

## *All Three Functions of Mindfulness*

*March 3, 2018*

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, like we're doing right now. We're keeping the breath in mind. But why are we keeping the breath in mind?

There are basically three functions for mindfulness on the path. One is to remember to stay alert to what you're doing in the present moment, and not let your attention shift off to the past or the future. The second is to remember to recognize what's coming up in the present moment, and specifically what you're doing, to see what's skillful, what's unskillful. If, say, a thought arises in the mind, you can label it simply as a thought. Or if it's a specific hindrance, you can remember, "This is sensual desire," "This is ill will," or whatever. Noting just that much allows you to step out of the hindrance for a bit. That's when you apply the third function, which is to remember what's effective in getting rid of unskillful thoughts and developing skillful ones in their place. This passes the job on to ardency, or right effort, to actually do the work.

So you remember to be alert. You remember to recognize what's going on so that you can then deal with it in terms of right effort. That last function—the function of right effort—often gets forgotten in discussions of mindfulness.

Many years back there was a monk who went into the hills of Burma and asked a senior monk there, "Where in the Canon does the Buddha teach vipassana?" And the other monk replied, "Well, isn't everything in the Satipatthana Sutta?" And that response—that that one sutta contains everything you need to know about vipassana or even about mindfulness—has led to what's now the modern mindfulness movement, where the focus is totally on the first two functions of mindfulness: to be in the present moment and to recognize what's happening.

But the sutta's not complete. It's not even a complete account of mindfulness. It gives the formula for mindfulness: that you keep track of the body or feelings or mind or mental qualities in and of themselves, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The formula is repeated for the body and for feelings and for mind and mental qualities. But then the sutta addresses only one part of the formula: What does it mean to keep track of these things in and of themselves? It treats that in a lot of detail—so much detail, and the sutta is so long, that people naturally assume it's complete.

But the question of what ardency does—the third function of mindfulness—isn't explicitly addressed at all. Which gives the impression that you just stay in

the present and note what's coming and going—and that should be enough. But it's not. Now, sometimes simply watching things come and go in the mind *is* enough to develop a sense of dispassion toward them, but it doesn't always work. And simply watching things coming and going is not enough to get the mind into concentration, which is what the purpose of mindfulness is.

Even the Satipatthana Sutta itself mentions this. When you're focusing on the breath, you start out just being aware of when it's long, when it's short, and then you consciously try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out. From there, you calm bodily fabrication which, the Canon tells us in another place, means getting the mind into the fourth jhana. That doesn't happen on its own.

Similarly with feelings: The sutta talks about feelings of the flesh, which are the feelings that arise willy-nilly at the senses. But then it also mentions feelings not-of-the-flesh, which are things you have to consciously give rise to. The pain not-of-the-flesh is the realization that there's work to be done and you haven't reached the goal yet. It's a painful thought, but the Buddha actually recommends developing it. Better than sitting around being upset at things in the world. He says to try to develop a sense of wanting to attain a goal and be willing to put up with the pain of that want—the pain that comes when you realize that you aren't there yet—because that's your motivation to practice.

Then there's the pleasure not-of-the-flesh, which is the sense of ease and well-being that comes when you get the mind into right concentration.

So even though the sutta doesn't explicitly mention getting mind into jhana, it implicitly ends up there, at these levels of concentration that need to be done, that are not just going to happen on their own. Because that's one of the functions of mindfulness that the Buddha calls as a governing principle: to remember to make sure to give rise to anything skillful that's not there in the mind and then, once it's there, to maintain it so that it doesn't fall away.

So it's good to think about this third function of mindfulness both because it's the one that tends to get forgotten and because it's also the most important. There are times when you have to consciously try to get past, say, sensual desires or feelings of ill will, and simply noticing that they're there is not going to be enough to get rid of them.

This is where the Buddha's analysis of how you deal with things that are taking over the mind comes in. There are five steps.

The first is to look for the origination. What causes that state to come? What sparks it? Be aware as soon as something has been sparked in the mind. Don't wait until it becomes full-blown.

Then the second step is to notice when it passes away. A lot of these thoughts come and go, come and go, come and go. When they come, they stir up some hormones and then the thoughts are gone. But the hormones are still stirred up. You're still having the physical symptoms, say, of lust or of anger or fear or guilt. And then because the physical symptoms are there, you figure, well, the emotion must still be there, the thought must still be there, and so you can dig up the thought again. So it's good to notice when the thought goes. Realize that it comes and goes in short periods, then it'll stop for a while and then it will start up again. Look for the times when you're starting it up again. That way, it begins to seem less monolithic and you also begin to realize why you're beginning to go for it: what sparks it.

Because that relates to the third step, which is to look for the allure, what you find attractive in the emotion, even if it's negative. Say—when sensual desire arises, a desire for a particular kind of food—you ask yourself, “Why am I going for it? What's the pull?” In some cases, it's because the body actually needs that kind of food. In other cases, it has to do with other things: some of the associations we have with food. They talk about comfort food—I've never particularly found meatloaf to be comfortable—but there are associations you have with things like that. Your mother made it back when you were young, and so there are associations that go with that. There are other kinds of food where the associations have more to do with status or with something exotic.

This is why we have that reflection on why we eat: just for the maintenance of the body, to make sure we don't get ill and that we have the strength to practice. That's all we need. Food doesn't have to be fancier than that. So look for the allure. Sometimes it actually makes sense and in that case, it's not really a defilement. But other times, it's something pretty strange and so we tend to hide it from ourselves. We don't see it or are embarrassed about it. Part of the mind is embarrassed so it hides it from the rest of the mind. So often we don't know exactly why we go for something.

This can apply not only to sensual desire but also to ill will or to worries about things. Sometimes you worry about things because you feel good: You feel responsible because you're worrying. But the worrying doesn't really accomplish much, and actually depletes your energy to deal with the unexpected. This comes particularly clear at death. One of the things the Buddha says if someone is dying, is to make sure they're not worried about the people they're leaving behind. Because after all, at that point, there's really nothing they can do for those other people. So the worrying just drags them down. But there's that sense of obligation

sometimes. People you're responsible for: You feel, "How can I leave these people?" Well, we've been leaving one another for who knows how long.

This is where the master narrative of Buddhism is useful: the narrative of many, many lifetimes. Put the narrative of your life in the context of that larger master narrative and see how it looks from that perspective. People have had lives intertwined who knows how many times, and then they've separated again and again. They come back again, get separated again. And the roles get switched. If you identify too strongly with a particular role, you're going to suffer when you no longer have that role. So look for the allure, and then look at it terms of that master narrative. Is going for this particular defilement really worth it in terms of the consequences it's going to have? Does it make sense in terms of that larger narrative?

This is when you get to the fourth step, which is to see the drawbacks. Holding on to that particular kind of thought: Where does it lead you? Where does it go? And what does it do to other people?

So much of our desire for happiness requires laying claim to things. And, of course, other people are going to have to lay claim to the same things. When everything is laid claim to, where are you going to find an innocent happiness? You've got to push other people out of the way, as in that vision the Buddha had of the fish in the stream pushing one another out of the way to get that last gulp of water before they all die. Even the ones who get the gulp of water die anyhow and because they cause harm to another, there's karma that goes with that. That's the way it is in the world. And it's not just fish. This is the way human beings live.

So when a thought comes up to the mind and pulls you away from the practice, pulls you away from concentration, you can tell yourself, "Do I want to be like a fish, laying claim to something that I can't even hold onto for very long, or can I come back inside and find some well-being there?—my sense of the body as I feel from within, my sense of my mind as I sense it from within." Because that's something that nobody else can lay claim to. Nobody else can even know it. That's your territory entirely.

So when you can think in these ways, you get to the fifth step: You can develop a sense of dispassion that frees you because you realize there's something better that comes when you let go. That's an important principle in the Buddhist teachings: You don't let go simply saying that "Everything is really bad so I might as well not try." There *is* something good in life. There's a whole area inside your body, inside your awareness that you can straighten out, and in straightening it out you can find a genuine happiness. So that's where we let go.

We let go out of dispassion, and the dispassion comes from growing up. This is a lot of what our growth in the practice is. We're growing up. We're maturing. We admit the consequences of our actions and then we try to find a way that makes our actions less harmful to others, less harmful to ourselves. We realize that we can take responsibility for ourselves.

It's in these ways that mindfulness performs that third function, which is helping us remember how to let go of things that are harmful, how to develop things that are skillful. You remember this from things that you've heard and also, even more vividly, from things you've done and have given good results.

So in your practice of mindfulness, make sure that it's complete. You remember to stay in the present moment anchored in one of the four frames of reference. You remember to recognize things that are coming up in the mind and learn how to label them as "This is skillful," or "This is unskillful." That's usually not the first thought that comes to us, of course. Lust comes into the mind, anger comes into the mind, and we just tend to go for it. We don't stop to label it as skillful or unskillful at all. The labels tend to be more, "I like it. Let's go."

But if you can stop for a bit and say, "Hey, this is a hindrance", that enables you to move on to the third function, which is to remind yourself, "This is what you do with a hindrance. You learn how to let it go." If there's something that leads to concentration or mindfulness—a sense of fullness and ease inside—you remember to develop that, and you remember how.

And that way, the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness achieve their purpose, which is to give the mind a good place to dwell inside: a place where you settle down and have a sense of well-being that doesn't have to depend on anybody else and puts the mind in a good position where it can see even more clearly where it's attachments are and how it can let them go.

So it's good that people are trying to be alert to the present moment and trying to recognize what's going on, but it's even better when they move onto the third step and learn how to use that knowledge, use that awareness to find something really skillful inside. That's how the Buddha characterized his own quest: the quest for what was skillful. This is what he found. He found it from the concentration you can develop the mind in a way that leads to a happiness that goes even deeper, that goes beyond the concentration.

So check inside yourself. Develop the qualities that the Buddha talked about. See if they lead to the same result.