

The Third Teaching

Mindfulness

There are many ways to help unravel the confusion of the mind. A basic quality which is extremely useful for us all to develop in this lifetime is what is traditionally called mindfulness. Normally, whenever we do something, we are thinking of many other things at the same time. I will give an example.

There is a Vietnamese monk called Thich Nhat Hanh who talks about washing dishes in order to wash dishes. Normally when we have a sink full of dishes, our thought is that we will wash these dishes, then we'll get clean dishes and they will be out of the way and then we can do something else. And so when we wash the dishes we are trying to get it over with as quickly as possible. While we're washing the dishes we are thinking of something we did in our childhood, or something somebody said yesterday, what we're going to do later in the day, or what our spouse said to us yesterday and what we should have said back, or we worry about the children or the financial situation in Singapore, whatever. What we are not thinking about is the dishes.

Now this would not be so important a point, except that the next thing we do, which might even be some-

thing nice like having a cup of coffee and biscuit, gets the same treatment. We sit down to drink the coffee, but after the first sip we are thinking about something else again. “Oh god, now I’ve got to go upstairs, then I’ve got to do this, then I’ve got to go shopping, what should I buy...” And so it goes on and on, right? We are never present with what we are doing in this moment, and life just goes by. Even when we are doing something really nice, we appreciate it the first moment, but you watch—the next moment the mind’s gone off somewhere else, comparing it with something else we did before.

I like Tiramisu very much—a spongy cake with coffee and lots of cream—totally degenerate, but I love it. So when I eat Tiramisu, it is a very pleasurable thing. At the first mouthful, I’m completely with the Tiramisu. But by the second mouthful, I am comparing it with a Tiramisu I had somewhere else which was my idea of the perfect Tiramisu, and I’ve lost this one. For the rest of the mouthfuls, I’m not really eating it any more. It’s eating itself. I’m already somewhere else, with former glorious Tiramisus which this one should have been but isn’t.

We do this every day, not only with what we think of as unpleasant things like washing the dishes, but also with pleasurable things. We’re not there. We don’t experience it. Even if we’re speaking about it, we’re just

giving our version, our ideas, our opinions, our memories, our likes and dislikes. But the thing itself is lost.

So Thich Nhat Hanh says that instead of washing dishes to get clean dishes, we should wash dishes to wash dishes. In other words, we just wash the dishes because there they are. And while we are washing them we are completely with what we do. We know we're standing at the sink, we feel the water and the soap suds. We are conscious of every dish that we wash. We're just completely here. He says our mind is like a bottle on the ocean, being slapped up and down in all directions by the wind. But we are centred, completely centred. We experience what we are doing, we know we are washing dishes.

Now for any of you who have tried this, you would have discovered that it is extraordinarily difficult. It sounds very easy, but after the first minute the mind is already either thinking, oh this is easy, very easy to be mindful, I can be mindful any time, chatter, chatter. And where are you? You're not with the dishes, you were just thinking about the dishes. Or else you were doing dishes being mindful and "Why did I get that dish? Oh, I remember, my mother-in-law gave me that, yes, that was part of a set, I wonder what happened to the rest of the set..." Right?

It is extraordinarily difficult to remember to be present. It's easy to be present once we remember. But if we do that, if we bring that quality as much as pos-

sible into our daily life, it's as if we are seeing things for the first time. Life sometimes seems very boring and repetitive because we only live it at second and third hand through our interpretations, elaborations, ideas, memories, likes and dislikes. We don't see the thing in itself. So the Buddha said that mindfulness was like salt in the food, it makes it tasty. Food without salt has no taste. Our lives are like that. That's why people have to have more and more exciting things now — louder music, brighter lights, more stimulation, because life has no taste. So we have to come back into the present and add a little salt to our lives. That salt is to be aware, to be conscious.

Mindfulness is a huge subject and I've only skimmed the surface. But try to bring that quality of knowingness, of being present and knowing what we are doing while we are doing it, as much as possible into your life without interpretations, elaborations, and ideas. Just being naked in the present, in the moment, that alone can really transform our lives. We become much more centred, we become much less easily angered or irritated, we feel poised in the midst of situations and not as though we've been buffeted here and there.

We see things more clearly, especially people. We are able to pick up not just their words and facial expressions but somehow we become more sensitive to the situation, to what is appropriate and what is

not. And if we really continue this, we gain a kind of inner space, so that we are no longer completely thrown up and down by our thoughts and our emotions. We are able to see that we are not our thoughts and emotions. Our thoughts and emotions are mental states which rise and fall, but that is not us. We're able to connect more with that which knows. For this reason the Buddha very much emphasized that everybody should cultivate this quality of attention, of being present in the moment.

If you spend your days cultivating loving kindness, compassion, tolerance, ethics, non-harming, honesty, integrity and mindfulness, I think you will have a pretty full day and no one will complain then that they have no time for practicing dharma.

Questions and Answers

This talk was mainly in the form of a *Q & A* session in which Ven. Tenzin Palmo addressed questions about Tibetan Buddhism, her life in the cave, and her current efforts in establishing a nunnery in India.

Q. Society has some problems with the idea of a person spending twelve years alone in a cave meditating.