

The Faculty of Mindfulness (*Sati*)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05-05-13.

In the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (The Greater Discourse on the Lion's Roar), the Buddha states that even if he were asked continuous and non-repeating questions about the four establishments of mindfulness [*satipaṭṭhāna*] for 100 years, he would not run out of things to say about it. [— see MN 12.62 {i83}] So it is a vast subject.

As I dig into the suttas, the Abhidhamma and the commentaries to see what they have to say about *sati*, mindfulness, it often feels as though I'm holding a multi-faceted gem in my hands, each facet providing a somewhat different view of its characteristics. It can be hard to keep a focus to what can be touched on in a short talk. But today I want to explore two things: 1. a basic understanding of what mindfulness is; and then its role and function as one of the Five Faculties.

Through a large part of my practice, a generally accepted definition of mindfulness was that it was attention

- bare of judgment, including comparison;
- bare of decision-making; and
- bare of commentary or story-telling, in other words mental elaboration.

All of which I've come to call the "Three Bares of Attention."

But over the last decade three different scholar-bhikkhus—Anālayo Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Bodhi & Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu—have written about the inaccuracy of this view of mindfulness as bare attention.

- Anālayo Bhikkhu, *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, Great Britain: Windhorse Publications, 2003, pp. 46-52.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011), "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A canonical perspective" *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12:01, pp. 19-39.
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness: Memory & Ardency on the Buddhist Path*, Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012.

Bhikkhus Anālayo and Bodhi take what I find to be somewhat rich and broad views of mindfulness, while Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu emphasizes a more distinct view of mindfulness, its role and function. Yet each perspective is helpful in grasping the fullness of this quality we call "mindfulness."

The issue begins, as these things often do, with an uncertainty about what exactly the Buddha meant by the word *sati*.

In trying to talk about his new approach to working with experience and finding a way to be free of unsatisfactoriness, the Buddha often had to adapt words that were already known, expanding their meaning or sometimes using them in quite different ways. The Pāli noun *sati* is derived from the verb *sarati* which means "to remember." [And it is related to the Sanskrit word *smṛti*, which also has to do with memory.]

So when the memory aspect of mindfulness is emphasized, it seems to be referring to two things:

- Remembering to keep attention focused on the object of attention, and
- Remembering what the Buddha's teachings, the instructions of our teachers and our own experience tells us about:

1. what is skillful and what is unskillful, in other words what will lead to our long-term happiness, contentment and benefit and what will lead to unsatisfactoriness, stress, struggle and suffering.

2. And remembering what the teachings and our own wisdom also tell us about how to relate or respond to what we encounter, whether it is skillful or not.

This memory aspect of practice clearly involves judgment, or more accurately discernment, and decision-making. So it seems to contradict two of the three forms of bare attention.

And yet as Bhikkhus Anālayo and Bodhi acknowledge, the Buddha also used the word *sati* in a new way, one which I think points to something that is at the core of the idea of bare attention: the simple quality of attention to or presence for the object that is the predominate sensory contact at this moment, whether it is a contact at one of the physical senses or some mental event. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as "**lucid awareness of present happenings.**" —p. 25 He also describes this quality of mindfulness as involving: "**from the side of the subject** [that is our subjective experience], **is the lucidity and vivacity of the act of awareness, and from the side of the object, its vivid presentation.**" —BB, p. 26

I find these terms fit with my own experience of increased mindfulness, especially during retreat practice. Things do seem clearer, brighter and more vivid. This is part of the quality that I think people have been suggesting through the phrase "bare attention," along with the idea that we need, especially in the early parts of practice with the body, feelings and

mind-states, to observe or see clearly the "bare facts" of what we're encountering with minimal conceptual overlay or elaboration.

What seems to have concerned both Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, is that the "secular or applied mindfulness movement," and to some extent even the "Insight Meditation movement", seems to have picked up and applied the lucid awareness/vivid presentation/bare facts aspect of mindfulness but they feel it has short-changed or abandoned the memory/wisdom aspect. The result is that the application of mindfulness becomes unmoored from the wisdom that guides us to freedom from unsatisfactoriness, stress, struggle and suffering, the wisdom that guides us to embodying goodwill, compassion, joy for the good fortune of others and equanimity. Instead there's just the idea that being present is enough.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu emphasizes the memory aspect in this comment:

"As he [the Buddha] defined the term, right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) is not bare attention. Instead, it's a faculty of active memory, adept at calling to mind and keeping in mind instructions and intentions that will be useful on the path. Its role is to draw on right view and to work proactively in supervising the other factors of the path to give rise to right concentration, and in using right concentration as a basis for total release." —TB, Introduction, paragraph 3

Bhikkhu Bodhi offers us a more balanced view of mindfulness and its function while also arguing that there is more to it:

"There are certainly occasions when the cultivation of mindfulness requires the practitioner to suspend discrimination, evaluation, and judgment, and to adopt instead a stance of simple observation. However, to fulfill its role as an *integral* member of the eightfold path mindfulness has to work in unison with right view and right effort. This means that the practitioner of mindfulness must at times evaluate mental qualities and intended deeds, make judgments about them, and engage in purposeful action." —BB, p. 26

This brings us to mindfulness as one of the Five Faculties. As I've mentioned in the past the Buddha identified these five qualities of mind as: Faith, Energy or Effort, Mindfulness, Concentration and Wisdom. When these five are fully developed and balanced they lead us to freedom. [— SN 48.17, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi] And it is this balancing function that mindfulness offers.

Mindfulness, through its combination of lucid awareness/vivid presentation and its memory functions, allows us to evaluate the status of each of these other factors, to develop and balance them. And without both the lucid awareness and memory aspects, mindfulness can't fulfill this monitoring and balancing.

So by remembering the teachings and our own experience with these five faculties, we can see that:

When faith is much greater than wisdom we get blind or naive faith, which is where we may start in the beginning, but if it is not balanced with some wisdom can lead us to do harmful things to others and to be harmed by those we give this blind faith to.

When wisdom exceeds faith, we get a heartless, intellectual understanding of what is encountered in life, something that serves to keep us at a distance from life rather than fully engaged with it.

And when energy exceeds concentration we can end up with restlessness. While if concentration exceeds energy we end up with sluggishness and sleepiness.

It is only when these five qualities are balanced that we have some ability to see the arising, presence and passing away of phenomena and to do so without grasping, aversion or delusion, so that we live our lives, or at least those moments of our lives, with non-clinging and equanimity.