

Extracts from a Dharma Talk by Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ân
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The practice of mindfulness (“smṛti” in Sanskrit) will help us be fully aware in any situation we experience. And if we continue to cultivate the energy of mindfulness, it will lead to the energy of collectedness (“samādhi” in Sanskrit).

When we practice mindfulness, we learn to have “an object of being mindful”. The nature of our mind is always moving. And because of that mobility, when anything happens, we can be carried away very easily because there is no stability, no root. Our mind just wanders from one object to another object. So, the practice of mindfulness helps us come back to ourself and learn to be with an object for a certain time. This practice will help us cultivate stability and solidity within us.

When something untoward happens, right away we are angry, or we are sad, we feel depressed. This is because our mind catches an object, and we lose ourself. There’s no stability - just like a tree without strong roots, when the wind blows, the whole tree is uprooted and blown over. But a tree with strong roots holds firm even in a strong wind. Thanks to its root system, the tree can be stable and solid. It will not blow over.

Often in daily life we listen to something, see something or are in contact with something and right away are blown over because we don’t have roots. For example, our partner says something. They just say it out of habit energy without an intention to hurt us. But when we hear it, we receive it, right away we are blown over like a tree. We suffer throughout the day. “Why did they say that to me?”. And our mind keeps focused on what they said. We lose our root.

The practice of mindfulness helps us re-establish our root system. Where in our body can we take root? The Buddha said that there are four areas in which we can establish our mindfulness, our roots. Mindfulness can be established by being aware or mindful of these four areas.

Our first root is our body. We focus on being mindful, aware of our body, all the time. When we walk, we know we are walking; when we sit, we know we are sitting; when we are standing, we know we are standing. When we put on a robe, we know we are putting on a robe. When we walk forward, we know we are walking forward; when we walk backwards, we know we are walking backwards. Whatever our physical posture – standing, sitting, lying, moving – we are fully aware of that and focus on these aspects. It’s a training because when we focus that way, it can become our habit energy.

So, we take root in the body. When someone says something, instead of paying attention to it and being blown over, we continue to remember this practice of mindfulness of the body. We listen, yes, but the content of what we hear does not blow us over. We are still aware of

our body. That is the training. For example, right now I'm giving a Dharma talk, but I also practice being mindful of my body. I don't let the content of my talk carry me away. I'm fully aware of my body position, fully attentive to how I move my body and I continue to return to my body when I'm giving the talk. The talk is part of my existence, but another part of my existence is being aware of my body. And that is the first place for establishing mindfulness.

It's so important because if we cannot take root in our body, then we don't know what is going on with our body. Often there is disharmony between the body and the mind. The body is here, but the mind is somewhere else. Because of that, sometimes we don't know what is happening to our body, we don't know what is happening to our mind because we are split. And when there is disharmony in the body and the mind, there is disharmony in the community between the family and the environment and it extends out to disharmony in the whole world.

When our partner makes that remark which blows us over, what happens is that all the negative energy within us will grasp onto this expression by our partner and we create a virtual world, a reality that might not exist. All the memories we have of living with this partner come into reality right now. All the anger, the sadness from our parents comes into this moment, all the negative energy of our culture and history comes into this moment and we see a reality that is not as it is. There is a lot of exaggeration; we create a lot of illusions. What our partner says might be as small as a peanut. But right away our mind grasps onto this peanut and grows into a melon – within a few minutes – and we live in the reality of the melon, while the true reality is only a peanut. It happens like that. Yes, there's suffering, we should not deny it. But we should see the suffering as it is and not blow it up into something much bigger. That is very important. Otherwise, things will get worse. The situation will become very bad. So, our partner says: "How come you are not kind to me today?" After hearing that one small sentence, we begin to retaliate, "How can you say that to me? I'm always kind to you. Remember when we were just married (could be 30 years ago)..." and then we bring in our kindness at the time of the wedding or later. "Ten years ago I did this, five years ago I did that..." You bring everything in to defend that you are kind to them. And you lose yourself. The Buddha called this confusion or delusion, or ignorance.

When we are not so mindful and lose ourselves, we fall into this confusion. We create a reality based on something that's very small. The practice of mindfulness is to learn to see things as they are. When the suffering is as small as a peanut, then we say to ourselves: "Oh, that suffering is just peanut suffering." We may feel pain or sorrow after our partner's remark, but we come back to our in-breath and out-breath; we feel our body, we feel the unpleasant sensation from what they said, and we embrace it with love.

They said, "How come you are not kind to me today?"

I hear it, I recognize it and I embrace it with all my love and care before I act, before I express myself. The practice is to return and to embrace what I feel right now. I do not do

anything yet. I learn to take root. That is the practice of mindfulness. We learn to go back and embrace the body.

The second root is our feeling or sensation - the bioenergetic field in us. Feeling is the second root in which we learn to establish our mindfulness: “I’m fully aware of what I’m feeling; the sensation within me. And I embrace it with love.” Do not be blown over by the situation. Come back and take root. Recognize the suffering and stay stationary.

In a previous talk, I gave the analogy of a fish that stays stationary in a lake. There are lake ripples around it, but the fish is immovable. Other fish move constantly around the lake, following the ripples. But, like the fish “practitioner”, we remain stable and solid.

The third root in which we can establish our mindfulness is our emotions, or mental formations. We embrace with our love and care all the pain and the sorrow we’ve felt. We do not let our suffering spread, we learn to hold it with our love because the moment our suffering spreads out, it is difficult to retract. It’s difficult to correct what has been damaged.

For example, when our partner said: “How come you are unkind to me today?” we begin to explode, we begin to say negative things and the relationship is damaged. We cause a wound in the relationship that will be very difficult to heal later. In our daily relationships, we need to learn to embrace the fire within us - the fire of anger, depression, sadness, and fear – and not let this energy explode. That is very important. So, emotions or mental formations are the third root in which we need to establish our mindfulness.

The fourth root is our perception about life. Our perception is that there is this “me”, I am “separate” from the universe. And we always defend this “me”, this “I”, regarding this “I” as the most noble thing in the world, and ourself as the center of the whole universe. But this “I” is only a construction of our mind. Our existence depends on other people. We cannot exist by ourself.

Coming back to the example of our partner who says: “How come you are unkind to me today?” We try to defend ourself; to represent ME, MYself as something noble. Perhaps our partner doesn’t mean to condemn us completely as a person. Language can be very misleading. They may just be expressing a small irritation, a small frustration. But we identify this with the totality of who we are. We see it as a comment that we are totally unkind and so we defend ourself.

Perceptions are such that, in any relationship, nobody is completely right; nobody is completely wrong. We see this in the wider world, too. In any conflict, each side has its own perspective. It is partially true to a degree, and partially false to a degree. If we act only with our mind, our rational thinking, it becomes impossible to resolve differences equitably because there is no complete truth on either side. We are unable to find a way to co-exist. But if we approach the same situation differently – that is, with our heart – we are

able to recognize that we each have needs for security, peace, and a way to make a living. We can come to a resolution. For sure it will not be a perfect resolution but at least we can co-exist.

Even at the level of families - in relationships with our partner, our parents, our son or daughter - we often find it hard to practice that way. We fall into the trap of using our mind, our rational thinking, to look for what is right and wrong. We use our logical mind to judge a situation. As a result, we see that not many couples can maintain their relationship for 30, 40 or 50 years. Perhaps they love each other very much at the beginning and want to share their lives. But after 5, 10 or 15 years, their relationship is broken. They cannot go further because they can only look at the other person with their mind. When we come back to the heart, embracing the heart, we begin to develop this energy of mindfulness.

The energy of mindfulness gives rise to the energy of compassion. Only with compassion can we live together and accept each other. With only our mind it's very difficult to accept each other, but with our heart it's much easier. So, when we take root in the four aspects of our existence – body, feelings, emotions, and perceptions – we calm down the violence within; the fire within us. It is a holy, healing energy. There is so much pain within our body. There's so much pain within our feelings. There's so much pain in our emotions and perceptions.

When we come back and embrace it all with our love and care, the energy of compassion begins to heal us. That is the only way that we can live with another person. Without that energy, the other person is always doing things we cannot accept with our rational mind. So, learn to cultivate the energy of mindfulness. Take root in the four aspects of our existence that make up our being. It should be a training. Each of us has the potential to live a life of mindfulness. Each has the potential to develop compassion and a life of mindfulness. The Buddha assured us of that. He called this potential the “buddha nature”. It is the potential within us that can give rise to the energy of compassion. But we need to develop this potential. We need to practice in order for us to be able to live together peacefully.

I have seen many couples going through deep suffering who still live unhappily with each other. We don't have to live that kind of life. We can live together peacefully, harmoniously, accepting each other and supporting each other to grow and develop. It is possible to do that. I've seen couples whose relationship is broken because one partner does not practice cultivating this energy of mindfulness, of compassion within him or her. That person causes a lot of pain in the relationship. Each of us is responsible for ourself and for the other. Each of us has to be responsible for our own part.

In any conflict, it is not only one side that errs. Mistakes are always made by both sides. Conflict arises because of confusion, delusion, ignorance on both sides. It's never only on one side. If we come back to ourself, learn to take good care of ourself, embrace ourself with love, embrace the wound within ourself so that this rationality can calm down, then we

will be able to see many things. That's why it is called mindFULNESS. "Full" means the mind is not fragmented. We have a fuller perspective, view about things. So, come back to ourself, embrace ourself deeply with love and compassion.

From conflicts within families to conflict between peoples and countries, humans need to learn our lesson and stop all destructive or violent acts. We need to calm ourself and embrace our pain, our sorrow, with deep love. From this deep love and healing for ourself, we can help others to heal.

We are all suffering today with the Palestinians and Israelis. They need support from the international community and from each of us. As humans, we are all responsible for war, wherever it breaks out. We have the duty and responsibility to cultivate compassion in our hearts - deep compassion. We can begin by resolving conflicts in ourselves, in our families, in our relationships with friends, in our societies and in our countries. We have a duty, and responsibility to do that. For our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren to have a future, it is crucial that we all practice.

The world seems to be heading into ever more difficulties, with the ongoing war in Europe and now, renewed conflict in the Middle East. This collective manifestation of human consciousness is a sign that we all need to return to ourself and ask -

"Do we have peace in our family?"

"Do we have peace in our relationships with our parents, our son, our daughter, our partner, our society?"

Without peace in all these relationships, the energy of suffering will one day spill into the collective consciousness and manifest here or there.

The way out is by the practice of mindfulness to cultivate the energy of compassion within, so we each can help the overall situation.

The need is urgent. We all have a responsibility and duty to practice. We need to return to the fundamentals of who we are and take root in the four aspects of our existence. From a Buddhist perspective, this is the only way out.