

Mindfulness

In his Eightfold Path the Buddha spoke of cultivating two particular kinds of attention: *concentration*, which cultivated turning one's attention to a central object of awareness and thus quieted the mind, and *mindfulness*, which means being aware of exactly what is happening in the mind and body *as* it is occurring.¹

Mindfulness, also called bare attention (attention without attachment or rejection) is an approach to awareness of the processes of one's life which accepts all that emerges and lets it be. It does not moralize what emerges or fight what emerges. What emerges is just what is.

Mindfulness also makes a helpful distinction between between core events, one's reaction to world and experience, and the experience itself

I would like to add to this traditional description of mindfulness the importance of a growing awareness of mind, that by which I am aware. From my observation of mind I am convinced that there can be an awareness of mind as a whole in which thoughts and feelings occur. Awareness of mind as whole is somewhat nebulous until thoughts and feelings emerge and then we are aware that they emerge from somewhere, and eventually we are aware of a living context in which thoughts occur. Such awareness should not divide mind into components such as id, ego, superego, self, but understand it as a whole, a manifestation of the whole person.

For those who have long struggled with their feelings and thoughts to accept mind may seem a dangerous approach. They have been seeking to keep both mind and body under control and refrain from actions which could be harmful. However, the struggle with mind gives what emerges from mind power and persistence (because a brief thought is now being sustained), it makes thought and feeling something no longer neutral, transforming it into a powerful impetus for enactment. Thus a thought may become almost an action or actually be enacted rather than remaining a thought.

When what emerges is viewed negatively rather than neutrally, as enemy rather than friend or "just there", then the person withdraws from the mind (or withdraws the mind) in anxiety and fear, or rejection, and then what emerges has no one present to experience thoughts and feelings in an appropriate context. Context is important. I am the context for all my thoughts – or, my mind is context for all my thoughts. I and my mind are more than my thoughts and embrace all else that I am.

Sometimes thoughts carry with them pain or pain becomes part of the context of awareness where the mind expresses the condition of the body. Then the concern is to remain mindful of the pain and not to disassociate from it. A person must remain with

¹ . Mark Epstein, M.D., *Thought Without A Thinker*, NY: Basic Books, A Member of the Persues Books Group, 1995, pp. 139-142.

what is and not flee from it so that all is qualified by one's awareness and presence. When I am present to pain, pain is not all.

There are two concerns in mindfulness, as I understand it. The first is to allow thoughts and feelings to be only that, part of the functioning of the mind, so that their potentiality is appropriately diminished and they can be allowed to be what they are and do what is appropriate. The second has to do with the provision of an important aspect of awareness within the *perceptual field* which is that place in the person where all awareness is brought together. As we need to be aware of and have an image of our body to function physically, so mind awareness is an important aspect of the perceptual field which enables functioning of thought. Though thoughts may seem random or responses to stimuli, they occur within a whole person, and are a part of the person's perceptual field and structured awareness. When a thought is part of my perceptual field it has a context which is aware of it as part of a whole and is not central in itself. Mindfulness then cultivates mind awareness. I realize that here I am departing from some of Buddhism which would see mindfulness focused on the emerging phenomena of one's life, focusing on what is happening when it is happening, and not the possible structure behind it.

Mindfulness usually begins awareness with concentration on breathing, a foundational body process, and in its eb and flow one discovers the possibility to trust the flow of life and experience. It then moves on to feelings, thoughts, emotions and mind.