Mindfulness - The Whole Formula

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There’s a long sutta on the topic of mindfulness. It’s called the Siddhipadana Sutta. Many people assume that it’s a full description of mindfulness practice. The Buddha starts out with a statement of the formula, what it means to establish mindfulness. You focus on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress for the reverence to the world. Then you do the same with feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves. But then when the Buddha discusses the formula, he doesn’t explain the whole thing. He explains only one thing, what it means to be focused on one of those four things in and of themselves. That’s it. He doesn’t explain what mindfulness means. He doesn’t explain what alertness, ardency mean. He doesn’t discuss putting aside greed and distress with reverence to the world. So he’s obviously not giving a full description. Even that partial description is quite long, which may have taxed the memory of his monks. Think about what it was like back in those days. To give a Dhamma talk, there were no recordings. We could go back and listen to them a second time, a third time. For some people, this was their one chance to hear the Dhamma. So the Buddha would give them what they could digest. So that night, all that people could digest was what it means to be aware of something in and of itself, to be focused on something in and of itself. As for the rest of the formula, there are other places in the Canon where the Buddha explains it. But because the sutta is assumed to be the full explanation, it’s given rise to a lot of misunderstandings. In some cases, it sounds like you’re simply aware of what happens, and you make a note. There’s this kind of feeling, there’s that kind of feeling, there’s this kind of mind state, there’s that kind of mind state. It stops there. But in other places where the Buddha explains what it means to be alert, and what it means to be ardent, it’s something quite else, something quite different. When you’re ardent, anything unskillful comes up in the mind. You’re trying to get rid of it. As for skillful things that are not there yet, you’re trying to give rise to them. And when they are there, you’re trying to maintain them, in such a way that you don’t allow new unskillful things to arise. There’s a lot involved, and a lot more than is usually assumed. Like with the quality of alertness and ardency. You’re alert to what’s happening. You’re keeping watch over yourself, so that you can then remember what to do. You recognize what’s there. That’s what mindfulness does. See, that essential desire comes up. You recognize that essential desire. That’s the task of mindfulness. And then it also reminds you what to do with it. That’s something to be abandoned. And then with the ardency, you actually do the abandoning. Ardency here is basically the same as right effort. Now, how you go about abandoning it, that’s going to depend on lots of things. Sometimes you just look at something and it goes away. Other times you look at it and it stares right back. It’s not going to go away easily. So you have to think of ways to understand how it got there, why you’re attracted to it, what its drawbacks are, so you can finally let it go. And you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure. You don’t have to tell the mind to let go. It just lets go on its own. But getting it to see these things requires a certain amount of effort. There’s a lot to be done. Like when you’re sitting here right now, you’re focused on the breath for a couple of breaths, and then something else comes up. Something else comes up, and you look into it, and it sucks you in. Suddenly you’re not with the breath anymore. You’re someplace else. Especially if the breath hasn’t yet become very comfortable, nothing particularly appealing to it, the mind very easily slips off. Sometimes it takes quite a while before you realize that you’ve slipped off. And then you can decide, well, as long as I’ve slipped off here, I might as well complete the thought. And that takes a while. And then you come back. That’s a case where your alertness and your ardency are still weak. Ideally, as soon as that distracting thought comes up, you want to be aware, okay? Distracting thought has come. And then you remember, you’re not going to go there. You’re going to stay with the breath. And then you do your best not to get interested in the thought, and to get more interested in the way you’re breathing. It’s usually good when you begin to realize that there are these distracting thoughts that are beginning to stir around inside, before they take over. Try your best to breathe in a way that’s interesting, feels good. Think of it feeling good in different parts of the body. You’re breathing through the nose, you’re breathing through the eyes, you’re breathing through the ears, you’re breathing through your tailbone. Play with the breath this way. That’s how you use your ardency to get past that particular distraction. And then you have to be alert. Other distractions are going to come up. And the ardency, as it improves, can get quicker and quicker, realizing what’s happening, until you realize, even before the distraction has taken over, you can begin to see it stirring inside. And so you remember what to do. Make the breath more interesting. The important thing is that you’re keeping watch. And you’re also remembering that you have tools that you can use. Because the purpose of mindfulness is not just to be with whatever comes up. The purpose of mindfulness is to get the mind into concentration, to stay with that topic, say the breath in and of itself, until you’re thoroughly immersed in the breath. There’s a sense of pleasure that comes from it, a sense of fullness. And you can allow that pleasure and fullness to spread through the body. So it seems to run along the nerves, it runs along the blood vessels. It feels really good. You can think of it going up to the pores, all the pores of the skin, all around. And then you’ve got something you want to protect. That becomes the duty of mindfulness then, to remember how to protect this. The alertness keeps watch. And any little tiny thought that begins to form, even before you can recognize it as a thought, it’s just a little stirring in the boundary between what’s a physical event and a mental event. It’s kind of a stirring of energy. You realize if you allow that to become a little knot, become a little node, thoughts will gather around it. So you zap it. Think of that good breath energy just going right through and scattering, scattering, scattering. An image you might want to use is of a spider on its web. It stays in one spot on the web. And if anything hits the web, it immediately goes over, takes care of it, and it goes back to its original spot. So you’re shooting down potential thoughts. That’s when you can say that you really are mindful, ardent, and alert all at the same time. And then as you leave meditation, you want to protect that. This is where restraint of the senses comes in. You’ll notice that there are some pleasures outside that you can watch and enjoy. They don’t have any impact. You can maintain your sense of being centered in the breath. And there’s no problem. This is one of the reasons why we like to come into a quiet place like this. There are the beauties of nature, but they’re calm. There’s nothing against sensual pleasures. There’s a tendency, some people, when they translate the description of concentration, to say that you’re secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful thoughts. That’s not what the passage means. You’re secluded from sensuality, which is your tendency to fantasize about sensual pleasures. And there are things, especially if you’re in a city, that’s where there are a lot of people, a lot of things that could excite sensual fantasies. But here there are very few. But there still might be things that knock you off. And you want to notice why. That’s what the restraint is for. It’s not that you’re clamping down and not looking at anything or not listening to anything. Your eyes can see. Your ears can hear. And they’re going to want some freedom to see and to hear. The important thing about restraint is how you process what you see and what you hear. In some cases it has to do with, well, what are you going to look at? What are you going to make up your mind to listen to? In other words, you’re more actively involved in the process. Well, why? There’s some things you want to listen to because they’re helpful, they’re useful. Other things you want to listen to because they stir up any kind of emotion. Because there are times when the mind says, “I’d just like to have some emotion.” Doesn’t matter what. Greed, aversion, delusion. Something to spice things up. And to look at things and find something to get worked up about. That’s what you’ve got to watch out for. Remind yourself you’ve got something good here inside. Your ability to be with the body. Be immersed in the breath and the body. And carry that around with you. That’s a skill you want to develop. Because it allows the period between meditation sessions to connect the sessions. So the next time you sit down, you’re right here. And you can get deeper into concentration. So restraint is not putting blinders on, putting earplugs in. It basically means being alert, ardent, and mindful. Carrying those three qualities around with you. Keeping watch. This is why the Buddha would often use the image of a mirror. Because remember, where is the cause of suffering? It’s inside. Where is the suffering? It’s inside. So the problem’s inside. The solution is also inside. So pay attention to what you’re doing. As the Buddha said, “Look at your actions as you would look into a mirror.” Because that’s where the source of the problem is. That’s where the solution can be found. And it’s these three qualities that provide you with a proper mirror. You’re mindful, you’re ardent, you’re alert. That’s really concerns beyond maintaining your state of mind for the time being. If there are duties you have to do, you do them. Otherwise, you keep your focus inside. Sometimes you may say, “Well, there’s not much to look at inside. Nothing much is happening.” A lot of things are happening. We’re used to them. We don’t notice them. But how you put things together, how you put names on things, how you come up with thoughts, how you focus on feelings. Sometimes you focus on feelings in a way that makes them worse than they have to be. Or you can blot them out entirely. There’s a lot going on inside. So there’s a lot to see. So you want to put your observation station focused inside. One of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because it’s where the mind and the body meet. We’re going to learn about your mind, learn about your body from within. This is the place to look. So one of the things you want to be mindful of is the whole formula for what mindfulness is. You’re focused on the breath in and of itself. Ardent, alert, mindful. Putting aside. Greed and distress with reference to the world. When you’re alert, be alert to things in that mood, in that framework. And be ardent to keep it in mind as you’re kind for what you want to do. Because you’re always doing things, even when the mind is very, very still. As you get more sensitive to it, you realize it’s thinking and it’s evaluating and it’s feeling different feelings. They’re all gathered around one thing. But here again, you want to be alert to what you’re doing. Because that’s how you’re going to learn how to do it. Do it better.

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