

“Living Meditation Living Insight” by Dr. Thynn Thynn

Staying With More Moments

Student: Sometimes it’s a luxury to be mindful of a task with undivided attention. I only get frustrated if I try to be mindful of a task when my young children demand my attention. It seems like the only thing to do is to redirect my attention to the children and do the task on automatic pilot.

Thynn: I like your phrase “automatic pilot”! Again, I have to emphasize that being mindful is only a means to practice focusing. Don’t compete with yourself. What you choose to pay attention to is entirely circumstantial. If the children need you, focus on them.

The only guideline is to avoid rigid conditioning.

This does not mean that if you are cooking vegetables, you must be absolutely mindful of the color and smell of the vegetables and ignore the children’s questions. If you did that, you’d be clinging to the cooking.

Student: Oh, so that’s why I feel frustration?

Thynn: Yes, because you are clinging. Once again, you must understand that upekkha (equanimity) should be in every act. If you can view cooking with upekkha, then you won’t have a problem letting go of mindfulness on the cooking and you can redirect your attention to the child. Sometimes you can cook - on automatic pilot, as you say - and answer the child. Other times, if the child has a pressing need, you might find it better to stop cooking and really devote all your attention to the child.

There are no set rules.

You can become attached to your mindfulness of the moment just as you can become attached to anything else.

This is very subtle, but understand from the outset that you can be bound by your own mindfulness!

Student: If things are very hectic I cannot even redirect my attention to another activity, but find I have to just live in the chaos.

Thynn: Well, letting go of the mindfulness can be appropriate. But we must also talk about living in the chaos. How do you deal with the chaos?

Student: Sometimes I become involved in the chaos and get carried away by it.

Thynn: Yes, if your mindfulness is not strong enough you can easily be drawn into the chaos. The mindfulness I am talking about is the mindfulness of your own mind. If you are not aware of your thoughts and your feelings about the chaos, you can easily slip into interacting in the situation, reacting to the chaos. Before you know what’s happening, you are already storming through the chaos, thus creating more chaos.

If you are mindful of your own feelings as you notice the chaos, you can choose how to act in the situation.

Instead of being only aware of the outside chaos, stop and look directly into yourself and see what is there.

Student: But that’s not easy.

Thynn: Of course not. But you have to start somewhere. As long as you are not silent inside, you will always be on a roller coaster ride with the outside chaos.

To look into yourself directly is to come back to your own source and to reach an inner equilibrium and silence. It is only from this inner equilibrium that you can view the outer chaos objectively.

When this happens you can see the chaos as chaos, as only a circumstantial situation. You'll see the cause behind the chaos and you can act accordingly. In short, when you penetrate to the heart of the chaos, you will spontaneously resolve it in the best way for the circumstances. This is what is called penetrating insight wisdom, or pañña.

Student: Do you mean we should be passive in a chaotic conflict?

Thynn: No. Again, there is nothing rigid about it. One situation may require a firm hand that cuts right through to the heart of the matter. If you are acting with awareness it will be the right action. Another situation might require that you become quiet and not generate more confusion. If you stop and look, you will know what to do in each situation. If you view both the chaos and your mind with upekkha (inner silence or equanimity), you will know what to do and will not be bothered by the chaos.

Student: If we stop to look, how can we react to others in the right way? We wouldn't have time to think of what to do.

Thynn: This is the most difficult part to explain. We are so used to functioning with the intellect that it seems quite impossible to function in any given situation without conceptualizing. You see, here we are talking about insight or pañña (Insight Wisdom). It's a paradox: insight does not arise unless the conceptualizing stops altogether. In a chaotic situation insight can arise only when we stop conceptualizing about the chaos. Mindfulness of our own mind will in fact stop the conceptualizing that our minds normally go through. When the mindfulness is strong enough and there is total silence in the mind, then insight will spontaneously arise as to how best to deal with the situation at hand.

Student: I have another question. I find I can stop being emotional, right in the middle of a difficult interaction, but then I don't know where to go from there. Since I am studying Buddhism and learning to practice the Buddhist way, I feel I should react with more compassion. But I may not feel compassionate. Because I don't know how to go on, I go back to my old conditioning of either resentment or aggressiveness.

Thynn: My dear, this is only a phase in your own progress. You have come this far. It is possible to go further. Look into the process involved in your mind right in the midst of reacting. When you are able to stop in your tracks, you are already doing quite well.

It is only when you start intellectualizing again that you get into trouble. If you have the notion that as a practicing Buddhist you should be compassionate, then you are setting up an image of yourself. As soon as that thought is allowed to come into your mind, you are not free. At that moment your mind is filled with the desire to fulfill your own image as a practicing Buddhist.

When the mind is not free, there is no chance for true compassion to arise.

It is as simple as that. Only when you free yourself of preconceived perceptions of yourself can spontaneous compassion arise. When you are free of concepts, you will act spontaneously and compassionately as well as creatively.