

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #4 - Mindful

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 12/01/13.

Today I want to continue exploring the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's discourse on the ways of establishing mindfulness. So far we have explored the [introduction](#) to the sutta, where the Buddha tells us that this is the direct path to freedom from being caught in the unsatisfactoriness of experience and the path to living with ease and equanimity with the ups and downs of this human life.

Then, the Buddha said:

"... in regard to the body one abides contemplating the body, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world."¹

And he repeats this phrase about the other three fields for mindfulness: feeling, the mind and certain categories of experience.

So far we have explored the quality of [ardency](#) - a passionate, continual and balanced effort; and the quality of [clearly knowing](#) - the ability to recognize and know what is happening in the world of experience in this moment. This week we're going to take a look at the quality that in Pāli is called *sati*, which is translated as mindfulness.

When I first began to practice, being mindful largely referred to what was described as "bare attention" or the quality of "being present" for an experience. And if you look at the way that mindfulness is generally thought of in our popular culture, the way many popular teachers describe it, and the way it is applied to fields as varied as psychotherapy, the corporate business world and the military, it is in terms of this ability to meet a moment of experience with bare attention, with presence. There's something to this, and I'll come back to it in a few minutes. But after you practice for a while it becomes apparent that there is more to the practice than just being present. So what is mindfulness?

Like many people trying to talk about a new discovery or new approach, the Buddha often had to adapt words that were already known, expanding their meaning or sometimes using them in quite different ways. The Pāli word *sati* is one example of this. *Sati* is derived from the verb *sarati* which means "to remember." (It is related to the Sanskrit word *smṛti*, which also has to do with memory.)

Remembering is certainly one of the challenges of our practice. Remembering to bring bare attention to our experience, remembering to be present for what is happening at a sensory level right now. But also remembering to bring *wise* attention to our experience, remembering to rely on the Buddha's teachings and our own hard-earned wisdom to guide how we relate to our minds and bodies, to our experiences, from moment to moment, so that we can find our way free from *dukkha*, from discontent and suffering.

Especially when we first begin to practice, it can be hard to get a handle on what is meant by the quality "bare attention" or as Bhikkhu Bodhi has called it "lucid awareness of present happenings."² One of the descriptions that I have found helpful, even if it isn't a totally accurate description of mindfulness, is what I've come to call The Three Bares of Mindfulness: bare of judgment, bare of decision-making and bare of commentary.

When we meet a moment of experience with bare attention or lucid awareness, at that moment our minds are bare of judgment. There is no judgment about good or bad, right or wrong, there is just the recognition that *this* is what is happening in the world of experience right now.

When we meet a moment of experience with bare attention or lucid awareness, at that moment our minds are bare of decision-making. We're not trying to make any decisions about what we are experiencing, about what to do about it or in response to it. We're just recognizing that *this* is what is happening in the world of experience right now.

When we meet a moment of experience with bare attention or lucid awareness, at that moment our minds are bare of commentary, or as I like to call it "story-

telling." We're not mentally elaborating on what is happening in the world of experience. We're not getting caught in a story about the past or the future. In other words, we're not getting caught in papañca or mental proliferation, which I've spoken of in other talks³. We're just recognizing, experiencing and knowing that *this* is what is happening right now.

For instance when a bell is struck and a sound occurs, if we meet that sound with bare attention, then there is a hearing and a kind of non-conceptual knowing of it, before any conceptual label, such as "bell" or "ringing", arises about it. Can you notice this difference in your own experience? When we encounter the sound and attention is accompanied by mindfulness, there would be the non-conceptual or "intuitive" knowing of the sound. And because bare attention is bare of judgment, there would be no discrimination about whether what was being experienced was good or bad. There would just be the experience of hearing and knowing the sound. When we encounter the bell sound with mindfulness, and attention is bare of decision-making we are not trying to decide whether it is the dinner bell or a phone ringing. We are not trying to decide whether we should sit here and just listen to it, or get up and eat, or answer the phone. There is simply the experience of hearing and knowing the sound. And, when we encounter the bell sound with bare attention, which means that attention is bare of story-telling, then we don't start thinking about how much we enjoy or dislike the sound of bells. And we don't start thinking about the bells we've heard in the past or those we hope to hear in the future. There is simply the experience of hearing and knowing the sound.

Another simile for this Bare Attention/Lucid Awareness aspect of Mindfulness is that mindfulness is like viewing clouds from the perspective of the sky. There is simply the noticing that they arising and passing through without any sense of them being good or bad clouds, without trying to do anything about them — because after all, what can one do about clouds they're just here or they aren't, and without any stories about the clouds we've experienced in the past or hope to experience in the days to come. They are just clouds, passing through the open spacious sky, and in a similar way sensations, feelings and thoughts just pass through awareness.

This bare attention/lucid awareness aspect of Mindfulness creates a space in which we can see things as they are, separate from our reactions to them. By creating this space and allowing us to see the truth of our lives in each moment, we develop a clear knowing which creates the possibility of responding in a wise way.

There's one more quality about this bare attention/lucid awareness aspect of mindfulness that I want to mention before touching on the wise attention aspect. It turns out that this bare attention/lucid awareness aspect goes hand in hand with the quality of goodwill or acceptance. After all, how could we ever see what an experience actually is while we're rejecting it by trying to push it away or destroy it? So in order to truly experience what something is, our minds must be free of judgment, decision-making and story-telling and our hearts must be open, kind and accepting of what is. Of course this only needs to happen one moment at a time. But when it does, it creates the condition for more goodwill, more acceptance of whatever arises in our own lives and the lives of others. So as long as we're truly doing mindfulness practice, we're automatically also doing mettā practice, cultivating the quality of goodwill.

So first we have to remember to meet our experience with bare attention and goodwill, so that we can actually see it and clearly know it. But then we also have to meet it with Wise Attention. We have to discern how to respond in a way that will help to weaken greed, hatred and delusion in our minds and hearts, and how to respond in a way that will strengthen generosity, goodwill and wisdom. So we need to develop some understanding of what the Buddha called *Sammādiṭṭhi*, translated as Right View or Right Understanding.

At its core, Right View involves, first, the understanding that actions have consequences, whether the actions are in the form of thought, word or deed. In other words, that how we relate to each moment of experience has consequences. This understanding is further developed into the view that some actions lead to wholesome or skillful results — results that lead to wisdom, peace, harmony, generosity and goodwill— and some actions lead to unwholesome or unskillful consequences such as ignorance/delusion, agitation, a sense of unsatisfactoriness, and suffering.

So not only is this quality of being mindful about remembering to bring bare attention or lucid awareness to each moment of experience, it is also about remembering to then relate to that moment of experience in a skillful way, a wholesome way, if we truly want to develop peace in our lives.

Notes

1. Adapted from the translation by Anālayo Bhikkhu, *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, United Kingdom: Windhorse Publications, 2003, p. 3. (Note: Following Bhikkhu Bodhi and others, I have substituted "ardent" for "diligent" as a translation of ātāpi.)
2. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011), "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A canonical perspective," *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12:01, p. 25.
3. Jones, Philip, Mental Proliferation and Its Underlying Factors, Sept. 1-29, 2013, <http://silentmindopenheart.org/talks.html>