

Eightfold Path-Right Mindfulness (2 of 6)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

experience, observe, foundation, aware, wisdom, conscious, *sati*, *viharati*, abide, dwell, awareness, cognize, feel, sense

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The seventh factor on the Eightfold Path is right mindfulness. We are coming to the heart of the mental cultivation as part of the Eightfold Path. The previous factor of the Eightfold Path is right effort. Developing mindfulness is one of the preeminent right efforts.

Right mindfulness is considered to be a wholesome and skillful state of mind to develop. It is healing and helpful. It is greatly beneficial. It creates a very good foundation for everything we do in life. It is a foundation for wisdom, compassion, and care.

It is good to put in a strong foundation first. It is good to have mindfulness as a foundation. It can be dangerous to have valuation, wisdom, compassion, and love for the world without a strong foundation. It might actually be that the wisdom and love are not quite wise or loving. It is easy to be fooled or to be a little bit off. It might be that the wisdom and love are unstable, easily succumbing to something different.

We cultivate mindfulness. It is helpful to really cultivate it for its own sake first. Keep the simplicity of it. Part of the reason for this is that on the path to spiritual liberation that Buddhism talks about, mindfulness is the pre-eminent mental state, or practice that leads to liberation. Mindfulness is important at every stage right up to the brink of awakening. Mindfulness is there.

Learning the art of mindfulness is so helpful. Mindfulness is an art in part of being very simple with experience. We are not evaluating or making it complicated. We are just being in the present moment experience. It is as if there is no past, no yesterday, and no tomorrow, or future. Of course, there is, and wisdom will help us understand what to do in relationship to the past and the future.

The simplicity of mindfulness is to get established here, without the mental activity required for thinking about the past and the future. It is really a delight to let go of so much and take in this moment. We are here with the beauty, fullness, and depth of this moment. This is the miracle of mindfulness – the miracle of being conscious.

It is one of the great miracles or wonders of the world to be conscious or aware. It is probably one of the most overlooked wonders of the world. People can spend all day busy with their lives without ever being cognizant of how special or wondrous it is to be conscious.

If we pointed out to someone busy with the affairs of daily life, they might think we were crazy. If we go downtown and go up to a stranger busy with their day and say, "Wow, you might want to take a moment and be aware that you're conscious. Consciousness is here and you're aware." I don't think it would be well received. I think that they have important things to do.

To find this foundation and value it opens up wide possibilities. One of the greatest ones is freedom itself.

So, what is mindfulness? There is a difference between how mindfulness is taught in the teachings of the Buddha, and how it is often taught in the modern world. This is especially true in the modern world where secular mindfulness is being taught. They are all good. It is all helpful, but there are distinctions to be made.

I think it is helpful to understand what the Buddha was teaching. First, the Buddha never gave any instructions about doing mindfulness. Growing up, my mother might have told me to be more mindful because maybe I was tracking mud into the house. You should be more mindful and know what you are doing. She was really saying to be more attentive.

The Buddha never taught anyone to *do* mindfulness. In relation to the word, *sati*, or mindfulness, he used the verb *to establish*. He also used the verbs, *to dwell or abide in sati*. One establishes and abides in mindfulness. To establish something does not necessarily mean we are doing it. We are bringing it in and rooting it here. We are letting it be here. A lot of this has to do with letting go. Establishing awareness often involves letting go of our preoccupations so awareness can really be here.

The Buddha never said to do mindfulness. He did say to establish it and then to abide in it. I love the expression abide. The word *viharati* can also mean to live in or to dwell in. To live in something can imply that we are in a state. We are in a state of awareness.

Now, mindfulness practice is different from mindfulness itself. The distinction could be described in this way. Perhaps one person is running. We ask them what they are doing. They reply that they are just running. Another person is running, and we ask what they are doing. They say they are training. They are training to run in a race or something.

Perhaps the first person is running away from the police. They might just be running for fun or exercise. They are just running. For the second person, running as a training is more than just running. It could involve endurance running, speed, alternating how fast you run, how far you run, and how you run. All kinds of things go into the training to run. It's much more complicated than just running.

Mindfulness training, or mindfulness practice involves other elements besides being mindful and resting in awareness. Those other qualities develop mindfulness, give it strength, and make it more present. In the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness, he doesn't tell anyone to practice or do mindfulness as an activity that we do.

We establish it enough. Then he gives a series of different verbs for what we actually do. These can be seen as ways of being mindful or practicing mindfulness. One of the first verbs he says is to cognize, to know, or to recognize what is happening. That is the cognitive capacity of the mind. We know what is happening as it's happening. That is often represented in mindfulness practice by doing simple mental noting -- itch, hearing, breathing, thought. We just recognize what is here.

Another practice or activity for cultivating or establishing mindfulness is to experience or to feel. The first activity, to recognize, is a mental activity, while feeling is more of a physical thing. We feel with our body. With breathing, we can recognize that it is an in-breath. There is an expansion of the chest as we breathe. One can also feel that expansion. We can feel the stretching and the movement of the breath. Those sensations of breathing occur in the torso – if that is where we are focusing. It is a sensing.

Part of mindfulness practice is to sense experience. There is a balance between how much we are cognitively noting and aware, “Oh that is an in breath, that is an out breath. That is pressure. That is the release of pressure.”, and how much we are letting the mind be quiet, just sensing the experience. That balance is different for different people. It is also different for various stages of concentration. As we practice, the mind gets more still. We use whatever is helpful to allow the mind to become more mindful, still, open, and inclusive.

Another activity of mindfulness practice is to observe. We watch the experience. Many different religions emphasize the value of the watcher, of seeing. When we watch something or observe something with the mind's eye, or the physical eye, we are not interfering, changing, or acting on what we are observing. We are just seeing it.

When we observe breathing or observe thinking, we are not acting on it or changing it. We are just seeing it or observing it. In the Buddha's teachings, the capacity to observe non-reactively, in a relaxed, open way, and to see clearly is understood to be a fairly deep practice that comes when the concentration is strong. This comes when the curtains have been pulled open. It comes when the agitation of the hindrances has fallen away. We can simply step back and watch.

Some experiences are more useful to watch or observe. We can sometimes have all three of these when we are thinking. We can recognize that I am thinking. That clear recognition can be a little movement or freedom from the thinking. In that freedom, we come into a place of being aware.

We can also feel the experience of thinking unless it is very, very subtle. If we are sensitive enough, we can feel the physicality that comes into play when we are thinking. Micro muscles that tense up can come into play when we are thinking. Emotions can come into play. We can see, we can feel, and we can cognize. We have these three different realms of activities which are sometimes called mindfulness practice.

Some people emphasize the cognitive. Some people emphasize the sensate, or sensory feeling. Some people emphasize observing. What is appropriate for any given individual varies from day to day, and from time to time. Learning how to navigate these different ways of being mindful, and how to be present is guided by the principle of *this too*. Can I just be here with this experience, without relaxation, without being for or against? Can I be here for this too?

Mindfulness gets stronger and stronger as we practice observing, feeling, and cognizing, or knowing. As it gets stronger, the sense of being conscious, being aware becomes stronger. Then we can rest in that. We can abide in it until it becomes lucid. This ability to just abide and rest in awareness, without the ego and self-identity issues coming into play, without reactivity, desires, or aversions operating allows for the cobwebs of the mind to unravel. This allows the ways in which we are contracted, tight, entangled, or caught in experience to unravel as well. It is a profound state of peace.

More and more, there is freedom to be found. That freedom is awareness. Awareness which is freedom is one of the best things. It is a great foundation for wisdom and love.

That is the background for how the Buddha then goes on to teach about right mindfulness, the four foundations of mindfulness. I will touch on these in the next talks. In the meantime, consider some of the useful, beneficial ways that you have experienced these three different aspects of mindfulness practice – knowing, clear recognition, observing, sensing, or feeling through bodily experiences. Have fun with them. Enjoy the different ways of practicing mindfulness.

Thank you very much.