



Dharma Gathering 2008

Mindfulness & meditation

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Introduction

In this essay we will examine mindfulness in meditation practice, beginning with the relationship between mindfulness and concentration (*samādhi*). We will then look at what makes mindfulness “right” mindfulness, and so a factor of the noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*). Finally, we shall look at how the Buddha speaks of mindfulness and the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) in working with a specific meditation object, breathing (*ānāpānasati*)

Mindfulness leading concentration

We begin with *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (*The shorter discussion* M44), a discussion between the arahant bhikkhunī Dhammadinna and her ex-husband Visākha. At one point they come to the subject of concentration, or unification (*samādhi*).

Lady, what is concentration [*samādhi*]? What is the theme of concentration [*samādhi-nimittā*]? What are the requisites for concentration [*samādhi-parikkhāra*]? What is the development of concentration [*samādhi-bhāvanā*]?

Unification of heart [*cittassa ekaggatā*], friend Visākha, is concentration; the four establishments of mindfulness [*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*] are the theme of concentration; the four right kinds of striving [*cattāro sammappadhānā*] are the requisites for concentration; the repetition, development and cultivation of these states [*āsevanā bhāvanā bahulikammaṇ*] is the development of concentration. (*Cūḷavedalla Sutta* M44)

Samādhi is here defined as “unification of heart.” The word *samādhi*, usually translated “concentration,” comes from *sam* (= “together”) + *ā* (= “towards”) + *√dhā* (= “to put,” “to place”). *Samādhi* means “to bring together, to gather, to unify.” *Samādhi* refers to everything within the heart and mind coming together into a unity. This is in contrast to our normal scattered, divided state, where we are pushed and pulled by our obsessions and impulses, at war with ourselves.

The establishments of mindfulness are here seen as the “nimitta” of *samādhi*. We looked at *nimitta* in our third essay, *Guarding the mind*, where we saw that *nimitta* has a variety of meanings depending on context. *Nimitta* is often translated as “sign,” indicating that which signals something coming. So here, the establishments of mindfulness could be seen as a necessary *preliminary* to the cultivation of *samādhi*, creating the entry into *samādhi*. It does this by creating a clear, firm, direct encounter with the object of meditation. Of course, mindfulness continues to accompany *samādhi* as it develops, since at every stage *samādhi* requires this kind of relationship to its object. So even as a preliminary, there is no sense of mindfulness,

having done its job, then going away. Nimitta can also be seen as “theme,” where mindfulness finds an appropriate way to track the meditation object based on the patterns of one’s experience of it, how it unfolds over time. Mindfulness remembers the structures of experience, in particular how the wholesome arises and develops and the unwholesome ceases and fails to arise further. In both meanings we can see that mindfulness leads concentration.

Right view comes first

When mindfulness is considered as a factor of the noble eightfold path it is called “right mindfulness” (*sammā sati*). Here we will look at mindfulness in the eightfold path through the presentation given in *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* (*The great forty* M117). The subject of this discourse is “noble right concentration (*ariya sammā samādhi*),” which is concentration embedded in the noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭhangika magga*).

Bhikkhus, I shall teach you noble right concentration [*ariya sammā samādhi*] with its supports [*upanisa*] and requisites [*parikkhāra*]. ...

What, bhikkhus, is noble right concentration with its supports and requisites, that is, right view [*sammā diṭṭhi*], right intention [*sammā saṅkappa*], right speech [*sammā vācā*], right action [*sammā kammanta*], right livelihood [*sammā ājīva*], right effort [*sammā vāyāma*], and right mindfulness [*sammā sati*]?

Unification of mind [*cittassa ekaggatā*] equipped with these seven factors is called noble right concentration with its supports and requisites.

Right concentration is “unification of mind” or “unification of heart” (*cittassa ekaggatā*) in relationship with the other path factors. Noble right concentration, in other words, is not *just* concentration, but concentration embedded within a particular context. This context includes mindfulness, but it begins with view (*diṭṭhi*).

Right view comes first. How does right view come first? One understands wrong view as wrong view and right view as right view: this is one’s right view.

Right view clearly comes first in the list of the eightfold path. But how does it come first in terms of the cultivation of concentration? And isn’t it odd that a discourse on right concentration, the last member of the list of the noble eightfold path, immediately swings around to an examination of the first member of the list, right view?

The normal human condition is one of delusion (*avijjā*), which implies not just a state of ignorance (not knowing what’s going on), but a positive state of misinformation (being convinced we know what’s going on, when in fact we don’t). Delusion operates in the context of path, for we are already on a path. Our lives necessarily have direction, and we are moving through them from past, through present, into future. We are already being taken somewhere, directed by the decisions we are

taking. The question is: where are we going? Are we going towards the cessation of pain? Or are we going towards the creation of more pain?

If we are deluded (which we are), our problem is that we don't know what to do in order to bring our pain to an end. We are guided by our desires, but they are a product of delusion's accompaniment, *taṇhā*, literally "thirst," which is usually translated as "craving." We are driven by an unquenchable thirst at the core of our being and struggle to quench it through strategies of possession and becoming. These strategies do not work because craving is never satisfied. We gain one thing only to crave another. But even if we begin to suspect this is our situation, in our delusion we don't know what else to do.

So the Buddha says, "One understands wrong view as wrong view and right view as right view." The beginning of *right* view is the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong view — a capacity which is missing in a state of delusion. Our view conditions our actions. What do we see as real? This influences our sense of who we are and what the world is, which in turn conditions what we see as possible or impossible, desirable or undesirable. So our view of what is real directly conditions the way we live.

Understanding wrong view to be wrong and right view to be right implies a capacity to step back and see our views, what conditions these views, and the kind of actions that naturally follow from them. This, in turn, implies insight (*vipassanā*), which in turn implies the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). So Mahācattārīsaka Sutta is concerned with a balance between insight (*sammā diṭṭhi*) and serenity (*sammā samādhi*), in which insight — in the form of right view — comes first, because it provides a basic sense of direction without which nothing else can happen. And central to right view is mindfulness.

What is wrong view? "There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed ..."

What is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold: there is right view that is affected by taints [*sāsava*], an aspect of auspicious action [*puñña-bhāgiya*], ripening in something to hold [*upadhi*]; and there is right view that is noble [*ariya*], taintless [*anāsava*], supramundane [*lokuttara*], a factor of the path [*maggaṅga*].

What is right view that is affected by taints, an aspect of auspicious action, ripening in something to hold? "There is what is given and what is offered ..."

We have two aspects of view: wrong and right. Wrong view begins with "there is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed ..." This represents a denial of the reality of *kamma-vipāka*, action and its "ripening," or result, the view that it doesn't matter what I do, either because it's not important ("What can I do?"), or because we believe actions don't have their appropriate consequences ("I'm sure I can get away with *this!*"). Right view begins with the realisation that actions have consequences, these consequences are real, and I would be well advised to take them seriously.

There are two levels of right view. The first is view “that is affected by taints, an aspect of auspicious action, ripening in something to hold.” This is also known as *lokiya*, “worldly” or “mundane” right view. Mundane right view is view that is correct, but limited. It results in ethical actions, but not in awakening (*bodhi*) or release (*nibbāna*). It does not cut through all attachments and identities, but brings about a new and improved identity which, although more desirable than that conditioned by wrong view, remains limited by its particular identification and the forms of attachment that feed identity.

Such right view remains “affected by taints” (*āsava*), the deep movements at the centre of the heart that reach out to the self and the world in order to hold them. It remains “an aspect of auspicious action” (*puñña*), actions that are powerful for good, and so lead to an identity and existence characterised by what we might call the reward for virtue. And it ripens in “something to hold” (*upadhi*), a foundation that provides the stability which is necessary to construct a sense of identity. The problem is that this identity, being founded on something limited, necessarily remains limited.

In contrast, supramundane right view leads beyond the world of good and evil to the realm of *nibbāna*, where all such distinctions are lost.

What is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path? Wisdom [*paññā*], the faculty of wisdom [*paññīndriya*], the power of wisdom [*paññā-bala*], the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor [*dhmma-vicaya-sambojjhaṅga*], the path factor of right view [*sammā-diṭṭhi maggaṅga*] in one whose mind is noble, whose heart is without taints, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path: this is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path.

Right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) is an aspect of wisdom (*paññā*). The reference to the mind being taintless implies realisation — either full awakening as an on-going way of life, or a temporary but direct experience of *nibbāna*. When fully developed, the path is no longer the path *to* awakening, but awakening itself, in its dynamic, active aspect.

One makes effort [*vāyāmati*] to abandon wrong view and enter upon right view: this is one’s right effort [*sammā vāyāma*]. Mindfully one abandons wrong view, mindfully one enters and lives in right view: this is one’s right mindfulness [*sammā sati*].

Thus these three states run and circle around right view: right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

The path requires a movement from wrong to right view, and right view has depth — once begun, there is much to develop. This movement entails effort, energy and persistence, all aspects of the path factor of right effort (*sammā vāyāma*). And effort is linked to mindfulness.

How can we abandon wrong view and cultivate right view? By doing it “mindfully” (*sato*). Mindfulness is a quality we bring to our activities, here the effort directed to recognising wrong view and cultivating right view. Effort alone is not

enough. In our delusion we might be making strenuous effort to cultivate *wrong* view, and so develop the wrong path. What makes mindfulness “right” mindfulness is its role as part of a network which includes other path factors — here right view and right effort. And what makes each of these other path factors “right” is that they too appear as part of a broader network.

The network is engaged through the direct, face-to-face encounter with experience which characterises mindfulness. This encounter, which clarifies what is going on, requires energy, effort, and so it harnesses the power of the path factor of right effort. Mindfulness as memory then tracks experience over time, allowing its patterns and structures to emerge. This entails the awakening factor of investigation-of-phenomena (*dhamma-vicaya-sambojjhaṅga*), an aspect of wisdom. Right mindfulness and right view are intimately related.

This sense of each path factor functioning as part of a broader system is conveyed by the factors of right view, effort and mindfulness “running and circling around” each other. Consequently, it is not so easy to distinguish between them. Each supports the other, each is a different face of the other. And notice that right view runs and circles around — right view. If right view requires right view, how do we begin? How do we break into the circle in the first place? Through mindfulness, as we have seen above.

Therein, right view comes first. And how does right view come first? One understands wrong intention [*micchā saṅkappa*] as wrong intention and right intention [*sammā saṅkappa*] as right intention: this is one’s right view.

Right view comes first throughout the path, as it distinguishes what is going on in each of the path factors. To practise any “right” path factor (for example, right mindfulness) requires the capacity to discriminate between “right” and “wrong” in every path factor, and this is an ongoing enterprise. It doesn’t stop at the beginning. So right view represents a reflexive examination of the path itself as it proceeds. It is “first” not just in the sense that it is mentioned first in the list, or that we begin with it, but in the sense that it underlies any movement along the path.

One makes an effort to abandon wrong intention and to enter upon right intention: this is one’s right effort. Mindfully one abandons wrong intention, mindfully one enters and lives in right intention: this is one’s right mindfulness.

Thus these three states run and circle around right intention, that is, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

The same three states — right view, effort and mindfulness — do the running around, but here they are running around right intention rather than right view. Effort is again the striving to replace the unwholesome with the wholesome, and mindfulness qualifies that effort by allowing view to discriminate between right and wrong intention.

We then get the same analysis for right speech, right action and right livelihood, the ethics aspect of the path. In each case, right view distinguishes right from wrong, the

effort is the effort to abandon the wrong and take up the right, and mindfulness qualifies that effort.

The non-linear path

Right view comes first. And how does right view come first? In one of right view, wrong view is abolished, and the many evil unwholesome states that arise conditioned by wrong view are also abolished, while the many wholesome states that arise conditioned by right view are fulfilled by development.

In one of right intention, wrong intention is abolished ... In one of right speech, wrong speech is abolished ... In one of right action, wrong action is abolished ... In one of right livelihood, wrong livelihood is abolished ... In one of right effort, wrong effort is abolished ... In one of right mindfulness, wrong mindfulness is abolished ...

In one of right concentration, wrong concentration is abolished, and the many evil unwholesome states that arise conditioned by wrong concentration are also abolished, while the many wholesome states that arise conditioned by right concentration are fulfilled by development.

With right view comes the abolition of wrong view, and with that the whole edifice of wrong path factors comes crashing down, for when one wrong path factor goes all the others become unsustainable. The same structure characterises each of the other path factors. When *any* path factor is right, all are right; when any path factor is wrong, all are wrong. The path, in other words, is a complete system, of “rightness” (*sammatta*) or “wrongness” (*micchatta*), consisting of a network of interconnected parts that support each other and together create an equilibrium.

This implies that the initial subversion of the wrong path can come from any direction. When any wrong path factor is subverted, all wrong path factors are subverted; when any right path factor is developed, all right path factors are developed. Nevertheless, certain factors are singled out in this discourse. Right view is clearly pivotal, and so insight dominates this sutta. Yet it begins with an examination of “noble right concentration.” Why the swing from concentration to view, from serenity to insight?

Our sutta begins with right concentration, at the end of the eightfold path list; and swings immediately to right view, at the beginning of the list. Note that these states are at the beginning and end of the *list*, not of the *path*. The Buddha often provides lists of related phenomena, and sometimes it seems that the items that constitute a list are held in some way by the first and last factors. Here, the path is shown as consisting of a unity of serenity and insight; which means that a discourse that begins with completed concentration — noble right concentration with its supports and requisites — can swing immediately to insight, the role of right view. Similarly, a discourse that begins with noble right view with its supports and requisites might swing immediately to serenity, the role of right concentration.

The role of mindfulness

Where does mindfulness fit? Mindfulness functions as an entry point into right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), insight (*vipassanā*) and wisdom (*paññā*). View acts as the guidance mechanism of the path. We *always* begin on the wrong path, for we begin with delusion. Everything is connected, so each factor of the wrong path runs and circles around each other, supporting each other. The path functions as a stable, self-perpetuating equilibrium. Locked within this system, how do we break out? We must make an effort “to abandon wrong view and enter right view,” but given that we are already lost in wrong view, what basis do we have to make a judgement between right and wrong regarding view or any other factor of the path?

Mindfulness provides our first step. We can establish mindfulness on *something* — some aspect of body or mind. We come face-to-face with experience, in a clean, clear encounter. We then track experience, holding it in mind, seeing how it unfolds over time. This teaches us something. We emerge from the oblivion that is *muṭṭha-sati*, “forgotten mindfulness.” We pass from oblivion, an aspect of wrong view, into remembering, which allows right view to function.

Mindfulness then guides our efforts throughout the path, remembering what is for the good of ourselves and others — what is wholesome. It links wisdom with activity, understanding with effort. At every point, it opens up a space within which right view can function.

View, meanwhile, partners concentration. “Noble right concentration” is concentration completed by the other path factors, and right view enables that completion by means of a developing discernment that allows the optimal functioning of all the path factors. Concentration provides a power to the mind; view provides the eyes, it enables that power to be used skilfully and delicately.

Mindfulness guides each movement between wrong and right view, strengthening right view and enabling it to guide right concentration. The path itself emerges as a unity of serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). As the Buddha says in *Mahāsaḷāyatanika Sutta* (*The great sixfold sphere* M149), “These two things roll on in harmony — serenity and insight.” Mindfulness plays a crucial role in establishing that harmony.

Mindfulness with breathing

We have seen how *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishments of mindfulness, is an approach to meditation practice that does not depend on any specific meditation object but applies equally to any aspect of experience. However, we also find in *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (*Mindfulness through breathing* M118) the establishments of mindfulness applied specifically to breathing as meditation object, where following a single aspect of experience — breathing — allows the entire path to unfold.

When mindfulness through breathing is developed and cultivated it fulfils [*paripūreti*] the four establishments of mindfulness. When the four establishments of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfil the seven factors of awakening. When the seven factors of awakening are developed and cultivated, they fulfil true knowledge and deliverance.

The Buddha explains mindfulness through breathing in the context of the four establishments of mindfulness, the contemplation of body, feeling, mind and phenomena.

How does mindfulness through breathing ... fulfil the four establishments of mindfulness?

[Body:] This is a body among bodies [*kāyesu kāyaññātara*]: inhalation and exhalation [*assāsapassāsā*]. And so then, surrendering desire and grief for the world, she lives contemplating body as body, ardent, mindful, and clearly understanding.

Here the Buddha seems to be saying no more than breathing is an specific aspect (aññātara) of body, so it is included in the contemplation of body.

[Feeling:] This is a feeling among feelings [*vedanāsu vedanāññātara*]: giving close attention [*sādhukaṃ manasikāraṃ*] to inhalation and exhalation. And so then, surrendering desire and grief for the world, she lives contemplating feeling as feeling, ardent, mindful, and clearly understanding.

This section goes on to deal with experiencing “rapture” (pīti) and “happiness” (sukha) and calming the mind, all of which are aspects of the development of concentration. Awareness shifts from body to mind, here the feeling tone associated with deepening meditation practice. We shall speak more of feeling (vedanā) in our next essay. For now, we can see that the practitioner is less concerned with the details of breathing than with the heart’s response *to* breathing; less concerned with the experience of body than with the heart’s response to body. As the heart experiences rapture and happiness, as it becomes tuned to itself, it becomes softer and more refined.

But why is feeling associated with close attention? This may refer to the quality of awareness as it develops through the practice. Feeling is both a thing, something to be aware of — “Usually, I’m not aware of my feelings” — and a way of experiencing — “I was feeling my way into the situation.” Here, the Buddha may be referring to a shift in the mode of experiencing. The practitioner has become intimate with breathing so that she is no longer witnessing it — from a distance, as it were — but feeling it. This involves a closer relationship to the experience, being inside breathing rather than detached from it, allowing oneself to discover the rapture and happiness that lie at deeper levels of the heart.

[Mind:] I do not say that one who is forgetful [*muṭṭhassati*], who is not clearly understanding [*asampajañña*], develops mindfulness of breathing. And so then,

surrendering desire and grief for the world, she lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, mindful, and clearly understanding.

As the discourse develops, interest moves from the meditation object — breathing — to the practitioner herself. There is a shift from objectivity to subjectivity. From the objective awareness of breathing to a more intimate relationship, characterised by attention turning to the way breathing is experienced. From there, attention turns away from breathing as object, no matter how intimately experienced, to the practitioner herself, the one contemplating breathing.

Is the mind of the practitioner characterised by an on-going mindfulness and clear understanding? Or does she forget, and in forgetting lapse into oblivion? For there can be no development of the establishments of mindfulness when awareness is not continuous, when it functions merely as occasional flashes of light in the darkness of delusion.

[Phenomena:] Having seen with wisdom the surrender of desire and grief regarding the world, she examines closely with equanimity [*upekkhā*]. And so then, surrendering desire and grief for the world, she lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

Here we find another shift in the practice, a movement from the particular to the universal which we will look more closely in our next essay. This section of our text goes on to deal with the contemplation of impermanence (*anicca*), fading away (*virāga*), cessation (*nirodha*) and letting go (*paṭinissagga*) while breathing in and out. These contemplations represent mature insight, where the specific object of meditation — breathing — has not disappeared, but is seen in a new and different perspective. The practitioner is seeing universal characteristics of experience — impermanence, fading away, cessation and letting go — instantiated within a particular object of experience — breathing. Within each breath, the entire universe reveals itself.

At this point equanimity (*upekkhā*) dominates the heart. *Upekkhā* comes from *upa* (denoting nearness or close touch) + *√ikṣ* (= “see”). Equanimity is a close looking on, or intimate witnessing. Witnessing, so not getting involved; but witnessing intimately, from very close by. Again, as in contemplating feeling, there is “close looking on,” but now intimacy has developed further, leading to the perfect balance of equanimity. Equanimity is also intimately related to mindfulness.

In the progress of serenity (*samatha*) meditation, which is concerned with calming and unifying the mind, the practice matures with the attainment of the fourth *jhāna*, or absorption. This, in turn, is characterised by equanimity partnered with mindfulness.

With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and through the previous disappearance of happiness and sadness, he enters and remains in the fourth

jhāna, which has neither-pleasure-nor-pain, and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity [*upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhi*]. (See, for example, Sallekha Sutta M8.)

When mindfulness is entirely purified, clarified, equanimity naturally matures; and when equanimity is entirely purified, clarified, mindfulness naturally matures. Similarly, insight (*vipassanā*) meditation is also fulfilled with the maturity of these two states. In the classical system of insight meditation found in the Theravāda tradition, the practice matures with the knowledge of equanimity regarding formations (*sankhārupekkhā-ñāṇa*). In this stage of understanding, the dominant states in the practitioner's mind are mindfulness and equanimity — as in the fourth jhāna. Equanimity is also spoken of in Saḷāyatanaṅga Sutta (*Analysis of the six sense fields* M137) as associated with the maturity of insight practice.

When, by knowing the impermanence, change, fading away and cessation of forms (sounds, odours, tastes, tangible objects and mind), one sees realistically with perfect wisdom that forms (sounds, etc.) both before and now are impermanent, painful and subject to change, equanimity arises.

This is equanimity that is not limited to any particular object, and so characterising a heart that is not stuck on anything. Such a heart can move, freely. This reminds us of the mature practitioner of the establishments of mindfulness, “living independently, without clinging to anything in the world.”

Conclusion

We have looked at the role of mindfulness in meditation, how mindfulness tunes the heart and allows it to unify. As a factor of the noble eightfold path it does this in partnership with all the other factors of the path, functioning as part of a network of mutual support. This has taken us to the subject of mindfulness and its relationship to insight, which will be examined more fully in our next and final essay.