



Dharma Gathering 2008

Mindfulness, memory & wisdom

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Introduction

Mindfulness is fundamental to Buddhist meditation and the cultivation of insight, to the extent that the terms “insight meditation” and “mindfulness meditation” are often taken as synonymous. But what is mindfulness? In contemporary dharma discourse, mindfulness is often spoken of as awareness. This seems odd, however, since the Buddha already had a word for awareness, *viññāṇa*, so why would he need another? But if mindfulness is not awareness, what is it? And what is its relationship to awareness?

We find a variety of definitions of mindfulness among contemporary authorities. Nyanaponika Thera, for example, defines mindfulness as “a kind of attentiveness that ... is good, skilful or right (*kusala*).”¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi defines it as “focused awareness applied to immediate experience in both its subjective and objective factors.”² Thānissaro Bhikkhu sees it as “the ability to keep something in mind.”³ Ñāṇavīra Thera says it is “general recollectedness, not being scatterbrained,”⁴ and he links it with “reflexion,” knowing what one knows or does as one knows or does it.⁵

Since mindfulness is so important to meditation and the cultivation of insight, and since there are so many variations in the way the term is understood, it may be useful to take a fresh look at mindfulness to clarify its meaning. The approach in these essays is to seek the meaning of mindfulness by examining some suttas in which the Buddha and his students use the term. In these suttas we find a number of themes associated with mindfulness, including its role in the path, its connection with meditation practice, its relationship with feeling and the part it plays in insight. Today we will begin with a definition, and go on to examine its relationship with memory and wisdom.

What is mindfulness?

The word “mindfulness” as the standard translation of the Pāli word “*sati*” comes from T. W. Rhys Davids, the great nineteenth century pioneer of Pāli studies. What

¹ Nyanaponika Thera. *The heart of Buddhist meditation*. London: Rider & Company, 1969: 9.

² Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The connected discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 1506.

³ Thānissaro Bhikkhu. *The wings to awakening. An anthology from the Pāli canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana Publications, 1998: 72.

⁴ Ñāṇavīra Thera. *Clearing the path. Writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera (1960-1965)*. Colombo: Path Press, 1987: 155.

⁵ Ñāṇavīra Thera (1987): 350.

does “mindfulness” as an English word suggest? The OED defines “mindful” as “taking heed or care; being conscious or aware,” and “mindless” as “unintelligent, stupid; ... thoughtless, heedless, careless.” Mindfulness implies awareness, but more than awareness; it also suggests both care and intelligence.

The Pāli word “sati” literally means “memory.” Bhikkhu Bodhi says that sati comes from a root meaning “to remember,” and he adds that “as a mental factor it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past.”⁶ Mindfulness, then, is the act of remembering the present, rather than the past; keeping the present in mind. But does this mean that the past is excluded from the field of mindfulness? Not according to Ānanda, who described the mindfulness of the mature dharma student in this way:

She has mindfulness; possessing supreme mindfulness [*sati*] and discrimination [*nepakka*], recalling and recollecting what was done and said long ago. (Sekha Sutta M53)⁷

Mindfulness here is linked to memory, in its normal sense of remembering the past, and to wisdom. Why is memory of the past so important to mindfulness? And why should memory be linked to wisdom? After all, a fundamental principle of contemporary dharma practice is the necessity for the practitioner to remain firmly in the present rather than being distracted by thoughts of past and future. This is neatly summed up in the slogan, “Be here now.” Then why is memory important?

A hint of this may be found in an incident that occurred during last year’s dharma gathering. Some mornings we saw a bird sitting on a branch just outside the glass wall of the main hall. Suddenly the bird would fly toward the wall, crash into it, and stagger back to its branch. It would resume its vigil, then at some point again fly into the wall, crash, and stagger back to its branch. And so on. It seemed that in the morning the light was such that the bird could see its own reflection in the glass, and perhaps perceiving this as a rival bird would fly across to challenge the trespasser. Now, clearly the bird had awareness. It was “in the present,” it was “here-&-now,” for otherwise it could not have seen and reacted to its reflection. However, we can be confident that the bird was lacking mindfulness. Why? Because it never learned from its experience.

What do we mean by “experience” when, for example, we say, “He is an experienced carpenter,” or “She is very experienced in sorting out problems of this nature.” Experience refers to accumulated knowledge, which in turn implies an ability to learn from the past. This suggests that a present encounter which is informed by the past has a different quality to a present encounter which is innocent of any influence

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed). *Abhidhammattha Sangaha. A comprehensive manual of abhidhamma*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Edition, 2000: 86.

⁷ The translations used in these essays are based on those of Bhikkhu Bodhi, but with some modifications.

from the past. What's the nature of this difference? I'm suggesting that whatever the difference is, that's where we will uncover the nature of mindfulness.

The lion's roar

Let us explore this issue further using Mahāsīhanāda Sutta (*Greater discourse on the lion's roar* M12) as our text.

This is how I heard it.

Once the Blessed One was living at Vesālī, in the grove outside the city to the west.

At that time Sunakkhatta, a son of the Licchavīs, who recently left this teaching and training, was speaking to the Vesālī assembly [*parisā*]:

“The samaṇa Gotama does not have any accomplishments transcending the human, any distinction in knowledge and vision [*ñāṇa-dassana*] worthy of cultivated ones. The samaṇa Gotama teaches a dharma hammered out by reason, following his own line of enquiry as it occurs to him. When he teaches the dharma to someone it leads, when practised, to the complete exhaustion of suffering.”

At the time of the Buddha there were two major forms of political organisation in the Ganges valley, the old tribal republics and the new centralised monarchies. The Buddha himself came from the Sakya republic, located in what is now the Nepal plains, north of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. He organised his saṅgha on the same principles as the tribal republics, so his sympathies were clearly republican. Each republic was governed by an assembly (*parisā*) to which the rājas, or members of the ruling aristocracy, had rights of membership. Sunakkhatta was a rāja, a member of the aristocracy of the Licchavī republic, which was located on the north bank of the Ganges in what is now the state of Bihar.

Sunakkhatta had spent some years as a bhikkhu but left discontented. He was troubled by restlessness and an inability to commit himself to any particular course of training, as he was always looking to possibilities elsewhere and judging what he had as inadequate. He was very interested in the powers associated with deep concentration states, and these seem to be what he means by “accomplishments transcending the human.” The Buddha, in contrast, teaches the way to ease and contentment, which to Sunakkhatta is not as interesting as spectacular psychic states and powers. A not uncommon attitude today.

Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples and regarded as foremost in wisdom, hears Sunakkhatta's attack and reports it to the Buddha. The Buddha says:

Sāriputta, the misguided man Sunakkhatta is angry and his words are spoken out of anger. Thinking to discredit the Tathāgata he actually praises him; for it praise

of the Tathāgata to say of him, “When he teaches the dharma to someone it leads, when practised, to the complete exhaustion of suffering.”

The Buddha is 80 years old and in the last year of his life. Two years previously he had faced a rebellion against his authority led by his cousin, Devadatta. This occurred in Magadhā, south of the Ganges in what is now southern Bihar. Now he is again under attack, this time in the assembly at Vesālī, and he has to defend his authority once more. All this is happening in the broader context of the collapse of the old political order. The centralised monarchies of Kosala and Magadha have new, ambitious rulers eager to extend their power through war, and the tribal republics are in their sights. The world the Buddha knows is vanishing into a whirlpool of blood and pain, and there is nothing he can do about it. Sāriputta will die before the Buddha, and this may be his second last appearance in a recorded conversation with his teacher. Two old men, wondering what has gone wrong with the world.

But the Buddha has plenty of fight left in him. He begins a discourse that explores the various reasons why his leadership is justified, why he “claims the herd-leader’s place, roars his lion’s roar in the assemblies, and sets rolling the wheel of Brahmā.”

The Buddha is a bull elephant, leader of the herd. His teaching is the lion’s roar of certainty, characterised by a supreme self-confidence. The “assemblies” are centres of community and decision-making. They may belong to the world of secular politics, like the assembly of the the Licchavī republic in Vesālī. They may belong to the spiritual world, like the Buddha’s own assemblies of bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, upāsakas and upāsikās (monks, nuns, lay men and lay women). The Buddha is received with respect in all these assemblies because of who he is and what he has accomplished — for he is an “accomplished one” (*arahant*).

Throughout our text the Buddha lays out his abilities and accomplishments, all of which justifies his “claiming the herd-leader’s place.” Towards the end of his teaching he comes to the subject of mindfulness and wisdom, and its relationship to age.

And here we begin.

Mindfulness and lucidity

Sāriputta, there are certain samaṇas and brāhmaṇas whose doctrine and view is this: “While this good man is still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, so long is he perfect in the lucidity of his wisdom. But when he is old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage, being eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old, then the lucidity of his wisdom is lost.”

But it should not be seen in this way.

I am now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage: my years have turned eighty.

Now suppose I had four students, each with a life span of a hundred years, perfect in mindfulness [*sati*], retentiveness [*gati*], memory [*dhiti*] and lucidity of wisdom [*paññā-veyyattiya*]. ... Suppose they continuously asked me about the four establishments of mindfulness [*satipaṭṭhāna*] and that I answered them when asked. Suppose they remembered each answer of mine, never asked a secondary question, and never paused except to eat, drink, ... piss, shit and rest ... The Tathāgata's dharma teachings, his explanations of the detailed aspects of dharma and his replies to questions would not end before those four students of mine would be dead at the end of their hundred years.

Sāriputta, even if you have to carry me about on a bed, there will be no change in the lucidity of the Tathāgata's wisdom.

The Buddha's authority is under attack, and this authority is based on his spiritual accomplishments and abilities. Everything depends on his "lucidity of wisdom" (*paññā-veyyattiya*). The Buddha is old; even if he was lucid in his youth, how can he be lucid now? Even if he deserved the "herd leader's place" when he was in his prime, has he still got it in him? So the challenge to the Buddha's authority revolves in part around his age. Is he "past it?" Devadatta's attempt to seize the leadership of the saṅgha also revolved around the issue of the Buddha's age, and his inability to effectively maintain his authority. Time for the old man to stand aside!

Our discussion centres on the nature of the lucidity of wisdom, and in particular how long it lasts. And when this subject comes up, the Buddha speaks of mindfulness (*sati*) and the practice of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). What is the relationship between mindfulness and wisdom?

The qualities of mindfulness

The Buddha gives the example of an intellectual discussion between dharma students and their teacher on meditation practice. So there is a link between the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), what we know as insight meditation, and wisdom, both intellectual and experiential. This link with wisdom comes out in the qualities that characterise the practice of mindfulness. They are: mindfulness itself (*sati*), retentiveness (*gati*), memory (*dhiti*), and lucidity of wisdom (*paññā-veyyattiya*).

Sati

Sati (mindfulness) implies keeping in mind the present, but more than the present. The present is held in the context of that which precedes it. Something from the past flows into the present and shapes it, informs it. It is this that makes "experience," in the sense of learning and the capacity to apply learning, possible.

Understanding language, for example, involves more than being present to the sound of a single word; it involves being present to the context revealed by the flow of words from past, through present, to future. The meaning of a single word or phrase is revealed only by something that happens later. A sentence — maybe a long sentence — is unrolled, and its meaning, its capacity to stimulate understanding, is revealed only at the end. The mind must hold all of the sentence as one as it unfolds over time.

Mindfulness of present experience has three closely related aspects.

- This present experience must be clearly registered. And for it to be clear, we must be face to face with it, not pulled away by the allure of past and future, or by something else happening at the same time. Just this, now. Not that, “*this!*” Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta describes the practitioner “contemplating body *as* body ... feeling *as* feeling ... mind *as* mind ... phenomena *as* phenomena.” This experience now, *as* just this experience now. Nothing added.
- This present experience must be held within a context that expands over time, including more and more past as it unfolds. We hold this present experience in such a way as to allow it to develop while we wait for something to happen which will enable it to make sense. And so we develop a skill. When a skilled yoga teacher looks at a student doing a basic posture, for example, she is focused on the present action of seeing this particular arrangement of the body; but her seeing contains a depth that comes from her 30 years of practice, study and teaching, which could not be imagined by a new student of yoga.
- As we hold this present experience we see that it moves over time. To register it fully, so that some understanding can emerge, we need a continuing engagement, a “contemplation” (anupassanā). Anupassanā, from *anu* (= “along”) + *passanā* (= “seeing”), means “seeing along,” or “tracking.” Anupassanā is the central activity of satipaṭṭhāna, the establishments of mindfulness. The practitioner of satipaṭṭhāna is described as “contemplating body *as* body ... contemplating feeling *as* feeling ... contemplating mind *as* mind ... contemplating phenomena *as* phenomena.” This implies a *tracking* of experience over time, maintaining a *continuity* of awareness and attention which allows development of a sensitivity to how things behave over time.

Gati

Gati (retentiveness) is the capacity to hold something in the mind, to be aware in a way that allows a broader picture to emerge. This includes the ability to wait — until something happens which will complete the picture, uncover the pattern, and so reveal what this present experience means. The ability to wait is extremely important in meditation practice. Often our meditation experience is mundane, even boring. It’s not what we want, or expect. But the practice requires us to learn how to wait, to give the dharma time to reveal something of itself, at its own pace and in its own way.

Dhiti

Dhiti (memory) is the capacity to bring out from the deep places of the mind what is stored there. Memory entails a response to present experience which brings with it what has been held from the past. It therefore implies the capacity to apply one's experience (in the sense of what has been learned) to present circumstances. Something has been absorbed, and so becomes available when called upon.

Paññā-veyyattiya

Paññā-veyyattiya (lucidity of wisdom) is the capacity to discern the patterns and directions of what is held in mind. More than just holding data, it is the ability to *navigate* data. Something has been experienced; but how well do we know our way around it? Here the Buddha's lucidity of wisdom is shown by his capacity to discuss the subtle nuances of satipaṭṭhāna without repeating himself. He knows a complex landscape, in both its broad patterns and detailed aspects, and this landscape is always available to him.

Mindfulness & wisdom

Mindfulness is found in presence; but a presence that comes from keeping the past in mind. The present is *extended* by mindfulness. For the Buddha, the present is far more than a mere "moment." Mindfulness begins with this moment but is cultivated through continuity, which is central to memory and the ability to navigate through a landscape.

For example, let's say we are being driven to a place we have never been before. Naturally we are aware of our surroundings. But if next week we had to drive to the same place ourselves, we might find it difficult to remember the way. "I remember this corner — but was it early or late in the journey? Was I coming or going?"

If we were being driven to a new place after being warned that next week we would have to drive ourselves, then the quality of our awareness would be different. We would be aware of the present moment, but at the same time placing that awareness into a larger context — the journey over time from here to there. So we would not simply be looking at things, but placing the momentary experience of each of these things into a larger landscape. Not just this sight, replaced by this sight, replaced by this sight, but the emergence of an unfolding landscape that creates meaning out of each experience by recognising how it fits into a broader pattern.

This is the link between mindfulness and wisdom. Mindfulness enables a capacity to map out a landscape in which separate aspects of experience fit together to form a pattern, creating an understanding which is then available for later use.

The practical application of this in our practice is that we do not simply try to stay with present experience. We certainly *do* seek to stay with present experience, but with a sense of direction, as we learn to navigate our way through the landscape of

body and mind. We are concerned with developing wisdom, understanding, and we do this by studying the patterns of things, as they emerge over time.

There is a quality of creativity implied here. Cultivating mindfulness requires more than just mechanically noting a meditation object handed to us by an authority, but studying the nature of experience *as* it unfolds, learning *how* it unfolds. We make the landscape our own. The landscape we are exploring is vast, rich and diverse. No wonder the Buddha could talk about it for a century without repeating himself. The delicacy, refinement and accuracy we employ in our awareness, along with the power of concentration we build up through the continuity of mindfulness, create a lucidity of wisdom that will serve us throughout our life. We may have to be carried about, but we will know what's going on — and perhaps be directing the traffic.

Conclusion

Returning to Ānanda's description of mindfulness, we can begin to understand what he means:

She has mindfulness; possessing supreme mindfulness and discrimination, recalling and recollecting what was done and said long ago. (Sekha Sutta M53)

Mindfulness is linked to memory, in the sense that experience *is* memory. Let's consider our experienced yoga teacher looking at a posture. She *sees* the posture in its depth and subtleties. To understand the posture in front of her she does not have to seek to recall all the lessons and training sessions she has gone through; she simply sees it, now. But that seeing *contains* her memories going back 30 years, and these memories manifest as present wisdom. Because of this depth, in simply seeing the posture the yoga teacher understands the posture.

This seeing and understanding which is contained within mindfulness has ethical implications. Once the brāhmaṇa Saṅgārava asked the Buddha about the nature of memory.

Master Gotama, what is the cause and condition why sometimes even those things [*mantā*] that *have* been recited over a long period are not clear, let alone those that have *not* been recited?

What is the cause and condition why sometimes those things that have *not* been recited over a long period are clear, let alone those that *have* been recited?
(Saṅgārava Sutta, Bhojjaṅga Saṃyutta)

India at the Buddha's time was an oral culture, where all knowledge was memorised. Education involved training the memory, so there was a great interest among intellectuals about the workings of memory. Saṅgārava wants to understand how memory functions. Why are some things remembered, and some not? The Buddha turns his question around and speaks of memory in a deeper sense, that of mindfulness.

Brāhmaṇa, when one lives with a mind possessed and oppressed by sensual obsession [*kāma-rāga*], and does not understand realistically the way out from arisen sensual obsession, at that time one neither understands nor sees realistically one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both. Then even those things that *have* been recited over a long period are not clear, let alone those that have *not* been recited.

Brāhmaṇa, when one lives with a mind possessed and oppressed by hatred [*vyāpāda*] ... stiffness-&-torpor [*thīna-middha*] ... restlessness-&-worry [*uddhacca-kukkucca*] ... doubt [*vicikicchā*] and does not understand realistically the way out from arisen doubt, at that time one neither understands nor sees realistically one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both. Then even those things that *have* been recited over a long period are not clear, let alone those that have *not* been recited.

Asked about memory, the Buddha replies in terms of how it comes about that one does not "see and understand realistically one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both." In a discourse on the five hindrances he links memory with meditation and the ethical sensitivity that meditation develops. The link between memory, meditation and ethics is mindfulness. Mindfulness is not simply concerned with experience and the wisdom that experience brings; it is concerned with the experience and wisdom that allows us to live a good life, a life in accordance with dharma.