steps and you can do it anywhere – you can do it standing in line, you can do it driving the car, or whatever.

So, first step: just notice what is going on in your mind right now, as best you can... any thoughts, any emotions, any feelings, just whatever is going on...

Then, having done that, bring your attention onto your breathing... so, notice the breathing going in and out of the body, maybe the rise and fall of the chest or the belly...

And then expand your awareness out onto the body – the third step – so you're noticing any physical sensations: maybe the contact with the chair or cushions... any other physical sensations you're aware of in the body... contact with the ground...

...So that is the 'Three Minute Breathing Space'. It's called 'three minutes' *not* because you literally have to do it for three minutes, but because it means it's not very long, and it's got three steps. And it's very useful to do.

So what I would get you to do, if you were doing the course, is to do that three times a day, or do it at three pre-selected times each day. So you just get into the habit of noticing what's going on, and stepping out of it, during your routine life, and then to start using it to cope with difficulties. So – you're noticing you're getting upset about something – you do a breathing space.

And the idea is that eventually you're getting a seamless mindfulness practice, so you're mindful all the time. ...I'm still working on it! But it's a direction that you can helpfully move in, with practice... and it is achievable to move in that direction.