

Satipaṭṭhāna (23) Activities as Mirrors

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The Buddha often lists our activities as being activities of body, speech, and mind. Usually, the activities of the body are mentioned first in these lists. Part of the reason is that our physical activities, such as walking, talking, and eating, are the most obvious to notice. Physical activities can be seen by other people. They are more obvious to be aware of than our speech, and certainly, our mind and mental activities.

Being more aware of our activities of body, speech, and mind, we have more choices. We may be more able to do something about our bodily activities than our speech, or especially our mind, which sometimes seems to be on automatic pilot.

So the training in Buddhism classically begins with attending to our actions because that is where it is easiest to bring mindfulness and to see clearly. It is the easiest place to have some choice about what we do.

In the discourse of the Buddha on the Four Foundations for Awareness, the first foundation is the body. The beginning exercises for the body have to do with activities. The first exercise, breathing, is a physical activity. When we sit still, breathing is usually the largest activity of the body.

Experiencing the breathing, we then experience the whole body – just taking in the body in whatever way it comes. Then we relax and calm the body. We might not be able to calm our minds, but we might be able to calm and relax our bodies to some degree. The body is often more accessible.

Next, we become aware of our postures, and then, in this third exercise, we become aware of our activities. Most of these activities involve the whole body or much of the body. We can observe, watch, and train ourselves to be attentive to our activities. We are establishing the ground, warming up the mind, and strengthening the mind so that at some point, we can be aware of something much more fickle and slippery – the mind itself. In a sense, mindfulness of activities is preparing the ground for a fuller experience of mindfulness.

But mindfulness of our physical activities has another very important role in itself. Our activities are a mirror for what is happening for us – a mirror to see ourselves better. The idea of activities as a mirror goes back to the Buddha's teachings to his son, when his son was relatively young. The Buddha encouraged him to use his activities of body, speech, and mind as a mirror to understand himself. He also offered specific criteria for what to see in this mirror.

Part of what we want to see is whether what we are doing is causing harm to ourselves or others. To see this ethical component of mindfulness is very important. We want to see whether what we are doing is wholesome or not wholesome. Whether it is nourishing. Whether it brings a sense of goodness or warmth – or whether it does the opposite. We also want to know whether what we do brings suffering or happiness.

Reflection about the impact and result of our activities is part of the role of seeing our activities as mirrors. This exercise is not simply about being aware of the activity in and of itself. It can be quite delicious to just be fully there. But as we develop the capacity for mindfulness, our awareness can also take in the impact, influence, or effect of our activities.

When the Buddha talks about full awareness of activities, using the activities as a mirror is important. Then we can see what choices we have. If we are hurrying to do something, and we ask if this is nourishing us or not, then we can see that we actually are not being nourished. We are not taking in the full experience by being present in a way that offers some deep support for our being. Rather, we are draining or shortchanging ourselves.

For example, while eating food, take your time to eat. Not only take in the food properly, but also enjoy it. Take in the nourishment of it, and feel and sense the goodness or caring. Maybe someone has cooked for you. Notice what it is like for the body to process the food and to take it in.

Yesterday, I had a delicious soup for lunch. I was hungry, and it felt wonderful to take it in and feel it. It felt almost like medicine. It felt good to be there present for it, as opposed to reading emails while I ate. We can choose: "I am not going to read emails. I am going to be here with the soup and just be with that."

If you are driving your car and rushing, is that a way to be nourished? Is that a way to be benefitted, to feel the growth of attention, or to feel good about being in your own skin? Probably not. Rushing probably takes you out of your skin or disconnects you in some way.

So we can use our activities as a mirror of something deeper and more important for us as we go through life. Sometimes in certain schools of mindfulness, the emphasis seems to be so much on just being present for things as they are – to just feel the immediacy of experience. And there is no emphasis on taking in the bigger picture – the impact or influence it has on us. But if we take in the bigger picture, we can choose what to do and what not to do.

Learning to do this with our physical activities also prepares the ground for later, when we do it for speech. After that, we do it, more importantly, for the mind. The mind is the origin and the source of our activities of body and speech.

We get a sense of what it is like to shift gears – to move in a wholesome direction, and to move away from that which debilitates or drains us, even in our mental activities as well. That is coming; it is much more difficult. But learning to do it with physical activities prepares the ground and gives us a sense of how to do it with mental activities. Then, if we do this in a relaxed way, it builds awareness, which becomes stronger over time. It is as if we are developing a muscle. At the right time, this muscle can be applied to the mind. But if we live mindlessly in the activities of our life, then we are not developing that capacity. In Buddhist practice, that capacity is eventually directed to the mind itself and to mental activities.

Later, we will see that mental activities get more and more subtle. Their subtlety is not inconsequential. This is where the core operating principles are for our lives. To touch into our mental activities, use them as a mirror, and have some choice about them – what to let go of and what to encourage – is a very important part of this practice. The message for today is that developing awareness of physical activities is phenomenally important for what comes later, as mindfulness practice develops further.

You can try this in your daily life. Be present for the activities that you do, but not just the activities in and of themselves. Be present for them as a mirror, so you are opening up to a fuller picture. And you see: what impact does this activity have? What impact does the way you do the activity have on you? Is it healthy for you? Is it wholesome? Is the way you do it beneficial? If not, can you find a way to do it that feels good?

One of the guidelines for what is wholesome and beneficial is that which is beautiful. To live in beauty, to act in beauty, and to see how to be in the world with beautiful activities. How would you walk down the sidewalk in a way that is beautiful – not for other people, but for yourself? How would you clean your dishes? How would you clean your home? How would you go about your day if your activities could really nourish you, support you, and develop something beautiful and wonderful inside?

I hope that you will stay closely mindful and attentive to the activities of your day and see how that supports some wonderful possibilities for you and what you can offer other people.

We will do one more day on mindfulness of activities tomorrow.