

WARRIORSHIP AND THE FOUR FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS by Gary Allen (Ratna Peace Initiative, 2009)

Cocoon

We cling tightly to a version of ourselves we could call “cocoon.” The threads of the cocoon are our psychological habitual patterns, a tendency to repeat a certain collection of beliefs, story-lines, and emotional conflicts. In general, we may find ourselves to be very angry, very needy, very addictive, very arrogant, very depressive, or what have you. In relation to certain things that happen in daily life that provoke us, we respond with an underlying sense of fear and insecurity, and then we grab onto some habitual response. If someone challenges our point of view, perhaps we always get angry. We feel the person has attacked us personally, that we’re in danger somehow, so we lash out. If things aren’t going well at home with our family, we go to the bar instead, trying to avoid the pain of our problems there and instead drown them out with booze.

There are many strategies, but what they all have in common is a subtle (or not so subtle) quality of fear, and then a habitual, impulsive, and familiar response. We may feel unhappy with our anger or our drinking, but it’s comfortable in its familiarity. It feels like “me,” and we may well have forgotten that there could be some other way to respond.

Cocoon means we’ve shut down to the immediacy and actuality of our lives and instead function on an automatic pilot where we don’t seem to question our own assumptions or look very closely at our lives at all. Our habitual responses do all the work for us, but this results in a sense of being trapped in ourselves, our particular version of ourselves, with tight limitation on what we can see, feel, & hear from the world. Even quite literally we may not see what’s going on around us; even if our eyes are working perfectly, our minds try to keep a lot of information and just plain *life* out of our experience to keep it from touching us. This is a kind of prison cell of “self” or “ego” we carry around. We may have a big investment in this little creation because it makes sense of the world, of who we are, and numbs us out to some extent from the brilliance and terror of an actual confrontation with reality.

The price of the cocoon is to live in a mental world that’s darkened, claustrophobic, secure in a negative way, and a form of arrested development. It’s hard for us when we’re holding tightly to this state to open up and really communicate with the world around us, or even, for that matter, to really communicate with the world inside ourselves. Essentially, we’re paralyzed with fear.

Warriorship

It’s in this context that *warriorship* becomes a relevant, necessary principle. In this case we mean a meditative or psychological warrior, someone who is willing to face the difficulties of their own feelings and perception. If it were easy to do, then we would have already done it most likely, but because our habitual patterns are often so ingrained and often quite hidden from us, and because we will have to face things that at best make us uncomfortable and at worst terrify us, there’s an adventure we have to go on in order to emerge from the cocoon. Real adventures are often very challenging and put us in unfamiliar territory.

Hence to be a warrior is to have the courage to face things we normally don’t want to see, feel, or hear. To be a meditative warrior means to face what goes on in our minds in meditation when we have no distractions or entertainment, nothing to take us away from facing ourselves as

we are right at this moment: the boring, repetitious discursive thoughts; the hollow fantasies and projections; the obsessive clinging to guilt and shame; raw anger and neediness; memories we don't want to arise because they haunt and harass us and make us feel helpless, lost, and overwhelmed. Like a warrior on the battlefield, we need the fortitude to face the situation when the bullets are flying and there's no one there to hold our hand.

Nevertheless, this is not a matter of macho attitude where one ignores the pain and pushes bluntly ahead. Just the opposite. It becomes necessary to allow the pain to happen and to open up to it. We've maintained the cocoon situation by avoiding our own sense of suffering, grief, and tenderness, so the warrior trains to sit nakedly in meditation with these difficult states.

Through avoidance, we've suppressed and numbed out many kind of emotions, sensations, and perceptions; by opening up we allow the emotional energy to move, we give ourselves an opportunity to deepen our insight and understanding, and we may well remove obstacles keeping us from being more open and genuine with other people. By facing our difficult states of mind they start to lose the hold they have on us. Their solidity and power starts to dissipate, and holes begin to tear in the cocoon. But like any warrior, we must approach this situation from the point of view of discipline and training. Discipline in this case means mindfulness and meditation.

Mindfulness and Meditation

The essential weapon or tool of warriorship is mindfulness. Mindfulness means that we bring our attention back from our habitual thought process to the immediacy of the present moment. The present moment has a fresh, un-canned quality. We're just here, alive to whatever is going on, inside or outside ourselves.

Our thought process, on the other hand, is dominated by a tendency to engross us and solidify its particular narrow viewpoint. If someone says something we don't like, for instance, we might flash with anger, and once we're launched in that direction, we might then start to build up a huge wall of resentment and blame against that person. It's possible the person meant something entirely different than how we took it, but we don't even stop to wonder about it before we're deep in our rage. Mindfulness offers us the possibility of really being with the whole process: we hear the person, we feel our reaction, we see our tendency to launch into some mental or even spoken tirade, we may also notice again how the person is, the look on his face, whether there's really a basis for anger or not. Having really paid attention to what's going on, then we know what's in our own mind, what we heard, and what we thought we heard. Being mindful, we might stop ourselves, and ask the person what they meant.

Without mindfulness, our habitual pattern rules, and so there's only one direction we can go. Being mindful puts us on the spot, makes us a sensitive, perceptive witness to what's going on around us, and what's going on inside ourselves. If we're going to sort out the confusion in our minds, we have to start paying attention to what really happens in the moment to moment experience of our lives.

The most fundamental level of sitting meditation is based on mindfulness. This is the formal exercise or training ground of mindfulness. There are many possible objects of meditation, but a standard object uses the breath. When our mind wanders, we bring it back to our breathing. Breathing is the medium of the present moment. The training of the mind comes in trying to discipline it to be continuously present with the breath. As we do so, we may spend more time with our thoughts than our breath, but this educates us about our thoughts. What do

we think about? What are we hung up on? What do we tend to avoid? What kind of emotions dominate us? We start to learn a lot about these things.

At the same time, we begin to learn what it means to be with the breath, to be mindfully present, awake, open-hearted, on the spot, which has a healthy, sane quality. We're learning both how our minds make us crazy and how our minds can also start to calm down and harmonize with the world. Then we take these qualities from our meditation seat into our daily lives. We begin to apply mindfulness to everything we do because we can discriminate between being stuck in the cocoon and really paying attention to whatever we're doing.

There's nothing we do that isn't improved by genuinely mindful attention: talking to someone, cooking a meal, doing our job, making love, playing a game. Whatever it is, if we're completely there, we'll accomplish and enjoy it so much better if we're totally present with it than if our mind is spinning out into this or that emotional head trip.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Since the body is always in the present moment, to be mindful of the body, whether it's our breathing during sitting meditation, or any other activity we might be doing, immediately brings us back and grounds us in the present. So the first foundation of mindfulness is called **mindfulness of body**. We're paying attention to what we do when we do it. If we're eating, we pay attention to our hand picking up the fork, putting it into the food, lifting it to our mouths, and putting it in. Then we pay attention to ourselves chewing the food, swallowing it, taking in some more. There's a great world of experience that we're bringing to our attention that we normally take for granted.

Mindfulness of body connects us to the immediacy of the world: a raindrop landing on our face or the snow crunching under our boots. By bringing our attention to the immediate experience of our body, we can drop the story in our heads and really be in the world where we're actually living—planet Earth.

While our discursive thought tends to entangle us in this or that kind of internal struggle, there's a sense of wholesomeness and vividness to our senses that allows us to appreciate and be interested in the world around us. If we're very caught up in our thoughts and spaced out, we need to come down to earth, quite literally. By bringing our minds back to what we're seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, and tasting, we come into contact with the richness and brilliance of the world around us, which we might normally take for granted. If we're driving a car, we're much more likely to avoid an accident. If we're just walking down the street, we could notice the sky and the trees, whatever beauty or ugliness there is around us. It's all part of the infinite richness of our world, and that richness is part of us, if we're willing to pay attention.

The second foundation of mindfulness, **mindfulness of life**, relates to our tendency to cling to states of mind. We might be in meditation and cling to some feeling of peace that happens, or we might simply be grabbing on to any state of mind to ward off our fear of not surviving or being overwhelmed by things. Instead of grabbing on to things that come up in our mind and holding on to them for dear life, we acknowledge them, fully connect to the experience of them, then we let them go, dissolving into a sense of just existing, being here, fully present, without elaboration.

Whatever arises in our experience moment by moment—emotions, memories, fantasies, sense perceptions—whatever comes up in our consciousness, we experience it, then let it go, letting ourselves just be here in the present moment. There's no sense of trying to maintain

ourselves or make ourselves into this or that, but very simply experiencing whatever arises, then letting it dissolve without maintaining it.

Mindfulness of effort, the third foundation, governs how we exert ourselves in the mindfulness discipline. Mindfulness definitely takes effort; without effort nothing will happen or evolve, and so there is a sense of work or exertion involved. However, if our effort is very heavy-handed and self-conscious, then we start to burden the process of mindfulness with our effort. We're making so much effort to be mindful correctly, we're getting all effort and no mindfulness. This is too laborious.

What's necessary is a light touch that tunes into what's going on with the body and mind. Organic to the process of consciousness are moments of recognition. There's a bare recognition of what's going on right now—a little flash or jerk that brings us right to what's going on at the present moment. That may be just a little spark in the long stream of our thoughts, but that little spark ignites us enough to bring our mind back deliberately to the here and now. We bring it back directly, without opinion, without judgement on what just happened. It's very immediate, like when you're driving a car and you catch yourself drifting into the other lane and instantly correct yourself.

First there's the recognition, that flash of perception, and then you correct your course, which is the deliberate effort of mindfulness to come back. The sensibility here is a quality of tuning back in, rather than forcing something to happen, like you're tuning a radio out of the static back to the music playing clearly. It's a simple, automatic, almost effortless effort. There's some quality of vigilance or atmosphere of alertness, and when you've found you've drifted off the mark, you just come back, very simply.

An essential fact of mental experience is that it occurs one moment after the next. There's the full experience of this moment, but immediately it's replaced by the next moment, and the moment after that. The fourth foundation of mindfulness, **mindfulness of mind**, focuses us on that moment, that single expression of mind or single dot of nowness. Thanks to how knotted up and distracted by our discursiveness we are, we tend not to see this essential quality of how consciousness unfolds, one moment at a time. Each moment is a moment of mind, and so the practice is to be fully mindful of that moment.

In a sense, mindfulness of mind completes the other three foundations of mindfulness. We're mindful of our body, our sense of existence, our effort or tuning in to nowness, and we're mindful completely of the mind's experience of that moment. The other three are supporting us, not so much to watch ourselves as be fully and completely in the moment, in the experience without filter of our cocoon or habitual patterns. This is how we taste reality directly, within the context of meditative discipline, and bring our intelligence alive in the investigation of our lives.

This kind of naked experience of our lives not only settles and grounds us in the pragmatism of our body and senses, it teaches us how to be with what's happening to us without solidifying it, making it into something we can't handle. As we relax into being alert and present with our lives, we start to experience their power and brilliance. Sometimes we'll be pierced by pain, other times by pleasure, but we'll begin to wake up through the power of our warrior's discipline to the beautiful, heart-breaking world that exists outside the cocoon.