Mindfulness Defined

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What does it mean to be mindful of the breath? Something very simple: keep the breath in mind. Keep remembering the breath each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. The standard translation for *sati*—mindfulness—is probably derived from the passage in the Bible that says, "Be ever mindful of the needs of others." In other words keep their needs in mind. Even though the word "mindful" may come from the Bible, it's the closest we can get in English to what *sati* means in the Pali Canon: keeping something in mind. So, be ever mindful of the breath.

As for watching the breath, or accepting the breath, or whatever else we're told mindfulness is supposed to be doing: Those are actually other qualities in the mind. They're not automatically a part of mindfulness, but you want to bring them along wherever they're appropriate.

One quality that's always appropriate is being watchful or alert. The word for alertness is *sampajañña:* being alert to what you're doing, alert to the results of what you're doing. These two qualities—keeping something in mind and being alert to what that thing is doing or how you're relating to that thing—should always be paired as you meditate.

In the discourse on establishing the frames of reference, these two qualities are combined with a third quality: *atappa,* or ardency. You really stick with what you're doing. You put effort into it. This doesn't mean that you have to sit here straining and sweating. It means that you're continuous in your effort. You don't let things drop. Psychologists have shown that moments of attention are just that: moments. You can be attentive to something for only a very short period of time, then you have to consciously return to it if you want to keep on being attentive to it, again and again. This means that you need to keep remembering to stitch those moments of attention together, from moment to moment to moment. That's what mindfulness is for. It's what keeps the object of your attention in mind. Whatever your frame of reference—the body, the breath—that's all mindfulness has to do.

But if you look through modern books on meditation, you see a lot of other definitions for mindfulness, a lot of other things it's supposed to do. The poor word gets totally stretched out of shape. And this is not just a matter for nitpicking scholars to argue over, because if you don't see the different qualities you're bringing to your meditation and don't understand the differences among

them, they all get glommed together. That makes it difficult for real insight to arise as to what's going on, as to what you're actually doing with the meditation.

I've heard of mindfulness defined as "sacred presence." I've heard it defined as "affectionate attention" or "compassionate attention." Actually, though, affection and compassion are separate qualities. They're not mindfulness. If you translate them into the Buddha's vocabulary, they mean goodwill. That's a good quality to bring to the meditation, but be clear about the fact that it's acting in addition to mindfulness, for an important part of meditation lies in seeing when things like this are helpful and when they're not. As the Buddha says, there are times when affection is a cause for suffering, so you have to watch out.

Sometimes mindfulness is defined as appreciating the moment for whatever pleasure it can offer. In the Buddha's vocabulary, that's contentment. Contentment is useful in areas where you're experiencing physical difficulties, but it's not always useful in the area of the mind. In fact, there's a passage where the Buddha said that the secret to his Awakening was that he *didn't* allow himself to rest content with whatever attainment he had reached. He kept reaching for something higher until there was nowhere higher to reach. So contentment has to know its time and place. Mindfulness, if it's not glommed together with contentment, can help keep that fact in mind.

Sometimes mindfulness is defined as "total acceptance" or "radical acceptance." In the Buddha's vocabulary, acceptance equals equanimity and patience. Equanimity means learning to put aside your preferences and just watch what's actually there. Patience is the ability to stick with things even when the results don't come as quickly as you'd like them to. But in the context of the Buddha's training, you put up with unpleasant things not just to endure them or to accept them, but to watch them. You realize that if you react too quickly to things—throwing things away when you don't get results as fast as you want—you never understand anything, never gain any results that are lasting. So patience and equanimity are needed to see things clearly. But once you've clearly seen that a particular quality is harmful for the mind, you can't remain patient or equanimous about it. You exert whatever effort is needed to get rid of it and to nourish skillful qualities in its place. That means you're bringing in other factors of the path: right resolve and right effort.

As we're meditating we're combining all kinds of qualities of the mind, and you have to be clear about what they are and where they're separate. That way, when you notice that things are out of balance, you can identify what's missing and can foster whatever is needed to make up the lack. It's not just a matter of just piling in more and more and more mindfulness. You've got to add other qualities as well. First you're mindful enough to stitch things together, to keep

the basic issue of your meditation in mind. Then you watch – that's alertness – to see what else is needed.

It's like cooking. It's not the case that if you don't like the taste of the soup you're fixing you just add more and more and more salt. Sometimes you've got to add onion, sometimes garlic, sometimes oregano—whatever you sense is needed. Keep in mind the fact that you've got a whole spice shelf to work with. And you don't want every bottle on the shelf to be labeled salt. You want to know precisely what the contents of each bottle are.

That's why it's good to read the Buddha's teachings. Some people make a virtue out of ignorance, saying that if you read a lot of the texts it just clutters up your mind. There may be times when that *is* the problem, but other times the problem is that your ideas about what can be done in the meditation are too narrow. When that's the case, reading the texts can open your eyes and expand the range of your imagination.

For instance, there's the old issue of the relationship between mindfulness and concentration practice. The Buddha never made a clear division between the two. In his teachings, mindfulness shades into concentration, and concentration forms the basis for even better mindfulness. The fourth jhana is where mindfulness becomes pure. The four frames of reference, the focal points of mindfulness, are also the themes of concentration. As Ajaan Lee notes, when mindfulness—the ability to keep something in mind—grows stronger, it becomes the jhana factor called *vitakka* or directed thought, where you really keep your thoughts focussed on one thing consistently. As for alertness, it provides the foundation for another jhana factor: *vicara,* or evaluation. You notice what's going on with the breath: Is the breath comfortable? You can make it more comfortable if you like—a little bit longer, a little bit shorter, deeper, more shallow, faster, slower. When you've found a way of breathing that's comfortable, you can spread that sense of comfort throughout the body. That makes it easier for the mind to become one with the breath.

Meditation is not just a passive process of being present with whatever's there and not changing it at all. Mindfulness keeps stitching things together over time, but it also keeps in mind the idea that you want to be able to settle down here. There's a purpose to mindfulness practice. It's meant to lead to concentration, from there to discernment, and from there to release. That's how its role is always portrayed in the texts. So you do what you can to make the breath a place where you can stay concentrated, where the mind can feel more and more at home. In this way, evaluation is an important part of the practice: getting a sense of what's pleasing to the mind, and adjusting things so that it's happy to settle down.

You can play with the breath, remembering that the breath isn't just the movement of air coming in and out. It's also the entire energy flow in the body. For the purpose of concentration, it's good to get sensitive to that—the energy flow in your legs, the energy flow in your arms, in your torso, in your neck, your shoulders, all around your face, your eyes, your ears. When you breathe in, where do the currents of energy flow? Think of the body not as a bellows that pulls air in and pushes it out. Think of it as an energy field that exchanges energy through every pore with the energy field of the world around it. Notice which sensations indicate where the energy is blocked, which areas of the body seem starved for breath. You can feed them, you know. Make a survey: Which part of the body doesn't seem to participate much in the energy flow? Let it participate for a couple of breaths and then see which other part needs to be nourished. It's like feeding a flock of chickens: You throw a little scrap of bread to this one, a little scrap to that one, until all the chickens are well fed.

This not only makes the present a more comfortable place to be, but it also gives the mind something to do so that it's not bored. If you can get interested in the breath, that interest can grow into absorption—in other words, jhana.

There's a lot to discover in the present moment. Insight doesn't come from being non-reactive, from simply by putting up with whatever is there. It comes from testing, experimenting. This is how we learn about the world to begin with. If we weren't active creatures, we'd have no understanding of the world at all. Things would pass by, pass by, and we wouldn't know how they were connected because we wouldn't have any way of influencing them to see which effects came from changing which causes. It's because we act in the world that we know about the world.

The same holds true with the mind. You can't just sit around radically accepting everything. If you're going to learn about the mind, you have to be willing to play—to play with qualities in the mind, to play with sensations in the body. That's when you begin to understand cause and effect. You begin to understand the principle of intention. What role does intention play in your experience? It goes a lot deeper and is more fundamental than anything you might have imagined. Your whole experience of space and time is based on certain intentions that are repeatedly being made on a very subtle level.

To see these things in action, you have to be willing to experiment in your meditation. That involves the desire to do it, persistence, keeping at it, being really intent, focused on what you're doing, and using your ingenuity: using all of your powers of intelligence. This doesn't mean book intelligence. It means your ability to notice what you're doing, to read the results of what you've done, and to figure out ways of doing things that get better and better results: street smarts for the noble path. Mindfulness allows you to see these connections

because it keeps reminding you to stay with these issues with every moment, to stay with the causes until you see their effects. But mindfulness alone can't do all the work. You can't fix the soup simply by dumping more salt into it. You add other ingredients, as they're needed.

Sometimes what you need in the meditation isn't what you expected. That's where alertness shades into evaluation, and evaluation into ingenuity. As Ajaan Lee says, evaluation is the quality that leads to discernment. We're training the whole mind, so we need a whole range of mental qualities to complete the training.

Mindfulness is where things start, but it can't do all the work. It needs other qualities to help it. As you realize that, it helps expand your imagination about what you can do here, what tactics you might try. That's why it's best not to load the one word mindfulness with too many meanings or to assign it too many functions. If it carries too many meanings, you can't clearly discern when you need to see the difference between, say, what goodwill does and what equanimity does, when you need one and don't need the other.

So even though mindfulness combined with alertness is said to be the most helpful quality in the mind, it too needs help. This means that you have to gain a clear sense of what you have on your spice shelf, and which spice is good for which purpose. Only then can you develop your full potential as a cook.