

What is Mindfulness?

The term 'mindfulness' has become a buzz-word in recent years. We hear of mindfulness being used in many ways to increase calm, to rectify attention disorders and to offer emotional stability. It is employed in a number of ways: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Childbirth, Mindfulness for Sports people, Mindfulness for Businessmen, and Mindfulness in the Military. A calm collected emotional state and a clear present-moment attention can have many applications to improve how a human being functions, and mindfulness is commonly understood to provide just that. In terms of its popularity (in the West at least) it has outgrown, and often doesn't even acknowledge, its ancient Buddhist parent with all her religious views. Understandably so: recent accounts of Buddhist fundamentalist attacks on Muslims in Burma and Sri Lanka offer a deeply disappointing view of how even Buddhism can get swamped by views.

But what is mindfulness? Is it a technique of noting, a moment-at-a-time, phenomena that arise within an unwaveringly focused attention? Finding the rigour of this approach too rigid and stressful, some teachers have espoused a less object-centred approach of tuning into awareness itself – an approach that is backed up in Tibetan Dzogchen practice, or in Advaita Vedanta, but which finds less secure ground in the Pali texts of Theravada. Which is confusing for those seeking Theravada/Pali roots.

One problem seems to be that of taking the method through which mindfulness is *applied* microscopically, a method taught by acknowledged masters such as the Mahasi Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Pandita (and a foundation for the major early Vipassana teachers), to be mindfulness itself. But to swing the other way and to say the mindfulness is just about being aware in the present, seems to miss a salient feature of what the texts (and the practice) are about. Mindfulness entails more than being choicelessly aware in the present moment. Take for example: *'he possesses the highest mindfulness and skill, he recollects and remembers what was done long ago and spoken long ago.'* (M53.16). Here, the mindful practitioner, keen to follow the teachings, brings them to mind to act as a frame of reference of his/her present experience.

So mindfulness has a referential quality; it connects present-moment experience to a frame of reference. The teachings on the four establishments of mindfulness exemplify this. Mindfulness of body, feeling, mind-state and 'essences' (more on that later) in the 'establishment of mindfulness' suttas (M.10, D.22) – is a referential practice, referring bodily experience to the body, feeling to the realm of feeling, the current state of mind to the domain of mind, and mental essences – potentials such as ill-will or goodwill that support mind-states – to themselves, just as they are. Why? Because in this way, which is called the *'direct path...for the disappearance of pain and grief...for the realisation of nibbāna'* one isn't referring them to 'my self' and 'how I should look' and 'why is my mind in this state?' and so on. Nor is one distracting oneself, spacing out, or suppressing mind-states. This reference, bare or judgement and self-representation is of course at the heart of mindfulness as a therapeutic tool: it clears out the mis-reference of judgement – of feeling bad about one's body and so on. In the practice of the four establishments, mindfulness replaces the agitation and reactivity of self-view with clarity and calm. That steady calm allows mind-states to unravel to the great 'unbinding' of nibbāna.

Reference to an object in and of itself is then part of what mindfulness offers. But in Buddhism there's more to it than that. The texts present mindfulness as being

accompanied by other factors – I call them ‘friends and relatives’ – some or all of whom tag along with mindfulness so that its motivation and application is clear, and that there is a learning from what the frame of reference presents. For instance take mindfulness in the eightfold path: it’s only one factor of an unfolding process which begins with right view and leads on through right speech and right action through right mindfulness and into samādhi or right unification of mind. In this process the most important factor is right view – the wise perspective that reminds us that everything we say, do or even think has results, for good or for bad. This view is the basis and the motivation behind cultivating one’s life: ‘*there is the result of good and bad deeds ...*’ Right view affirms that we can enter on a good way through being fully and responsibly conscious; it motivates us to pay attention. Mindfulness then carries right view into living experience; by highlighting the mind-states that are the causes and results of our actions, it gets the mind to see which ones are for our true benefit.

So: ‘*...when your virtue is well-purified and your view is straight, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, you should develop the four establishments of mindfulness.*’ (S47.15) Now, the body isn’t virtuous or non-virtuous in and of itself, and neither is feeling, so this instruction isn’t about object-definition but about *how* one attends and *why*. Robbing a bank or slaughtering a chicken might require clarity, focus and calm, but they wouldn’t be themes for right mindfulness (although there is such a thing as ‘wrong’/miccha’ mindfulness), because they don’t reveal the ‘essence’, in this case the mental potencies of avarice, shamelessness and non-empathy. So, for right mindfulness, the ‘attentive’ aspect of mindfulness has to connect with felt awareness of one’s approach and intention. Because attention, *manasikāra*, is amoral; assassins can cultivate it to a high degrees. But attention is only one aspect of mind, the aspect that is operated through *manas* – mind as rational, object-defining tool. This is the function that gets tuned to high degrees of efficiency and speed. People racing through piles of data, people rapidly trading stocks and shares, people behind screens, scanning and taking notes have high degrees of attention and rapid reference. But what they’re not referring to is their own mind, mind as ‘heart’ or ‘*citta*’. This is the mind of feelings and impressions and of ‘how I am’; mind as an empathic and central steady ground. And through lack of clear reference to *citta*, we have rampant social and individual disease – people losing themselves in what grabs attention; people stressed out through losing contact with their inner ground, even to the extent of not knowing that there is one. Because the systems and cultures that they operate through continually emphasise that happiness and success only come through chasing and acquiring what’s out there. And as soon as you get and acquire, then that’s out of date – so get a new one. This is the world of surface, of which the touch screen is the icon: contact is instant, glassy, and lacking depth. You just bounce from one thing to the next. In such a scenario, there’s no inner home, just a centre that remains swampy, hungry and restless.

That’s why right mindfulness is vital. If there is one life-saving feature that I’d say mindfulness is about is that it connects *manas* the object-definer to *citta* the subjective sense. Mindfulness is the moment of holding the question ‘How am I with this?’ To use the image of a hand: attention is like the fingers, and *citta* is like the palm. Fingers can probe, twiddle and touch, but are unable to collect anything. The palm can’t probe and inquire, but it receives, collects and fully feels what the fingers place in it. So *citta* has the storekeeper’s wisdom – it wants to know what is worth being in touch with, what can be held for one’s welfare. It certainly needs educating, and that is the function of ‘deep’ or ‘wise’ attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), the attention that refers sense data to the feeling and responsive heart of the mind. This then is another friend of mindfulness. Deep

attention draws on skilful ‘intention/volition’ (*cetana*), the inclination of *citta*. Then, to assess that experience, to feel how a sight or sound, thought or memory affects you – deep attention clarifies the contact-impression (*adhivacana phassa*) in the heart. So when right view and deep attention guide mindfulness, it draws *manas* and *citta* together; and this results in a clear, ethically-attuned awareness.

As for objects: as you attend to the experience of body, beneath the surface, curl the fingers of attention towards the receptive palm and you have established mindfulness of body, the embodied sense that gives you ground. As you get embodied, feeling comes to the fore. Attend to feeling, and as you notice how it changes, this clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) makes you less reactive in the presence of pleasure or pain. Curl the attention further back to the palm so that it’s only attending to mental impressions – and you have mindfulness of mind-states and their essences, the connection that opens and clarifies the heart. Eventually, when fingers and palms meet in a sensitivity that has no aim and object other than that meeting, you have *samādhi* - the mind is unified. Attention comes home, and finding that this is a very comfortable place to be, intention settles into appreciation and ease.

Furthermore, mindfulness is involved with wisdom. It may be correct to say that mindfulness is non-judgemental – but that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t support assessment. It is in the putting aside biased judgements and short-term impulses (*‘covetousness and grief regarding the world’*) that assessment of what is really useful can take place. So to avoid having its attention hijacked, mindfulness has to be established and made firm: one image is of a man carrying a bowl of oil on his head with another walking behind him with a sword ready to cut his head off if he spills a drop. ‘If even,’ to paraphrase the Buddha, ‘the most beautiful girl in the world sings and dances in front of him, would he give her any attention?’ (S.47.20) No, his mindfulness is firmly established on balance, the key to clear assessment of what is really needed or true in any situation.

It’s fortunate that the ‘head-lobbing’ technique is not usually offered in meditation retreats, but the point has to be learnt somehow. Patiently, persistently and without getting sidetracked even by self-criticism or doubt, mindfulness has to be established so that those fingers don’t grab hot coal. Knowing what burns or stabs the heart, or entangles it with no benefit, is up to each of us to find out; but for that mindfulness needs friends – ardour (*atapi*) and energy (*virīya*) – are needed. Effort? Striving? Put it another way: right energy comes from fullness of heart, not blind will. With bright heart we can keep mindful of *citta* through all its changes, but without that persistence we don’t learn. Learning how to support the body, and to train, encourage, gladden and soothe the mind is the pragmatic wisdom that makes a decade of persistence worthwhile. But more directly than that, right energy is just an expression of being fully here; what else is mindfulness about?

Transcendence, that’s what. In another parable (S.47.8), the Buddha presents the examples of two cooks; both present their master, the king, with his meal – but one does and one doesn’t notice what food the king enjoys. The one who doesn’t notice serves the same food every day, regardless – and gets fired. The one who notices what food the king chooses from the meal, continues to refine the meal he prepares in line with what most satisfies his master – and gets promoted. The parable then likens these to the way that two bhikkhus – *who are both described as being mindful and clearly comprehending* – present a meditation theme to their minds. Of the two, the ‘foolish, incompetent’

bhikkhu doesn't note how his mind responds, so he gets no good results; but the 'wise, competent' bhikkhu takes note and 'his corruptions are abandoned'. This makes the point that mindfulness needs to attend to 'the sign of the mind'. This is beautiful: at the gate of the transcendent, *citta* will present subtle signs of luminosity, ease, vastness or stillness. Any of these may be a key to be picked up, held and explored. So we need to look and feel more deeply to what meditation theme it picks up readily and enjoys rather than keep blindly pushing.

This is the entry to the mystical experience, when the heart attunes to a felt sense that isn't coming from the sense of self. The fine-tuning comes through another of mindfulness' friends, one that tastes the essences that support any mental state. This is 'investigation of essence', *dharmavicaya*. It has to be applied to the *citta* as in: 'What effect is this having on my mind?' or 'What is motivating this practice?' So in establishing mindfulness, we're encouraged to assess whether the mind at this time is ready to dwell on a particular meditation theme, considering for example: 'Can my mind find focus on this aspect of breathing or does it settle more readily while walking? Or is this the time when gentle kindness is a more suitable place to dwell?' Through investigation the corruptions of forcefulness, ambition, or any ego-bound program get weeded out. They are replaced by a more subtle invitation into Truth.

In this way, *citta* educates *manas* in the ways of directly-experienced wisdom. And *manas* pays back by casting that wisdom into concepts that form the storehouse of one's contemplative know-how.

Without mindful reference, awakening, wisdom, and even kindness remain concepts and ideals that remain out of reach. But without referring to its supportive companions, mindfulness doesn't penetrate much deeper than granting an improved quality of attention. As a member of a team, mindfulness frees the mind from the burden of self-consciousness, self-hatred and self-orientation – the shift that is the heart of awakening. Maybe as 'Mindfulness' moves into the mainstream, it will naturally encourage some of its practitioners to participate in that process. However, there's also the danger that, as has become the case with hatha yoga, it will be shorn of its mystical depth and transformative power. Will it become another money-making commodity that improves people's capacity to work on the same treadmill as before – or will it help to refresh its forgetful Buddhist parent? As practitioners of the Dhamma, that's our ongoing responsibility.