

Right Mindfulness

A Foundation of Buddhist Practice By Barbara O'Brien, About.com

Right Mindfulness traditionally is the seventh part of the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, but that doesn't mean it is seventh in importance. Each part of the path supports the other seven parts, and so they should be thought of as connected in a circle or woven into a web rather than stacked as if in an order of progression.

Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that Right Mindfulness is at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. "When Right Mindfulness is present, the Four Noble Truths and the other seven elements of the Eightfold Path are also present." (The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, p. 59)

What Is Mindfulness?

The Pali word for "mindfulness" is *sati* (in Sanskrit, *smriti*). *Sati* can also mean "retention," "recollection," or "alertness." Mindfulness is a whole-body-and-mind awareness of the present moment. To be mindful is to be fully present, not lost in daydreams, anticipation, indulgences, or worry.

Mindfulness also means observing and releasing habits of mind that maintain the illusion of a separate self. This includes dropping the mental habit of judging everything according to whether we like it or not. Being fully mindful means being fully attentive to everything as-it-is, not filtering everything through our subjective opinions.

Why Mindfulness Is Important

It's important to understand Buddhism as a discipline or process rather than as a belief system. The Buddha did not teach doctrines about enlightenment, but rather taught people how to realize enlightenment themselves. And the way we realize enlightenment is through direct experience. It is through mindfulness that we experience directly, with no mental filters or psychological barriers between us and what is experienced.

The Ven. Henepola Gunaratana, a Theravada Buddhist monk and teacher, explains in the book *Voices of Insight* (edited by Sharon Salzberg) that mindfulness is essential to help us see beyond symbols and concepts. "Mindfulness is pre-symbolic. It is not shackled to logic," he says. "The actual experience lies beyond the words and above the symbols."

Mindfulness and Meditation

The sixth, seventh and eighth parts of the Eightfold Path -- Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration -- together are the mental development needed to release us from suffering.

Meditation is practiced in many schools of Buddhism as part of mental development. The Sanskrit word for meditation, *bhavana*, means "mental culture," and all forms of Buddhist meditation involve mindfulness. In particular, *shamatha* ("peaceful dwelling") meditation develops mindfulness; people sitting in *shamatha* train themselves to stay alert to the present moment, observing and then releasing thoughts instead of chasing them. *Satipatthana vipassana* meditation is a similar practice found in Theravada Buddhism that is primarily about developing mindfulness.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in mindfulness meditation as part of psychotherapy. Some psychotherapists find that mindfulness meditation as an adjunct to counseling and other treatments can help troubled people learn to release negative emotions and thought habits.

Four Frames of Reference

The Buddha said there are four frames of reference in mindfulness:

- Mindfulness of body (kayasati).
- Mindfulness of feelings or sensations (vedanasati).
- Mindfulness of mind or mental processes (cittasati).
- Mindfulness of mental objects or qualities (dhammasati).

Have you ever suddenly just noticed that you had a headache, or that your hands were cold, and realized you'd been feeling these things for a while but weren't paying attention? Mindfulness of body is just the opposite of that; being fully aware of your body, your extremities, your bones, your muscles. And the same thing goes for the other frames of reference -- being fully aware of sensations, aware of your mental processes, aware of the phenomena all around you.

The teachings of the Five Skandhas are related to this, and are worth reviewing as you begin to work with mindfulness.

Three Fundamental Activities

The Venerable Gunaratana says mindfulness comprises three fundamental activities.

1. Mindfulness reminds us of what we are supposed to be doing. If we are sitting in meditation, it brings us back to the focus of meditation. If we are washing dishes, it reminds us to pay full attention to washing the dishes.
2. In mindfulness, we see things as they really are. The Venerable Gunaratana writes that our thoughts have a way of pasting over reality, and concepts and ideas distort what we experience.
3. Mindfulness sees the true nature of phenomena. In particular, through mindfulness we directly see the three characteristics or marks of existence -- it is imperfect, temporary and egoless.

Practicing Mindfulness

Changing the mental habits and conditioning of a lifetime is not easy. And this training is not something that only happens during meditation, but throughout the day.

If you have a daily chanting practice, chanting in a focused, fully attentive way is mindfulness training. It can also be helpful to choose a particular activity such as preparing a meal, cleaning the floors, or taking a walk, and make an effort to be fully mindful of the task as you perform it. In time you will find yourself paying more attention to everything.

Zen teachers say that if you miss the moment, you miss your life. How much of our lives have we missed? Be mindful!