

Varieties of Mindfulness

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The word *sati* in Pali has lots of meanings. The basic one is to keep something in mind. We're often told it means alertness or awareness, but that's not the case. Alertness and awareness come under the Pali word, *sampajañña*. *Sati* means keeping something in mind, like remembering to stay with the breath, remembering the various things that help in the training of the mind. It functions a lot of ways in the practice.

First off, there are the recollections: a series of themes to remember, to think about, to keep in mind when you find your meditation wandering off course in the direction of doubt, laziness, discouragement, or just general hopelessness. That chant we had just now about aging, illness, separation, and death: Those are important things to keep in mind so that you don't get complacent. But notice that the Buddha didn't stop at aging, illness, separation, and death. He went on to the principle of karma, because if all you think about is aging, illness, and death it gets pretty discouraging. The potential for happiness lies in our actions. In other words the Buddha didn't teach fatalism. He didn't teach that our actions are insignificant. They're important. Our happiness, our lack of happiness, depends on our actions. So that's where we focus our attention. That's what we should keep in mind. This is called *dhammanussati*, keeping the Dhamma in mind. This is why the Buddha has us listen to the Dhamma, read the Dhamma, because the Dhamma contains all sorts of useful and encouraging ideas.

For instance, there's the passage where the Buddha is talking to his son and says that when you make a mistake, resolve not to make it again. If you see that your actions have gone off course, resolve not to do them again. When they've been on course, develop a sense of happiness and joy. Often we mistrust that joy. We think somehow that the critical thoughts in our mind are more real, and that the more self-congratulatory thoughts are deluded. Well, that's not the case. When you do something right, you should congratulate yourself on it as a means of encouragement, to give some juice to the path. Otherwise it's very easy for things to get dry. If you criticize yourself about your actions all the time, you find yourself totally hemmed in. Remember that you *do* do some things right. Focus on those to put the mind in a good mood. In Thai they use the word *arom* to mean both mood and object. When we're meditating, we're looking for a good *arom*, both a good mood and good object. So that's an important thing to keep in mind as well. That's another function of *sati*, mindfulness.

If you're feeling discouraged about yourself, focus on two of the recollections, *silanussati*, *caganussati*, thinking about the times when you *did* hold to your

principles, when you *were* generous. Call those to mind as a way of giving yourself energy on the path. This doesn't mean that you have to reflect on examples of perfect virtue or perfect generosity. Reflect on what you've been able to do as a means of encouragement.

So there are topics of recollection to deal with just about every direction the mind can go when it falls off the path, topics of recollection to bring it back onto the path. Once you're *on* the path, it's important to reflect again on what sati or mindfulness means: You're keeping something in mind. Say for instance that you're keeping the breath in mind. You're tuning in to that part of your experience. Our experience has many layers. You might think of it as many frequencies, like the radio waves going through the air right now: lots of different frequencies coming right through this building from Los Angeles, San Diego, Tuscon, Tijuana. If you bring a shortwave radio in here, you can tune in to lots of different stations from all over the world. It's simply a matter of choosing which frequency to tune in to, which layer to tune in to

The same holds true when you're keeping the breath in mind. When you create a frame of reference here in the present moment, there are lots of things you can tune in to. You can choose the body in and of itself. You can choose feelings, mental states, mental qualities in and of themselves. Those frequencies are on the path. Other frequencies are off the path—there is such a thing as Wrong Mindfulness, you know. Our meditation consists of choosing the frequencies most beneficial for the mind.

So try tuning in to the breath in and of itself. Be aware of the breath, making it your point of reference in relationship to everything you do while you're sitting here quietly with your eyes closed. Even when you get up and walk away, try to stay tuned in to the breath. When you do work, stay with the breath; when you rest, stay with the breath. If you're going to change your frame of reference, try to be deliberate about it.

In the sutta on the frames of reference, the Buddha talks about being aware of the body in and of itself, either internally or externally. "Externally" means how the body relates to the world outside. In other words, you don't have to be only inside the body for it to count as Right Mindfulness. When you're dealing with other people, you need to have a frame of reference that includes the outside world but doesn't grab hold of it. You can stay tuned in to the body even as you're involved in dealing with other people, being sensitive to how those dealings register with the body. Then when you're sitting again with your eyes closed, you can make your frame of reference totally internal if you like. Or you can tune in to the sense of space that permeates the body and extends out in all directions.

So there are a lot of different things to tune in to that would qualify as the body in and of itself. It's important to realize this because sometimes we fall into an ironclad notion that only certain kinds of awareness count as mindfulness. We feel that we're strapped there and can't function. There are reports of people who

go for long retreats where they've been working on only one kind of mindfulness for three months and when they come out they can't function. It takes them a couple of days to readjust to being in the outside world. Well, the Buddha didn't have us practice so that we couldn't function, couldn't adjust, couldn't adapt. He simply wants you to be conscious and deliberate about the way you adapt: the different levels, the different layers, the different frequencies you're tuning in to. If you can shift levels mindfully, you're okay.

There's an old science fiction story about a spaceship that didn't have to use fuel. It moved by changing its frame of reference. If its frame of reference was here on earth, it would stay still on earth. If it switched its frame of reference to the sun, it would suddenly zip out into space, away from the direction the earth is revolving around the sun. If it switched its frame of reference to the center of the galaxy, it would shoot *way* out there, to other arms of the Milky Way. And the plot of the story revolved around the fact that when the ship changed its frame of reference, everybody in the ship would go unconscious for a while.

Well, this is *exactly* how our minds work. Normally we change our frame of reference who knows how many times in the course of a day, and we blank out for a moment in between. Ajaan Lee even said that we pass out for just a brief moment and then find ourselves in another frame of reference. The purpose of the practice we're doing right now is to be able to change our frames of references without blanking out, so that we're clear about what we're doing. That's what alertness is all about.

In this way we can function appropriately. When you're dealing with people, you choose the proper frame of reference that includes them, that includes that level of reality, that level of experience. When you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you can drop that frame of reference. You don't have to think about there being anyone else here in the room at all. Instead, you can focus totally on the breath in and of itself. In this way, you see how much your frames of reference really do depend on memory, another meaning of *sati*. What are you going to remember in order to deal skillfully with the reality before you? You can be selective. In fact, you have to be.

Years back when I was a young monk in Thailand, the monastery where I was ordained had a rotating roster of monks to give the evening Dhamma talks. Out of the fourteen monks on the roster, maybe two could give good talks. The rest I found really irritating. After a while I realized that, rather than giving in to my irritation, I could use the talk as a meditation exercise: how to be aware of the sound of the Dhamma talk without registering the meaning—in other words, deliberately forgetting the meaning of each word and remembering only to be with the level of the sound. That's a function of *sati*, or mindfulness, too: deciding what you're going to remember and what you're not going to remember, what you're going to apply to your experience and what you're not. I found that after a while I could just listen to the sound, word by word by word, consciously forgetting the last word to be present only with the sound of the

current word. It worked fairly easily because Thai wasn't my native language, but you might want to try the skill out yourself. If you don't like the Dhamma talks you hear around here, you can just be with the sound. You don't have to listen to the meaning. Be selectively forgetful.

To be consciously forgetful in that way requires an act of mindfulness – in other words, deciding which level you're going to tune in to while you let everything else go for the time being. If you're going to work on concentration, you'll want to stay on one level as consistently as possible. This is why concentration practice is best done alone or in areas where you don't have to interact much with other people. But you also need to learn how to balance it with interactions with other people in a peaceful way, so you can get skilled at consciously changing your frame of reference as appropriate. This is why we live in a community.

Our ability to live together is an important skill in the meditation, for it's in the changing of our frame of reference that a lot of the machinations of the mind become clear. We tend not to see them if we let our awareness blank out during the switch, but if we can learn to be conscious as we switch from one frame to the next, we begin to see the way the mind creates a reality for itself out of all the whole buzzing confusion of our senses, to use William James' term. Of all the sensory input that comes in at any one particular moment, you make a choice of what you're going to pay attention to, what memories, what frame of reference you're going to bring to that particular moment. And it's an important mental skill to be able to shift your frame of reference as necessary.

So remember that that's all part of the practice. It's not the case that we're really being mindful only when we're on the level of pure sensation. We're also mindful as we shift our frame of reference to be appropriate to whatever is needed. If you go into the kitchen and you're totally on the level of pure sensation, you're going to forget how to fix the food. You have to remember enough to fix the food. When you're dealing with other people, you have to remember enough about common courtesy, remember enough about the English language in order to deal with them. But you can be selectively forgetful while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, so that you can give your full attention to the task at hand. You can take this skill and apply it to all sorts of situations.

Mindfulness is not just one level of awareness, one level of experience. It means being very deliberate and clear about what you bring to whatever you're doing: what you're going to remember, what you're not going to remember, what you're going to recollect, what you're going to let go, which things are useful to recollect right now. If you wanted to, you could sit here and spend the whole hour thinking about facts that would make you totally miserable, but what does that accomplish? We're sitting here to think about things that are useful for the mind, so remember the things that are useful for the mind, that will help it develop. As for the other voices coming in and out of the mind, listen to the ones that are helpful and ignore the ones that are not. You can be selective.

This way, mindfulness becomes a quality we can apply to everything we do. And instead of making us unable to function, it actually heightens our ability to function, because we understand the process that the mind goes through as it shifts its frame of reference from pure sensation to remembering language, remembering customs, whatever needs to be applied to your current situation, to your current task.

So try to keep these points in mind whenever you find them useful.