

Chapter 11

Wise mindfulness

Discussion points

- Mindfulness – the most crucial link of the noble eightfold path
- Two aspects of mindfulness
- Mindfulness in daily life
- Mindfulness of external ‘objects’

Wise mindfulness is probably the most important of the eight limbs of the path to peace and happiness. It is needed as much for success in the worldly endeavors as also for the purification of mind. That is the main reason for so-called mindfulness revolution in the west. Mindfulness has now permeated in every part of life, we have training programs for students and teachers in schools and colleges, for patients and doctors in hospitals, for prisoners, sportsmen, judges, policemen and military personnel, for children, parents and would be parents, politicians, corporate executives and civil servants, etc.⁶³. In most of these cases, however, the emphasis is on ‘attention training’ so that one can give all attention to the task at hand thus minimizing digression of the mind into unnecessary thoughts and improving the efficiency / productivity/ performance and also reduce stress, especially the ‘occupational-stress’. Reduction in digressive thoughts does contain the increase in mental defilements, but it is not sufficient to uproot the deep seated ignorance of self-view. Wise mindfulness, therefore, includes not just ‘attention regulation’ but also an investigation into the nature of experience with a view to discern the **fundamental nature of all experiences**, viz. **impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and impersonality**. This discernment leads to attenuation in the attachment to the notion of “I”, which, as we saw in [Chapters 3,4,5](#), is the root cause of unhappiness.

Thus wise mindfulness has, as it were, two aspects: focused attention to the sensory experience (the breath, the bodily feelings, the state of mind and the mental contents) and discernment of its nature. The first aspect includes non-judgmental, non-reactive

⁶³ Barry Boyce (2011) (Ed), The Mindfulness Revolution, Shambhala, Boston.

'observation' of whatever is happening within the body-mind complex in all circumstances. Thus if the breath is long, we just note 'the breath is long'; if it is short, we just note 'the breath is short'; when the feelings arising due to contact at any sense door are painful, we just note 'feelings are painful', when these are pleasant, we just note 'feelings are pleasant'; if aversion to some experience arises, we just note, 'aversion is present', and when it ceases, we just note, 'aversion is not present'; and so on..... never reacting to whatever is experienced. This is similar to the attitude of a scientist observing something under a microscope in his laboratory.

Thus mindful walking would include being aware of whatever is happening in various (at least some) parts of the body while walking⁶⁴. As we put our foot on the ground the sensation in the sole changes and we can 'sense' whether the heel touches the ground first or the toe mounds. We can be aware of the nature of these sensations as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Then as we move ahead this foot is lifted and the other foot comes down. The sensations in the feet change continuously and one can keep the attention glued to them observing them non-reactively thus giving very little opportunity to the mind to get into digressive thinking. If we react to the sensations the mind will soon get into a spin, remembering and recalling memories associated with that reaction. A typical chain of thoughts arising from reaction to painful sensations in the foot could be: Oh! How painful, people are so callous and put big pebbles on the footpath in the garden -> this only happens in India -> I never had any such difficulty while going for long walks in Europe -> India is really not worth living, no discipline -> see the kind of politicians we have got, no discipline, sheer hunger for power -> No one is honest -> rampant corruption And so on the inner dialogue goes on randomly jumping from one topic to another, till suddenly one remembers, oh! I was supposed to put my attention on the sensations in the feet... and restarts focusing attention on the chosen 'object'.

If there is any aversion to the 'wandering of the mind', that too is noticed equanimously and 'understood' as a consequence of taking the wandering of mind personally. This noticing quickly brings the mind back into equilibrium. The repeated discernment of the characteristics of impermanence and impersonality of these sensations, the feelings and the mind states is the second dimension of the practice of mindfulness mentioned above. It results in insight into the fundamental nature⁶⁵ of all experiences, thus strengthening the wise view.

⁶⁴ A short video : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7IO4rF9qrc>

⁶⁵ of impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and impersonality

Similarly we can visualize how we could do various other activities of daily life mindfully. Thus mindful listening would involve listening attentively, without reacting to whatever is heard; and bringing the attention back to the listening process whenever we discover that the mind has wandered away into thinking process⁶⁶. If any reaction happens, we make a mental note and return the attention back to hearing. When imbued with the wise view and compassion it becomes a potent method of ameliorating misunderstanding and interpersonal conflicts.

Mindful Eating

Considerable research has been done to study the impact of mindful eating on health and well-being. It has been shown to help treat eating disorders and to reduce weight. Dr. Lilian Cheung, a Harvard nutritionist, identifies seven practices of mindful eating, viz. Honor the food, engage all your senses, be mindful of the portion size, chew your food, eat slowly, not to skip meals, eat plant based diet. Dr. Cheung explains all these practices in a short video:

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/multimedia-article/savor/>

As we have seen in above chapters, mindfulness is needed to 'develop' all the other factors of the eightfold noble path. Thus only when we have cultivated mindfulness, it becomes possible to be aware of the arising of unwholesome mental states like craving or aversion, and wholesome states like kindness, generosity, as soon as these arise. This is a

pre-requisite for wise-striving ([Chapter 10](#)). If the mindfulness is very superficial, we would realize that an unwholesome mental state had arisen, only after it results in some unwholesome action like demanding bribe, sexual misconduct, harsh or abusive speech, violent physical action etc. Even the arising of wholesome states like generosity, compassion, loving kindness, if not noticed non-reactively and impersonally, can result in unwholesome consequences like arising of pride, pity, looking down upon others etc.

In short, mindfulness is the key to introspective reflection of any kind, whether it be the awareness of bodily sensations, or mental states or vocal and bodily actions. The way to strengthen it is primarily by the practice of mindfulness itself. The Buddha in his famous discourse on establishing the mindfulness⁶⁷, advises us to be mindful with full awareness of all that is happening when we are walking, sitting, standing, talking, eating, chewing, drinking, bathing, defecating, dressing, undressing and even when going for sleep, in short during all activities in daily life! The mindfulness of normal, natural breathing is suggested as a powerful

⁶⁶ A short video : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU6cCVu-wWo>

⁶⁷ MN 10, Satipaṭṭhāna sutta

technique for keeping the mind tranquil. The mindfulness of feelings and mental states, and discerning their impermanent and impersonal nature, helps greatly in increasing equanimity and dispelling the self-view, the root cause of mental defilements. Observing the object of attention very closely so as to discern its various mundane characteristics is very helpful in strengthening mindfulness. Thus during the practice of mindfulness of breathing, trying to be aware of the length (duration) of the in-breath and the out-breath, the nostril through which these are going, the entire process of their starting and stopping, etc. compels the meditator to be more mindful.

The Buddha in the discourse⁵⁴ quoted above extends the scope of comprehensive mindfulness to include not only what happens within us, but also whatever is happening outside. As has been pointed out by Dhar⁶⁸ :

This shifting of awareness between 'internal' and 'external' objects is helpful in achieving a skillful balance between 'intro-version' and 'extroversion'; and in developing insight into the ever-changing and impersonal nature of all phenomena ...External contemplation of feelings and the state of mind of others can be practiced in daily life by 'inferring' about the same from their 'body language', facial expression and the tone of voice.. [Knowing these as conditioned and impersonal] facilitates the emergence of a more considerate response.

This, of course, needs to be done cautiously lest it should appear like offensive gazing at the other person!

[Back](#)

⁶⁸ P.L.Dhar, Meditation Manual based on the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta , pothy.com