

# Being on Time

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This evening we come together to practise the *Dhamma*. A good portion of practising the *Dhamma* is simply being on time: being on time with mindfulness. This is what we mean by being mindful—getting mindfulness up to speed, keeping pace with the rapid flow of life with clear awareness. Mindfulness shines a light on the present. Mindfulness is the conveyor—that which conveys sensory information about the way things are to augment the wisdom that we already have and apply that wisdom quickly. That's how we can practise all day long every day.

Every moment there is an opportunity to check: is our mindfulness quick enough? Are we on time? A thought arises while we are sitting in meditation. The instructions are very simple. Thoughts are not the enemy, but if we are not on time, we can get carried away. Our attention is carried away down some relatively meaningless and petty road, feeding negative states of mind, or simply circling around in worry that wastes our mental energy. That's very tiring.

Mindfulness means being there on time when something happens. Let's say a worry arises, we feel worried...but then we quickly recognise: whatever the content of the worry, in and of itself it is merely a fear-based thought—only mental energy. 'That's just a worry.' This fear of a possible future, realistic or not, rational or not, is quickly seen as merely a scenario in our mind, not more real than that. That puts it in perspective and makes it easier to let it go. The mental and physical tension then subside. The worry may come up again, but then we are on time and we let it go again. Gradually the bad habits are modified. Through self-observation, we recognize that worrying does not actually help solve a problem. Then it begins to lose power over us—although sometimes it takes five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes...we're not on time, not quite quick enough yet. But that's alright, we all start by being late and then we get better. We start by blindly believing the content of our thoughts, assuming the stories are more real than they are, getting lost in thought for fifteen minutes and then remembering, "Oh, right, am I breathing in or am I breathing out?"

As we get more experienced with Buddhist practice, if we get lost in thought for even a few seconds, maybe ten seconds, we think, "Hmm, I was pretty slow there. Oops, I lost mindfulness for ten seconds. I really need to do better than that." As soon as a thought arises, 'boop', you know it. If you need to tell yourself something, if you want to emphasize it, you can say "A thought is merely a thought." It's just a thought. Whatever the content, whatever the story and emotions, a thought is just mental energy. Usually by that time we are experienced enough to know. As soon as a thought arises, we recognise it pretty quickly. And we observe: does this have the flavour of the wholesome or the flavour of the unwholesome?

When we are meditating, unless we are doing a systematic contemplation, even thoughts about wholesome things can be a distraction. If the purpose of the meditation is to simply observe our breathing, then that's our area of attention. Then even wholesome thoughts can draw our attention away, can be a way that our mind is looking to distract itself from going more deeply. So we aim to develop enough discipline to be systematic. A thought arises, and we know it straight away. Also, as we come to appreciate the beauty and pleasantness of being with the breath, how nice it feels, how grounded and peaceful it feels to be centred and balanced, then it's pretty obvious when a thought carries our attention away. It's unpleasant. "So why am I thinking about that?" Why bother worrying about tomorrow when the present is so pleasant...worrying about how to make tomorrow happy...while in the meantime we ruin the perfect moment of the present? So why not just be happy in the present? This then makes it more likely that we will be happy tomorrow. Taking responsibility for the future and worrying are two different things.

Being on time. When someone praises us, we've got to be on time. If we are not on time, we may think, "That's an intelligent comment. That's a smart and discerning person. Finally someone recognizes how wonderful I am." After a while, if we have some wisdom, then we may realise, "Oops, a bit slow there." That's called reinforcing the sense of self. Or if we get criticized, what reactions come up? How slow are we to react with wisdom? How long are we beset with defensive thinking before we let it go?

Can we be on time? Someone praises us... fine, maybe it's true, maybe it's not. Someone criticizes us...fine, maybe it's true, maybe it's not. How does it feel? Can we learn something? If so, good. Otherwise just let it go. Then we are on time. Then our mind is not like a roller coaster. We don't get pulled off balance. That place where we feel still, peaceful, calm, centred, bright.... you get a taste for that. Then you begin to recognise how much the world pulls us away from that all the time—if we allow it to. It doesn't have to. The world is just the world. Can't blame the world. It's just the way the world is. But are we on time? If we are on time, then it's not a problem.

Something happens that's pleasant. We recognise, "That's merely a pleasant feeling. It's got my attention, it's pleasant, that's nice." But wisdom is brought there quickly by mindfulness, seeing that the moment has already passed. The feeling fades, and then it's gone. It's pleasant, then it changes. Seeing this, we naturally pull away from taking refuge in pleasant feelings and move towards taking refuge in our own heart.

When we experience something that's unpleasant—physically painful, mentally painful, frustrating, not what we want—how quick are we to know it, to bring our wisdom to bear? Understanding, "This is merely an unpleasant feeling," there is immediate relief. "Oh, it's merely an unpleasant feeling. Not such a big deal. Not who I am. This will pass." It's still unpleasant, but we don't add to it. It's already fading away. It doesn't define us. It's not our refuge. If our refuge is in avoiding unpleasant

feeling, then life becomes very difficult. It's an endless toil of trying to avoid the things we don't like: discomfort, criticism, painful memories, fears, belly fat and boredom. But if our refuge is within our own heart, within that place of peace—call it *Buddho*, call it the radiant mind—that mind is awake.

There was one time when I was staying with a teacher named Luang Pu Lee of Red Cliff Mountain. I lived on a platform jutting out from a ledge on the side of a cliff. The walls were made from monks' robes nailed to pieces of wood. It was winter and the winds from the North were very cold at night. We didn't have sleeves or long underwear or heaters to keep us warm. We just had patience. When it was cold, I'd tell myself, "This is cold." I would feel it, feel it keenly, pay close attention to the unpleasant sensation and try not to react with aversion—just carry on calmly, not tighten up and not look for distraction. When it was very cold, with the wind blowing through the gaps in the cloth, I would observe, "This is what it means to feel very cold" and try not to make a problem out of it. That's good training for life.

Pleasant, unpleasant, praise, blame...these things come and they go. But the deep sense of peace and satisfaction that we have, that doesn't shake. Or even if it shakes a little bit, it doesn't go too far away. We recognise, "Hmm, my mind shook a bit. That's not as nice as having the heart just be still." When we see that, when we *feel* that, immediately the mind wants to come back to being still. Because it's more satisfying. This is the role of mindfulness. It shines a light on what we do in the present moment. It shines a light on what's happening and allows the natural wisdom that we already have to assess the situation, to grow and to make the right decision, make a wise decision. We all have that ability. We all wish to incline towards happiness. If we just see a situation clearly, then we do. When we see a real life situation clearly, mindfulness says, "Right...this way is agitating, and this other way is deeply satisfying. Which do I want?" You don't have to think. The mind just inclines towards that which is deeply satisfying. It's peaceful and it's wise.

But if mindfulness isn't on time, then we are simply confused by our delusions. We can't help it. We can't see. It's just the nature of a deluded mind. This is unpleasant and agitating, and we don't even see that which is deeply satisfying. So we just incline towards that which is unpleasant and dissatisfying, agitating, frustrating and get drawn into it. We feel we have no choice, until eventually it's too frustrating and then we say, "I've got to stop. I've got to find a better way."

Mindfulness is remembering. Remembering the Dhamma we already know. It's not memorised Dhamma. It's not Dhamma that you have to regurgitate like a student taking a test in school. It's Dhamma that we know in our heart already. We've experienced it. Maybe we've experienced it on retreat; maybe we've had insights in daily life. We know...but we forget. Sometimes our mindfulness isn't quick enough, and we just need to stop and remember. "Right. I don't need to do that. Why am I getting caught up in that?" Then we can let it go. We remember, "Right, peace of mind."

It's been many years since I've been back here in Malaysia. When you don't come back to a place for four years, five years, ageing becomes more obvious. I'm just talking about myself here. When we live with a body day in and day out, the changes are very gradual. Sometimes though, after longer periods of time, returning to a place, we realise "Hmm, the first noble truth of ageing, this is inescapable." We are experiencing one aspect of the first Noble Truth as the body begins to fall apart. There are pleasant aspects of growing older, but physically it's kind of a hassle. It's one of those things where mindfulness needs to be on time. Then we make peace with ageing. As grey hairs become more prevalent, what's the reaction? Mindfulness has to be very quick. Our perception of self is challenged. If that perception is fixed, I'm going to suffer. Anytime we identify with a stagnant perception of ourselves, it's going to eventually lead to suffering and frustration in some way. Because life is constantly in flux.

That which we identify with is constantly changing. So it doesn't make sense to have a fixed perception of ourselves—especially if we are attached to a particular age, a particular look, a particular way that we are or a particular talent that we have. When those things change, then we experience sadness, *dukkha*. But the change in and of itself is merely nature, *Dhamma*. This is merely the flowing stream of a human life, neither good nor bad, simply the way things are.

Ageing is very good for practising *Dhamma*. We can get drunk when we're young. I'm talking about infatuation with our own health and strength and beauty. It's fun, but it's easy to become careless. It's one reason why Luang Por Chah and so many of the other forest masters would make life difficult for the forest monks and nuns. Because when things are comfortable, it's easy to be careless. When things are uncomfortable, it gets your attention. You really have to make an effort in order not to suffer. You really have to be on time with mindfulness. "This is unpleasant. How am I not going to suffer? How can I be at peace with this?" We learn, and we become strong.

So ageing is a bit like that, like a teacher. A few more pains here, a few more aches there—and sometimes, much more serious issues. What kind of reaction does that bring up? Whenever there is negativity, frustration, sadness or wishing it was otherwise, this is *dukkha*. If we recognise it as such, if we recognise, simply, "This is *dukkha*," then it must have a cause. What is the cause of this *dukkha*? Attachment, grasping, clinging, craving? Are we craving for it to be different? Are we grasping at a perception of self that no longer exists? If so, it's good to recognise that. Then our wisdom grows every day. If I don't have a fixed perception of myself, then as this body gradually changes, it's not a problem. Things that we used to be able to do, we can't do them anymore. It's not a problem, unless we are fighting the stream of time.

So being on time...every time we see something, are we aware that we are seeing? Seeing is merely seeing. That's when mindfulness becomes very quick. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and cognizing. As soon as we see something, very quickly a sense of self arises. 'Boom', I am seeing. I am seeing that, I am

seeing you, / am seeing this. Almost every time we open our eyes, we are reinforcing our sense of self, who we think we are, what we identify with. So mindfulness has to be very quick. Seeing is a natural function. But when the sense of self arises with seeing, then we have to be on time to recognise that. That's a very deeply held conditioned reaction, but that's also something we add to the flow of nature. That's something we can recognise. Right now we can observe: 'There is seeing. And then there is an assumption that there is a person who is seeing, that / am seeing.' These are separate. This sense of self is something that arises on top of nature, in addition to nature.

Is it a problem? It's the seed that encourages grasping and can grow into *dukkha*. It starts small and subtle, but festers and can then explode into an argument. Then it's a problem. In the same way, we hear something, pleasant or unpleasant. "I like that, I don't like that, /'m the one who's hearing." Again, a sense of self arises. Identification with what we hear can lead to strong attachment to opinions and conflict. Then it's a problem. So we look at the causes. Every time we have sense contact—like tasting: "This food is delicious. I like this food, or I don't like that food. I made this food. I eat too much food. I'm hungry." All of this reinforces a sense of self, me and mine.

Is this a problem? If we recognise that this is a conditioned reaction, then it tends to solve itself—if we bring mindfulness there in time, if we are able to quickly catch it. As we sit in one position on the floor, cross legged, longer and longer, then we start to experience *dukkha*: aches, pains, discomfort, a wish to change posture, a wish that the body would only experience pleasant feelings. This is a teacher for us. Discomfort in the body is an excellent teacher as long as mindfulness is on time. If mindfulness is on time, then we see, 'oh that's merely discomfort in the body.' The body is one thing, the feelings are another, and that which is watching and knowing, that's something else.

The body and the mind are two different things. When mindfulness is not on time, then it all gets pushed together into one ball of tightness, and it just feels like I hurt. There's identification; there is physical pain; there is mental pain and dissatisfaction all rolled into one. Then we don't have the opportunity to learn from it. We miss the opportunity. So again, mindfulness has to rush to the rescue and see, "I missed that opportunity, but I'll start again." While sitting in meditation when sick or just sitting through the inevitable aches and pains, we need to remind ourselves: "This is my teacher. My body is my teacher as it gradually changes." We learn patience, and we learn understanding.

So when mindfulness is on time, we have innumerable opportunities to learn every day. Every time we open our eyes and see, every time we hear something, every time we eat something, every time we smell, or experience pleasant and unpleasant sensations—these are opportunities for developing wisdom. We observe: are we peaceful, or not? To what degree are we peaceful? What are the causes of being peaceful? What are the causes for being un-peaceful? What changes can we make?

How do our words affect the level of agitation in our minds? What behaviour leads to feeling at ease? How do we make wise choices that gradually incline the mind towards peace? Towards the happiness we seek?

I'd say it's a no brainer—because you don't need to overthink things. You just see things clearly, allow your natural wisdom to make the right choice and incline the mind towards that which is peaceful. And then when it comes time to die—if you've been practising being on time with mindfulness your whole life—when it comes time to die...well, you don't want to be late for that one.