

The Higher Power of Mindfulness

#

The Higher Power of Mindfulness is the power of attention and non-reactivity. It opens us to wisdom and insight through clear seeing. Mindfulness is the foundation of all spiritual growth as it reveals the truth of the way things are, internally and externally.

Several years ago, a woman approached me in the bookstore of a Buddhist center where I was teaching a class.

“I’ve never been able to get the Higher Power thing,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I could never work the third Step, and I kept drinking around that. But now I see that my Higher Power can be mindfulness. Thank you so much.”

Her relief was palpable. Something very heavy had been lifted from her shoulders. And I was as grateful as she was that, apparently, something I’d said had helped her make this connection.

Mindfulness has the ability to transform our experience. The act of paying attention changes how we perceive what’s happening to us. Instead of being driven by impulse, reactivity, habit, addiction, self-will, and all the rest of the semi-conscious and destructive energies that run us so much of the time, mindfulness puts us in a position to choose our destiny.

I remember the feeling as I built up to a drunk. It was as if some force over which I had no control was pushing me. I was going to drink—there was no choice involved, I couldn’t imagine an alternative. To not drink would be to die, would be to resist some fundamental natural law. That’s the feeling that addiction gives you. That’s the power of addiction.

Mindfulness runs counter to that. The power of mindfulness is the power to see outside the blinkers, outside the tunnel, to see ourselves and our experience from a different perspective. We call this “higher” because it has a positive effect, as opposed to the destructive, “lower” power of addiction. Mindfulness actually shows the world to be simpler than our mind perceives it to be. Instead of the complex of problems, issues, doubts, hungers, and resentments that obsess and confuse an addict, mindfulness shows our experience to be simply that of six senses and those things the senses can perceive. (The Buddha calls the mind the sixth sense.) The practices associated with mindfulness ask us to be aware

of what is coming in through these six sense doors, without judging those experiences or trying to figure them out; without trying to repeat or repel those experiences; without being overwhelmed or losing interest in them. Simply allowing them to be.

As mindfulness is cultivated by these practices, it grows in power. But the powers we cultivate aren't typical ones, like controlling others, gaining material possessions, or affecting events. The power of mindfulness is the power to be: the power to experience life fully without flinching; to feel our pain without running away; to feel our joy without clinging to it. The power of mindfulness is the power to see—as the Big Book puts it, to “intuitively know how to handle situations that used to baffle us.” The power of mindfulness is the power to know—to know beauty, to know love, directly, unfiltered. The power of mindfulness is the power of life.

On my first retreat I fell in love with the beauty of the high desert. With no music to listen to, with no distractions of work or TV or shopping, the mind searched for stimulation, and it found it in the stark landscape of cactus and sand, of mountains and hard, bright skies. During walking meditation periods, I would stop and just look. I finally understood what it meant to see, to feel the wonder of the natural world's beauty. A few weeks later, on a trip to my hometown in Pennsylvania, I walked the streets amazed at what I'd never noticed in over 20 years of living there. The town was beautiful: the tall elms lining the streets, the gabled 19th-century mansions, the brick sidewalks and old churches. I realized that mindfulness had opened me to an experience of the world I'd never had. And it made me think that only now was I learning what life was. The Higher Power of Mindfulness was beginning to transform me. #