

Mindfulness as a Spiritual Faculty

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As you all probably know, the whole question of Mindfulness or Awareness relates to the fifth of the five Buddhist ethical precepts. In Buddhism, being aware is a *precept* that we take upon ourselves. As Buddhists, we undertake to *cultivate* awareness. Awareness is a matter of ethics, it's a matter of morality. Indeed, it is awareness itself that makes morality possible—as we'll be hearing later on.

Awareness or mindfulness is also the central faculty of a group of special faculties or, as we could even call them, special *senses* which we develop in the course of practising the Buddhist Path.

The first of these extra senses is wisdom—our dawning understanding and vision of the way things really are. And this special 'sense', or faculty, of wisdom is balanced by the development of another sense, the sense of faith—the ability really to place our hearts on the ideal of Enlightenment. It isn't enough just to see clearly the ideal of Enlightenment, even with the eye of wisdom. We need also to give ourselves to it, and this is why faith is needed to balance wisdom.

But it isn't so easy to give ourselves, to trust it—it isn't so easy to have such complete, unshakable confidence in the Buddhist Path. Which means we can't fully practise it. So in order to be *able* to trust it more and more, we need to see more and more that it really works. Before we can see that, we need to understand what 'it' actually is—understand in the ordinary way, which is a bit different from wisdom. Simply understand what 'it', what the Buddhist Path, is actually trying to achieve. We usually come along with wrong assumptions about what Buddhism is about. Indeed, we are bound to have at least a few wrong ideas. Quite a few of us come along, for example, with the assumption that Buddhism 'must' believe that there is a creator God. It can take years before we can accept that it really doesn't do that—and even then, perhaps in the corner of our mind, that view still finds a place.

I'm still talking about the spiritual faculty or sense of faith. So in order to place our heart on and to trust Buddhism, we need to develop our rational understanding of what it actually is, what it actually says. But that isn't enough; we also need to develop our *intuitions* about it. We need to cultivate that sixth sense about what is right, what is good, so that when we have that feeling 'that's good', or 'that's how it should be', we are actually right. Intuition can be wrong, well wrong—but we train it until our feelings and intuitions start to be in accordance with reality. As our intuition becomes more and more developed in this non-rational way, as well as in a rational way, it also starts getting easier for us to trust the Buddhist Path and therefore to be able to practice it.

It takes plenty of time and much experimentation to do this. And of course it requires plenty of effort, plenty of energy. Not only effort; spiritual development requires concentration of mind, even concentration of the will—otherwise our efforts won't have any direction and just end up dissipated all over the place. So here we have two more special senses which are developed in the course of practising the Buddhist Path: effort or vigour, and concentration. Concentration requires effort, effort requires concentration. These two need to be balanced too, just like faith and wisdom. Without energy, concentration becomes dull. Without concentration, our energy is dissipated. So faith, wisdom, and concentration and effort. And in the centre of all these, as though at the centre of a mandala or a compass with each at one of the four quarters, is the spiritual faculty of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a special sense that we develop, a special faculty. It is with our awareness that we watch over, with which we monitor, all our efforts to develop ourselves.

So these are the five spiritual faculties. To summarise the five, I'll quote Bhante's summary from *The*

Essence of Zen:

Faith, representing the emotional and devotional aspect of the spiritual life, must be balanced by wisdom, otherwise it runs riot in religious hysteria, persecution mania, fanaticism, and intolerance. On the other hand **wisdom**, which stands for the intellectual - better cognitive or gnostic - aspect, must be balanced by faith, without which it speedily degenerates into hair-splitting scholasticism. **Vigour**, or the active, kinetic aspect of the spiritual life, must be balanced by concentration, representing the introspective, contemplative counter-tendency, without which vigour is either animal high spirits or neurotic restlessness, and **concentration** itself by vigour, divorced from which concentration is aimless reverie, morbid introspection, or neurotic withdrawal. **Mindfulness**, the remaining faculty, being by its very nature incapable of going to extremes - one can't have too much mindfulness - requires no counter-balancing faculty to hold it in check. Mindfulness it is, indeed, that keeps faith and wisdom, and vigour and concentration, in a state of equilibrium. 'Mindfulness is always useful,' the Buddha once declared.

What are we aware of?

In terms of the precepts, the fifth precept, we speak of the principle of mindfulness, and especially of purification of the mind. Thus 'with mindfulness clear and radiant I purify my mind'. So this is the principle—clarity of mind, maintaining a clear consciousness so that we can really see, really think, really feel what is going on. So whatever encourages such clear consciousness is to be cultivated, and whatever hinders such clear consciousness is to be avoided. This is why the precept is phrased in terms of abstention from intoxicants. The actual words of the precept, as we recite them together with the three Refuges, is: *Sur1meraya Majja Pam1datth1na*.

The meaning of this is pretty straightforward. *Sur1* is a Pali, originally Vedic, word meaning intoxicating drink. *Meraya* is a particular kind of intoxicant: it's a strong spirit, perhaps like rum or gin. The word *meraya* is usually found together with *sur1*, just as we find it here in *sur1meraya*. Then the word *majja* also means a strongly intoxicating drink. *Majja* is derived from the Pali word *mada*, or *mad*, meaning intoxication or intoxicated. (Perhaps surprisingly, this word *mad* has no discernible etymological connection with our English word 'mad'.)

This specific connection with alcohol may be misleading. In Buddhist tradition you find listed many kinds of *mada*, many kinds of intoxication. There were twenty-seven different varieties in one list I came across. Substance use and abuse is not the only way. Often in the Sutras three unskilful intoxicated states of mind are mentioned. One may be drunk with the intoxication of youth, drunk with the intoxication of good health, and drunk with the intoxication of life. We may well have heard that famous passage in the Sutra of Golden Light, in the Confession from the Sutra of Golden Light.

'May the Buddhas, whose minds are full of mercy and compassion, watch over me, those best of two-footed beings, who dwell in the world in its ten directions. And whatever evil, cruel act was done by me previously, I will confess it all before the Buddhas... Whatever evil I have done by being drunk with the intoxication of authority, or with the intoxication of high birth, or by being drunk with the intoxication of tender age.'

So here we have various states of intoxicated mentality, states which are seen as regrettable because they lead to unskilful action. Intoxication, that is, which comes about simply through being young and full of life; simply through being in good health; and there are those states of intoxication we may fall into when we are in some position of authority relative to others; or when our upbringing is privileged, relative to others.

I think these show the essential nature of intoxication quite clearly. In all these situations we feel good, but our feeling good does not motivate us to *do* good. We just feel really great. Really grand, full of ourselves, full of life, full of energy, full of pizzazz—we feel like we always wanted to feel, feel intelligent, feel active, attractive, inspired.

Well at least, perhaps, that is how we conceive the state of being inspired.

Let's leave aside this question of inspiration, the question whether feeling really great means we are inspired. Because in this state of feeling really great, something is missing. We are somehow *too* full of ourselves. We are *intoxicated* with ourselves. The word intoxication is connected with the idea of what is toxic, what is poisonous. We are poisoned. Essentially, intoxication is a state of imbalance in which we do not, cannot see objectively. We are somehow blinded, blinded by a particular kind of ignorance.

The Buddha once said that all unenlightened beings are mad.

It's interesting that the Buddha talks in terms of the kind of ignorance that we have when we are young and inexperienced. Young men and women are mad. Crazy with desires for this and that, and the other. (Perhaps especially that.) The fact that they cannot know what it is like to have lived forty or even thirty years—the fact that they can only guess what it is like—strongly conditions their view of other people, and hence the world generally. Hence it is sometimes a somewhat narrow and personal view. That's why they are all crazy. Thirty-somethings and forty-somethings perhaps aren't quite so crazy in *those* ways, because they have more experience. But they are driven insane in other ways. For them what does it is the pressure to survive financially, to look after family, to succeed in society, to be desirable, to look pretty (or if that's impossible, at least acceptable). There's this tremendous pressure to keep up appearances, maintain that position, preserve a particular reputation, to impress. The pressure to have sound views, acceptable views, or at least some kind of view. So many pressures. Life gets complex. The pressures which the thirty- and forty-somethings experience don't even occur as possibilities to teenagers or even to many twenty-somethings. But such pressures are very real. And they those poor middle-aged beings are driven quietly insane by them. Tonight, we won't look at the craziness of those who are completely over the hill, the fifty-somethings and even beyond. A veil is kindly drawn across that distant horizon. The point I'm making is that in different ways and to different degrees, each of us has been driven quite mad by the pressures of samsara, by the pressure of being spiritually ignorant. We are under pressure, we are *oppressed* by so many things.

Later in the Sutra of Golden Light this idea of the oppression of samsara is expressed in another series of confessional verses:

In the oppression of existence, or through foolish thought, whatever severe evil I have done, in the presence of the Buddha, I confess all this evil.

And I confess that evil which has been heaped up by me in the oppression of birth, by the various oppressions of bodily activity, in the oppression of existence, in the oppression of the world, in the oppression of the fleeting mind, in the oppression of impurities caused by the foolish and stupid, and in the oppression of the arrival of evil friends, in the oppression of fear, in the oppression of passion, in the oppression of hatred and by the oppressions of folly and darkness, in the oppression of the instant, in the oppression of time, by the oppressions of gaining merits, standing before and in the presence of the Buddhas, I confess all this evil'.

Our oppressions do not arise without cause. In the Buddha's vision of Enlightenment, his vision of the nature of existence, he realised that everything is continually and interdependently arising upon the basis of constantly changing conditions. What he saw is not a chaos. It's a total feedback system. Events feed back and alter other events in *particular* ways. Our deeds feed back and condition our consciousness; our consciousness feeds back and conditions our deeds. Deluded, ignorant consciousness makes it likely that our deeds will be deluded and ignorant, which again affects our consciousness. The traditional image for this is very relevant to our subject. It's a drunken man. Oh, he's in a wonderfully intoxicated, totally soft and silly state of mind. That night he wanders all over town doing many, many indescribably foolish things. He wakes up, his head ringing, thinking 'Oh no, I didn't do that, did I? Oh god, did I really say that? Then he has to live with the fact that he has done this and that. After a while, of course, you can get used to anything. But such experiences do affect one's mind, one's consciousness.

The Buddha saw that we are born in a particular kind of body, a body which has, in some mysterious

way, been shaped by our mentality. We have all been born in human shape, and as particular, unique human beings, because of the particular, unique kind of mentality which we have developed. It's a mentality which has gathered momentum over countless previous existences. Consciousness, according to Buddhism, is always *embodied*. This is the case now, in life, as we can see. It's the case too after death, according to the Tibetan tradition. And it's the case even in our dreams, as we surely know from experience. There's always a body, whether it's a subtle mind-made body or an apparently solid material body. And our consciousness, unenlightened consciousness, *determines* this body. So now, having a body, we have senses—and so, through these senses, the world just pours in. So many ideas, sights, sounds. Millions upon millions of moments of sense experience just flooding in, unstoppable. We can't turn it off, we are forced to watch and listen. It is so intense that we have to pass out every night, we have to go unconscious, otherwise we simply can't handle it.

Indeed, we don't handle it, not really. Because we basically do not understand who or what we are—being unenlightened—we are forced to interpret what is going on. We are forced to give ourselves some kind of explanation. Otherwise we really will go mad. So over the long period we call childhood we come to some kind of agreement with the rest of unenlightened humanity about what on earth is going on. This is how our familiar conventional, consensus reality comes into being. By the time we have been alive for twenty or thirty years, we have just about got the hang of this consensus reality. Life begins to seem slightly more comfortable, ordinary, and explainable. Then we hit our first mid-life crisis. After that, things are never quite the same. The consensus reality no longer fits. And then, as we get older, and older, and older, and older—and start to realise that getting older doesn't stop, that there's no plateau—we discover increasingly that we cannot control things the way we used to. Then, reality becomes even less explainable than it was before, and we become a little bit like children again. Except the agreement we made with ourselves and others when we were growing up no longer fits. The consensus reality starts to dissolve until we are using all our diminishing energies tightly to hold our unenlightened world view together.

Thus in the Buddha's vision of conditioned co-production our aging body conditions our aging consciousness, which in the longer term conditions the next life. The process is going on continually, continually feeding back on itself and changing. The actions we do have consequences for our consciousness; and our acts of consciousness, even our thoughts, have consequences in terms of our predisposition to act in particular ways. As we know from basic Buddhist teachings, we can use this fact positively. In dependence upon consciousness arises body, in dependence upon body arises senses, in dependence upon senses arises feeling. The world pours in through our body's senses, and it *feels*. At different times, in different situations, the world *feels*——it feels great, feels horrible. When it feels great—we want more, try to change our life so we're likely to get more of what seems to be giving us pleasure; when it feels horrible—we back off then, resolve to avoid what seems to be hurting us, change our life so it doesn't happen too often, preferably not at all. In this, the easy natural way, we change our lives according to our likes and dislikes. We shape ourselves in this way, we become a certain shape, a certain cast of mind, fixed, a samsaric mold for future castings.

But we can also transform ourselves in the way of liberation from all this samsara. We don't *have* to be the puppet of our likes and dislikes. Though it's work, though it goes against the grain, we can change even our likes and dislikes, just like some people can get used even to herbal tea. More importantly, we can change how we respond when we encounter situations that we strongly dislike—or strongly like: those situations for which we have a dangerous weakness, those situations which bring out the worst in us. Those situations which are morally dangerous. Through training ourselves in the Dharma, we can become aware and strong, we can liberate ourselves from any obstacle.

This brings us back to the precept of mindfulness. The awareness bit, you see, is of very great importance. If we are inspired by the Buddha's vision, we can change, but there is a minimum commitment. Just as Ryvita can only help you slim when eaten as part of a calorie controlled diet, and not when spread with half an inch of butter, peanut butter and jam, so the Dharma can work only when

there is awareness.

I hope it's obvious from all this that we are already sufficiently intoxicated and maddened, sufficiently mentally unbalanced, it's quite bad enough already without adding to that by deliberately intoxicating ourselves even more with gin, whisky, bacardi, murphy's, babycham, whatever your poison happens to be. (People sometimes ask, don't they, "What's your poison?"). Or, for the more adventurous, grass, hash, cocaine, acid, ecstasy—or uhu, paint thinners, ether, whatever you find most inspiring. How much of all these stuffs do we need to take in before we realise that it makes life even more complicated than it already is?

People drink and smoke and sniff for all kinds of reasons, perhaps, but one very basic reason is undoubtedly a sense of unsatisfactoriness. They don't want that sense, so they do something which makes them feel different for a while. But the feeling lasts only for a while, after which the sense of unsatisfactoriness comes back. All rather depressing, really. But if the only way we can find to deal with our sense of unsatisfactoriness is to divert it, to distract ourselves from it, depression is increasingly going to be our lot. Increasingly, to be stone cold sober gets to be bored and dull and discontented.

The approach in Buddhism is, as we know, radically different. We are going in the opposite direction. Being straight, being un-drugged, is just the start. We need to get over being bored with our ordinary states of consciousness, and move on and out from there. We don't try to divert ourselves from our experience, but wholeheartedly embrace it. We are, therefore, alive where others are, effectively, dead.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says,

Mindfulness is the abode which goes beyond death. Unmindfulness is the abode of death.

Those who are aware do not die. Those who are unaware are as though dead already.

The main scriptural reference for the practice of mindfulness is Majjhima Nikaya 10, the Satipatthana Sutta or 'Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness'. Here the Buddha speaks of the development of mindfulness in four areas which are progressively more subtle. First there's the physical body, then the feelings, then our general mental states, and finally the particular objects we mentally perceive in each moment.

Awareness of the body means, first of all, experiencing it. We often don't do this—often don't know how we're sitting, how we are moving, how we are standing. We don't experience our face and hand gestures, don't experience our body language. If I stand like this (dejected, chest closed) something is communicated. If I do this often (adjust glasses, scratch ear, shrug), something is communicated. When we experience our body more closely and continuously, we are more in touch with what we are feeling. It's back to the stone cold sober image again—very often we divert ourselves from our ordinary physical experience because we have got out of touch with it, have started to see it as something alien and unpleasant. But in Buddhism we embrace our physical experience all the time, experience ourselves fully, physically.

And this, being aware of our body, means being in touch with what we are feeling—which is the second foundation of mindfulness. Feeling we've already heard about in the context of conditioned co-production: it's what happens when we open our eyes, see, hear, touch, taste, smell, think. Sense experience *feels*. Feels pleasant, feels painful, feels strongly, feels almost not at all. We grasp after the strong pleasure, back off from strong pain. It is clearly of vital importance to be constantly mindful of this whole area of feeling. If we don't know what we are feeling, we won't notice our responses to our feelings. We won't notice when we are getting stuck in attachments and aversions. We won't notice when we are getting stuck in a samsaric rut. So if we want to develop, we need to look more closely, need to experience ourselves more fully, fully embrace our experience, be *in* our experience all the time, and not diverted from it.

To do so we need to establish ourselves also in the third foundation of mindfulness—that is, we need to

notice our moods, our general states of mind. Knowing when we are grumpy and likely to say something unpleasant, knowing when we are a bit intoxicated and likely to do something silly. Knowing when we're not feeling that intelligent and likely to make a mess. Knowing when we're tired. Knowing when we're genuinely inspired. Recognising craving. Recognising hatred. Recognising delusion.

And finally it will help to recognise our states of mind, and our feelings too, if we watch the clues given by our moment-to-moment experience of the objects we perceive. What are we *actually* looking at the moment? What are we actually hearing? And what are we actually thinking? It isn't always the obvious thing. You aren't just looking at me and thinking about what I'm saying, I'm sure. We aren't that simple. Our minds flash around the universe of our imagination like lightning. So noticing that happening, experiencing it as it actually happens, fully experiencing ourselves mentally, is the fourth foundation of *sati* or awareness, or mindfulness.

But simply noticing, simply being aware of what happens in our experience, is one of two aspects of the practice of mindfulness. As well as *sati*, awareness, there is *sampajañña* or awareness of purpose. There is a point to all this deliberate development of awareness and it is, of course, spiritual change. Change happens against the natural grain of habit. We need to make an effort all the time to respond in new, creative ways to the old experiences. Awareness provides the eye of awareness. In awareness of purpose we remind ourselves that we want to change. With *sampajañña* we interpose the hand of action. So noticing, with the eye of awareness that we are physically unaware, we take ourselves in hand, we get back into contact with our body, we embrace our physical experience. Noticing that we don't know what we are feeling, and are just reacting emotionally without awareness, we take action. We feel what we feel, good or bad. We take ourselves on fully, take emotional responsibility for ourselves. Noticing that we're in a grumpy mood, we don't say too much at the moment, keep ourselves at a safe distance for the time being. Noticing that we're high and elated—inflated—again we watch out to avoid doing something silly. Noticing, finally, that a particular sight, a particular thought, has sparked off a particular mood, and acting creatively. Noticing the tiniest beginnings of thought processes which lead to moods which lead to specific emotions which lead to specific actions. Avoiding unskilful actions of body, speech and mind; cultivating physical actions, vocal actions, mental actions that are wise, that are generous, that allow us to grow.

Skilful action, based on awareness: essentially, that is the practice of mindfulness. Awareness followed by skilful responses. The eye of awareness and the hand of skilful action. *Sati* and *sampajanna*.

'Whoever, monks, should thus develop these four foundations of mindfulness for seven years, one of two results is to be expected for him: either Enlightenment here and now, or if there is still any residue remaining, the state of non-returning.

Monks, let be the seven years. Whoever, monks, should thus develop these four foundations of mindfulness for six years, five years, four years, three years, two years, for one year - one of two results is to be expected for him: either Enlightenment here and now, or if there is still any residue remaining, the state of non-returning.

Monks, let be the one year. Whoever, monks, should thus develop these four foundations of mindfulness for six months, five months, four months, three months, two months, for one month - for a half month - one of two results is to be expected for him: either Enlightenment here and now, or if there is still any residue remaining, the state of non-returning'

That's how the Satipatthana Sutta ends.

Here's how the Satipatthana Sutta begins:-

There is this one way, monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrows and griefs, for the going down of sufferings and miseries, for winning the right path, for realising nibbana, that is to say, the four applications of mindfulness.

What are the four? Herein, monks, a monk fares along contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly conscious of it, mindful of it, so as to control the covetousness and dejection common in the world.

He fares along contemplating the feelings in the feelings... contemplating the mind in the mind... contemplating the mental objects in the mental objects, ardent, clearly conscious of them, mindful of them, so as to control the covetousness and dejection common in the world".

Covetousness, envy, dissatisfaction. Dejection, depression, lack of confidence. These things are as common after 2,500 years as in the Buddha's day. It's enough to drive you to drink, perhaps, but that's not a good way. In fact there is only one way to deal with them. Intoxication and mindfulness face in opposite directions. We move either one way or the other, either away from reality or closer into reality. We either embrace our experience or avoid it. We use it or lose it; lose awareness and imprison ourselves even more than we are already; use awareness and gain our freedom. The choice is ours.

We can conclude now by taking an overview of the fifth precept, in fact of all five precepts because the fifth precept, the development of clear and radiant awareness, underpins all ethical principles. One cannot be ethical at all without it, because in order to respond with metta rather than dull indifference, one needs awareness—awareness of others. Responding with loving-kindness to the needs of living beings is the essence of all precepts. It is loving-kindness which prevents us from harming, from selfish taking, from selfish sexual behaviour. It is even what causes us to be truthful. We will only be truthful when we see the importance of communication, and only loving-kindness can show us that.

So metta, the desire for others' happiness and well-being, is the motivation for all ethical behaviour. Metta is nothing without awareness—it's just empty, false emotion. So awareness is the basis for metta. That's why those two principles, mindfulness and metta, are taught right at the beginning at all our meditation classes. They are the opening stages of the entire path to Enlightenment, because they make ethical behaviour possible. Ethical behaviour makes possible higher states of consciousness, which in turn makes possible true understanding, wisdom and Enlightenment.

Buddhism is a path of purification. The first three precepts are said to purify the body, the fourth speech and the fifth mind, but this is a bit too schematic. Physical and vocal actions basically come from the mind, from our mental volitions. All five precepts involve work on the mind. All purify the mind of unskilful volitions.

The fifth precept, of abstention from drugs and drink so that one can develop clear and radiant awareness, represents that principle of purification. The idea of purity, of purification, can sometimes sound dull in our ears, conditioned as we are by so much history. It can sound sanitized, artificial, even false. So the very idea of purity has become impure. We actually associate purification with something which has been poisoned. But we can hardly do without the idea of purification, since it is a basic spiritual quality. We need to purify our notion of purification, make our idea of purity genuine again. I think we have to think more, reflect more, about what purity really means. Perhaps we can use Sangharakshita's aphorism, 'purity is power', for example. To me, purity means embracing the realm of truth. And I see the realm of truth as a realm of great beauty, of even awe-inspiring beauty—a space which is filled with light and presence. A place where awareness opens out into a great mandala, affording infinite vision in all directions. We're at the centre of that mandala at this very moment. All that prevents the vision from unfolding is the fact that we are, temporarily, suffering from having poisoned ourselves.