

Strength of Mindfulness

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Back in the 19th century, when the word “mindfulness” was coined to translate the Pali term *sati*, it was the perfect word for the job. It was related to a phrase that’s often repeated in churches: to be ever mindful of the needs of others. In other words, you keep their needs in mind; you take them into consideration as you go through the day in all your activities. And even though the Buddha has you be mindful of other things, that instruction is a form of mindfulness in the sense that he was talking about: keeping something in mind as you going through your activities, reminding yourself of what’s important to act on, what values you want to express in your actions.

In the intervening years, the meaning of the word has changed, getting further and further away from what the Buddha meant by the word. It would be good to recover the original meaning of the word and put it to use. We live in a time where simple acceptance is not an option anymore—if it ever was. There are things you have to accept, but there are other things you shouldn’t accept at all.

There’s one passage where the Buddha says that if you see something unskillful coming up in the mind, you’re mindful to get rid of it, and you’re mindful to give rise to skillful things and to maintain them. In other words, you don’t simply watch things coming and going. You try to *make* good things come and you try to *prevent* them from going. You’re mindful of this because you remember that everything in the world that you’re going to experience is going to depend on the skill with which you treat it. That requires you to train the mind so that at all times—in times of peace, in times of no peace, in times of illness, in times of no illness—the mind is ready for whatever comes. Because the potential for aging, illness, and death is always there. The potential for social unrest is always there.

Think of those dangers the Buddha has the monk in the forest reflect on: “Aging can come, illness can come, death can come, society can fall apart. I need to develop an attainment that makes me safe, so that even when these things do come, I won’t have to suffer.” That may seem selfish, working for your own well-being that way as everything else falls apart, but you’re not making things fall apart. And part of the practice, of course, is generosity, virtue. You give things—you give of your time, you give of your energy, you give of your knowledge; you’re happy to share what you have—and then you refrain from harming. These are things you want to keep in mind at all times. Otherwise, the path won’t develop and you won’t find that safe attainment.

As the Buddha said, the practice of virtue, the practice of concentration, the practice of right view, the attainment of release: All of these things require mindfulness—that you keep your priorities in mind and don't let yourself get waylaid by the latest things that are being shouted at you through the media, through whatever you hear around you. You've got to keep your priorities straight. And your number one priority is that you have to develop good qualities inside.

In the list of the strengths, mindfulness comes between effort or persistence on the one hand, and concentration on the other. And the three are closely related. I've seen it explained sometimes that the Buddha taught two different paths: the path of effort and concentration on the one hand, and the path of mindfulness on the other. And the two, as they're explained in that system, are very, very different.

But the Buddha never separated these things out like that. There's a passage where he talks about the need to develop purity of view, purity of mind—in other words, concentration—and purity of virtue. In every case, it requires a series of qualities that all go together: desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, and alertness. So mindfulness fits right there in that series of very pro-active qualities. You keep in mind that you've got to stick with this. After all, with your virtue, you want to make sure that you stick with your virtue even when things get very difficult. If things break down outside—food becomes hard to find, other things become hard to find—can you guarantee to yourself that you're not going to stoop to some unvirtuous actions in order to get what you want? You've got to create a state of mind where you know for sure that you're not going to stoop in that way. Even though you may feel tempted, you know that you have the strength and restraint to just say No. That requires desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, and alertness—all those qualities together.

The same when you're buffeted by the winds of good and bad news: You want to maintain your steadiness of mind, because you know how you're going to react will be a lot more reliable if you can maintain your even keel inside. If you have a sense of well-being inside, it's a lot easier not to give into influences from outside. Again, this is going to require desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, and alertness—all acting together.

In terms of purity of view, you want to remember that the real suffering that weighs the mind down does come from inside. Things outside may get bad, but you don't have to suffer from them. You keep that in mind, which means again, that you turn your energies to training the mind. You train your desire, your effort, your diligence, your endeavor, your relentlessness, mindfulness, and alertness. You keep this set of values in mind. And you remember that this is all for the sake of release, for the sake of freedom. So anything that would bind

you down with passion, you've got to work to free yourself from it—again, you need relentlessness and mindfulness to pry yourself free. Even, as that passage says, with the things that would bring you to release, there comes a point where you have to let them go, too, for the release to be total. You keep that in mind so that you're not just holding on to the path.

Remember the image of the raft. You get to the other side of the river, you put the raft down. But in the meantime, you learn how to hold on to the path in a skillful way. The sutta where the simile of the raft comes also has the simile of the water snake. You need to get something from a snake—say, its venom to make an anti-venom—so you have to grasp the snake in the correct way. In the same way, you have to learn how to grasp the Dhamma in the correct way. We're not here to engage in arguments and debates. We're not here to say that we're better than other people because of our views, or that we have to impose our views on other people. That would be like grasping the snake by the tail. The snake would turn around and bite you. But you still have to grasp the snake if you want to get its venom. In other words, as you're practicing, you have to hold on, but hold on in the right way. You're holding on for the sake of cleaning up your own mind. If you hold the Dhamma in that way, it's like holding the snake right behind the head with a forked stick. The snake can writhe around and curl around your arms, but it's not going to do any harm.

So you want to make sure that as events get difficult—and even when events are not difficult and you start getting complacent—you keep in mind what your values are, keep in mind what you need to do, because that's what mindfulness is for: It directs your actions. It points the mind in the direction of concentration because you know that that's going to be your most stable and reliable state. And it gives direction to your efforts in general.

That way, you do keep in mind what is really important. You do keep in mind what you have to do. You're not just here looking at things, accepting whatever,

I was reading recently an article saying that mindfulness is basically a matter of watching with equanimity. Well, equanimity sometimes is a good thing to have on hand, and sometimes it's not. If it makes you complacent, if it makes you indifferent, makes you apathetic, then that's the wrong quality of mind. Equanimity, to be good, always has to be combined with other skillful qualities. And mindfulness is what you use to remember when different qualities are useful and when they're not, how you have to combine them—all the lessons you've learned.

Now, you don't memorize those lessons and run them through the mind all the time, but you have them at your fingertips. This is one of the reasons why we keep the mind still. When it's still, it's as if all the drawers of the mind where all your valuables are stored are available. You know where they are so that

when you need something, you can pull it out. When you don't need it, you can put it back in the drawer. But if the mind is a whirlwind, then the dust and whatever else is stirred up by the wind will make it impossible to see where the drawers are. But when things settle down, then you can see clearly: "Here's the drawer I need for dealing with difficult things outside. Here's the drawer I need for dealing with lust inside. Here's the drawer I need for dealing with jealousy, anger." The drawers are all available.

So your persistence, your mindfulness, and your concentration all go together. And that's how they all become strong. That list of desire, effort, endeavor, diligence, relentlessness, mindfulness, alertness also appears in a sutta where the Buddha is talking about the attitude you should have if your head were on fire. You bring all those qualities together to put the fire out. You remember what's really important in life and you focus your efforts there. And as for any attachments that would pull you away from what's important, you're mindful to let them go.

That's when you see how important it is to keep your mindfulness strong—because in that way, it does become your refuge. Of the various qualities of the path, the Buddha focuses on mindfulness as your refuge so that all the other things you've learned about the path will be there at your fingertips. Otherwise, the things you've learned wash away, wash away, and they serve no purpose. But if you can store them away in the drawers of the mind and keep yourself calm so you know where the drawers are, then all the good things you've learned will be right at hand and show their real value right when you need them.