

Simply Resting in Knowing

Sarah Doering

I would like to begin tonight by telling a story from the Zen tradition. One day, about 600 years ago, a so-called “man of the people” made his way up a steep path to the top of the mountain. A “man of the people” means an ordinary person, someone like you or me. When he’d reached the top of the mountain, he approached the wise old man who lived there, bowed, and said, “Please, sir, will you write down for me the first principles of wisdom?” The wise old man picked up a brush and wrote down one word: *Attention*.

The man of the people looked at this and paused, waiting expectantly, but nothing more happened. So he turned again to the old man and said, “Please, sir, isn’t there more?” The wise old man picked up the brush and wrote down another word, which was exactly the same as the first: *Attention*.

The man of the people looked at this, frowned, and waited. Nothing happened. He said, “Well, I don’t see what’s so special about this.” So for the third time the teacher picked up the brush and wrote down one word, again the same one: *Attention*. The man of the people looked at him, shook his head, and said, “What does *attention* mean, anyway?” The reply came, “*Attention* means *attention*.” The man of the people bowed, turned, and made his way back down the mountain.

We don’t know what was in his mind, of course, but probably there was a fair amount of both confusion and frustration. It’s easy to sympathize with him, because wisdom is so rare, and of such inestimable value, that quite naturally we assume that the way to it must be abstruse and very complex. Yet only one word was given in response to that question, “What is the foundation of wisdom?” And that one word was *attention*.



Tonight I would like to speak a little about attention and its relation to wisdom and inner freedom. Attention, or mindfulness, is the active aspect of awareness. It’s a deliberate effort not to forget, not to be careless, but to be aware. Awareness, of course, is the remarkable capacity that we all have to be conscious, to know. Awareness is a characteristic of all sentient beings. It’s the very hallmark of what it means to be human. Yet really it’s seldom considered. It’s so familiar that most of the time it’s taken quite for granted. We’re really like fish in water, and awareness is the ocean we swim in, without really noticing.

One reason why we don’t notice is that awareness isn’t in any way obvious. It doesn’t have any color or shape, any substance. There’s nothing to touch, nothing you can put your finger on and say, “Ah, there is it.” It has no characteristics to identify it. Nonetheless, it *is*. Knowing *is*. Right now, there is hearing going on, and it’s known. Perhaps there’s seeing, and it’s being known.

This article is drawn from a dharma talk given by Sarah at the Forest Refuge several years ago.



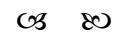
Most of us tend to live our lives looking out the window, as it were. We're paying attention to what's going on in the external world. We want to know what's going on out there. We think, "Oh, he's a nice person," or, "I like this and I don't like that," or, "This is good and that's bad." We're always busy checking and assessing, wanting to know more about the world outside. All our conditioning in our culture leads us to believe that happiness is "out there," that out there is what matters, that out there is where reality is.

What we don't understand is that the only way the so-called "outside world" is made contact with is through our mental experience of it. The entire sensory world of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and knowing, is filtered through the screen of our minds. Nothing can be experienced apart from the mind. In fact, all our experience takes place within the mind. Because we're not accustomed to thinking this way, or to observing our minds, there is very little understanding of the processes that happen within the mind. The result is confusion in our lives and much suffering.

Because we don't understand how the mind works, we don't understand the difference between seeing clearly and not seeing clearly,

and what makes that difference. We don't see that our minds are affected by how they're used. We don't see that whatever we think and say and do affects the quality of consciousness. We don't see that we're actually creating ourselves, our character and the unfolding of our lives, as we go along.

At a deeper level we take to be permanent what, in fact, is impermanent. We take to be happiness what, in fact, is *dukkha*. And we take to be solid and real what, in fact, is insubstantial—only a bubble, a dream.



The practice of mindfulness cuts through our conventional way of seeing. It changes our understanding, for it changes the way we perceive. It awakens the vast potential of understanding and of love which now lies dormant within each of us.

Mindfulness has been spoken of in different ways a number of times in the last weeks. I'd like to look at it again for just a moment, very briefly, because it's so important. It's the one factor of mind of which there can never be too much. You might think, "How can there be too much love?" But unless love is balanced by wisdom, it becomes sentimental and soft and

foolish. You might think, perhaps, “How could there be too much wisdom?” But unless wisdom is balanced by compassion, wisdom can be hard and dry. Mindfulness is the only factor of mind of which there can never be too much.

It is a deep, direct knowing of the present moment. It’s not attention as we ordinarily use that word. That attention is likely to be superficial and hasty. Ordinarily the energies of the mind are very scattered and diffuse. Their focus is quite imprecise. In the ordinary course of things, attention is simply not sustained long enough for really careful observation. A moment in which we’re paying attention ordinarily is followed by some kind of an emotional reaction or a thought. The attention itself is broken. Yet, if you ask anyone (that is, anyone who isn’t here sitting on retreat), they’re quite likely to tell you, yes, of course they know how to pay attention. But just like the “man of the people” in the story, they may have no idea what difference it makes, why paying attention is any big deal.

We all have a few main channels in our lives, of course, where thought and action are purposeful and deliberate. Sometimes this is true to a very high degree. An artist intent on her work, a mathematician solving a problem, a basketball player playing a serious game, a skier—all can know the joy of an alert and concentrated mind. I talked a few weeks ago, as it happened, to a surgeon, who spoke about the joy of operating. You may not think of an operating room as a place where there can be very much joy. But he actually spoke of the rapture, the bliss, of operating. Rapture and bliss come from very close observation and very deep interest in what is going on. For those of you who are enjoying these states now from time to time, that’s because your attention is very close and continuous.

But for the people in these various activities which I’ve just described, once they come back into normal life, that high degree of attention is broken. So there isn’t an opportunity, really, for them to come to understand the way the world is.



What we’re doing here, in the practice of mindfulness, is collecting all the scattered fragments of mental energy around a particular point. If you’re doing mettā [loving-kindness] practice, that point is a constant one. In mettā the phrases are repeated over and over again until the mind begins to gravitate right back to those few phrases. Or the point of attention may change in an open field, as with the practice of vipassanā [insight meditation]. Mindfulness moves first here, then there. But even in an open, ever-moving field, mindfulness can maintain a quiet, steady focus so that deep levels of concentration can build.

Mindfulness is able to notice not only what’s going on, but can stay with that object or changing field of objects over time. It doesn’t slip away as it develops. We all know what it’s like to be with the breath. You have connected, perhaps, with the first half-breath, and then, before even that single half-breath is completed, something comes up, attention skitters off, and the breath is forgotten. We’re not even able to be with one single half-breath. But in time, of course, that changes.

Mindfulness is sometimes likened to throwing a stone at a mud wall. To throw the stone, energy is needed. Effort. Aim. Just as effort is made with the stone, so mindfulness connects with the object and, if the effort continues, mindfulness sticks, just as the stone sticks to the wall if the wall is made of wet mud. I like that example because it tells us how old this practice is. It goes back more than 2,500 years ago when most of the houses and buildings were made of mud. This practice is just as relevant now as it was back then.

Mindfulness doesn’t let objects disappear from view. It stays firmly noticing, so it penetrates right into the object. It can immerse itself in the breath, for example, and quite literally pervade the breath, be inside the breath. Some of you may have seen this. It’s a very deep kind of knowing. It takes whatever is present



as grist for its mill. This means, whatever is present it accepts and observes. It doesn't care what's here. It doesn't matter whether it's fear or boredom or joy. It's likened, of course, to a mirror, which just reflects back whatever appears before it, with no comment whatsoever.

But the metaphor of a mirror can be misunderstood, because a mirror suggests some kind of distancing, perhaps, from feeling. But mindfulness feels every feeling. It knows the flaming heat of anger. It knows a dull ache in the heart. It knows each flicker of hope or joy. But when it's full and complete it knows them with no reaction. Its power derives from this clarity. The mind is simply stripped of all the stuff that ordinarily is added to it—all the personal likes and dislikes and associations and expectations that we have. There is just "attention attending." That's why the wise old man at the top of the mountain gave the answer he did to the man of the people. To the question, "What is attention, anyway?" he simply said, "Attention is attention."

That can seem an irritating or puzzling answer. But in one sense, there really was nothing else to say. The kind of attention that he was concerned with, the kind of attention that leads to wisdom, is bare of anything else. It's awareness, pure and simple. A state of pure awareness.



This state of pure awareness is described in a *sutta*, or sacred story, from the *Udāna Sutta*. One day when the Buddha was going on alms rounds, he was approached by a man called Bāhiya of the Bark-Cloth. Bāhiya was a man who'd made a long journey to come into the presence of an awakened being, the Buddha. So here he is at last, and he urgently asked the Buddha for a teaching. The Buddha declined; it wasn't the right time. He was carrying his bowl, and he was seeking food. It just wasn't the right time to give instruction. But Bāhiya persisted. A second time the Buddha said no. Bāhiya asked again, and it's said that when a Buddha is asked three times for something, he always agrees. He finally spoke a few very brief words, and said,

"In the seen there will be only the seen. In the heard, only the heard. In the sensed, only the sensed. In the cognized, only the cognized. This is how you should train yourself." (Ud 1.10)

When Bāhiya heard this, he understood and, as the story goes, was instantly enlightened.

For all its apparent simplicity, this obviously is a very subtle teaching. It's difficult to understand unless the mind is completely prepared for it, as Bāhiya's was. It's also difficult

If we put ourselves totally into an experience, we disappear into it.

to talk about. “In the seen is only the seen” is speaking of a kind of clear seeing. It’s a seeing, a knowing, that is utterly pure. It’s without thought, without associations. It’s nonverbal, completely intuitive. This kind of seeing—which one can call pure mindfulness, pure awareness—occurs only during the very beginnings of perception, at the very first phase of hearing or seeing. It occurs when a vibration first registers upon the eye or the ear, and consciousness receives it purely. It’s in this first fleeting moment that the truth of what is makes itself known.

But then almost instantly the thinking mind jumps in and puts a stamp upon it, finding it pleasant or unpleasant, liking it or not liking it, building associations that define it, limit it, domesticate it, make it its own. In the doing, that initial glimpse of truth slips away and is forgotten.

The work that we’re doing—being mindful of the breath, coming back as soon as we forget, coming back over and over again—deliberately strengthens that first receptive state of knowing. It begins to prolong the openness that is pure knowing. In that split second of pristine openness, the tangles of the mind release. There can then be a vividness, an intensity of the most ordinary things of every day. We’ve all had moments when the setting sun is simply a brilliance of orange and red and gold, when the grass is green—really green—or the sky is blue. When one is present in this way, the familiar seems quite unfamiliar, because everything seems so new.



As Joseph Campbell once observed, it is not so much the meaning of life that we seek, as the experience of being alive. It’s the experience of being alive that bare attention can give. All that’s required is an attentive, whole-hearted willingness to be with experience. Here is a poem written by a contemporary practitioner explaining what that means. You’ll

notice this is a very plain poem. It doesn’t have any adjectives, any descriptive phrases; it’s mainly verbs.

*Sit.
You sit down.
Breathe when you breathe.
Lie down.
You lie down.
Walk where you walk.
Talk when you talk.
Cry when you cry.
Lie down. You lie down.
Die when you die.
Look when you look.
Hear what you hear.
Taste what you taste.
Smell what you smell.
Touch what you touch.
Think what you think.
Let go, let go, let go.
Die when you die. Just die when you die.
Lie down, you lie down, and die when you die.*

Whatever we do, the message is, do totally, with complete attention. If we put ourselves totally into an experience, we disappear into it. The sense of self vanishes.

Here is another poem, written over a thousand years ago by the Chinese master Li Po:

*The birds have vanished into the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
Until only the mountain remains.*

To drop into that space of silent awareness, in which finally only the mountain remains, because the sense of “I” simply is no more—this doesn’t require great effort. It comes about through a balance of alertness and repose, from simply resting in knowing. The flow of life then is simple, harmonious, and clear.

Sarah Doering was formerly a resident teacher at the Forest Refuge. She now lives in Northampton, MA with her family.