

The Meaning of Mindfulness

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji July 29th, 2006



Mindfulness is wordless. Mindfulness is meeting the moment as it is, moment after moment after moment, wordlessly attending to our experiencing as it actually is. It is opening to not just the fragments of our lives that we like or dislike or view as important, but the whole of our experiencing.

But what does the word “mindfulness” mean? The English word “mindfulness” – that we use – is a translation of the Pali, Sanskrit and Japanese terms, “sati”, “smirti” and “nen”. Another English translation of the Pali word “sati” is “memory”. This is what “mindfulness” means – memory. But when I say “memory”, I am not referring to the habitual crunching of attention that people engage in when they are trying to remember things past. The kind of memory I am speaking of is the capacity to remember that allows you to remember reality in this moment. It is this capacity that allows you to understand the meaning of each word I am saying as I am saying it. Without it, there would be no continuity to your experiencing whatsoever.

This capacity to remember is a “mental factor” A mental factor is a gathering or grouping of movements of attention that make up how we perceive, or can condition how we interpret what we are experiencing, depending upon whether they are open or closed. “Mindfulness of mental factors” is one of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as taught by the Buddha in the Mahasatipattana sutta. And so to understand what the word “mindfulness” means, we need to understand what a mental factor is.

Although you might like to think that there is some “one” inside of the bodymind that is always the same, you keep changing your mind about who and what you think yourself to be. And that is because what you like to think of as “you” is not a solid entity. It is a collection of “mental” factors and this thinking about you is just a

subset of them.

It's not difficult to see that you present yourself as different "selves", all depending on where you are and what is going on. The "work self", the "social self", the "organized self", the "disorganized self", the "sad self" and the "happy self" come about through the shuffling of mental factors. Yet, despite this obvious shuffling, when a mental factor is present we tend to view THIS "self" as permanent and unchanging and we will base decisions and actions on it. Small wonder we have such difficulty following through with things we set out to do. Sometimes you like your "self" and other times you are filled with self-loathing about your "self" but whether you like or dislike whatever "self" you think your "self" to be at any given moment, one thing is sure - it will change because mental factors change.

Sadness, for example, is a mental factor, as are anger, happiness, fear, anxiety, frustration and passivity. We have many, many mental factors, a whole "database" of mental factors, all vying for first place. When "sadness" comes up, we think "Oh well, I am sad. Of course I am sad, I have always been sad. I am a sad person." Two hours later, we might be "happy" and we will think, "Oh well, of course I am happy, I have always been happy. I am a happy person." When we experience a state, we completely identify with it and so when we are "sad", we forget that we are also sometimes "happy". We don't remember the range of states we experience because we have little to no carry-over of a sense of context between states. It is because of this lack of carry-over that we can live under the delusion that there is a solid, unchanging self despite the fact that our experiencing shows us that this is not and has never been true. Who and what you seem to be in this moment is dependant on whatever mental factors there are in place. In fact, in a single moment there arise together mental factors which could become sad or happy or indifferent or eager or pensive or angry and as well factors that are processing perceptions of spatial dimension, colours, forms, weight, temperature, fragrances and on and on. As practice deepens and opens this becomes more and more obvious so the compulsion to choose and focus on one or a few of these potential feeling-tones becomes less and less interesting.

Sati, or the capacity of memory, is the dominant mental factor of mindfulness and this is what makes it possible for you to open past states of contraction. This is the heart of Zen practice, and the fundamental purpose of it: to learn to step past all of the states that we experience into who and what we truly are, which is Awareness in Itself. But to do this, we must first learn to recognize contraction and release it through practising basic mindfulness.

We have only to look at the headlines of newspapers to see the consequences of not opening past contraction. As the Roshi has often pointed out,

A moment of contraction is not a small thing. Getting lost in thought, narrowing attention and excluding reality are how crimes, wars, and the destruction of our environment have all occurred. Becoming annoyed at an old lady fumbling for change in a check-out line at a store is not different in kind than starting a war. In fact starting a war is only possible because such a moment of contraction was never noticed for what it was. Contraction leads to further contraction and all of the catastrophes of human history have followed from people following thoughts and feeling-tones and are the inevitable consequence of, for example, your attention fading in and out as you hear these words.

Mindfulness is not just "noticing" something and then covering it over with discursiveness or what we think

we know about that thing - this thing means “this” and this thing means “that”. It is allowing that thing to reveal itself as it is.

Allowing things to reveal themselves as they are is only possible if we continuously refresh mindfulness. We are only practicing when we are practicing; we can only practice for a split-second at a time and then we must begin anew. This is the meaning of “beginner’s mind” or “shoshin” - continuously opening to the details of present experiencing as they are in this moment, beginning again in this moment... and this moment. This is the effort we must make and this is true for everyone practicing, regardless of how long they have been practicing. When our practice is truly “realized-practice” as Eihei Dogen zenji and Anzan Hoshin roshi speak of it, then this effort is simply the exertion of the whole moment itself with all of its numberless colours, forms, sounds, sensations and movements. It is not that there is no effort made but rather that there is no sense of someone making the effort.

Until then, mindfulness of the moment can be very slippery because the moment always slips away. This “moment” is not a place or a thing that you can “have”. You can never lay claim to it because you arise within it along with everyone else, every thing else, everywhere. It is not a something let alone something else.

This is what we are practising when we are really practising mindfulness. We practice opening the capacity to remember reality. The contracted states we propagate are not interested in reality. When we work ourselves into a dense state of contraction because perhaps someone said something that really pissed us off, the last thing that it would normally occur to us to do would be to open to reality. Who wants to open to the richness of sensations, colours, forms, sounds, and the rest of the details that make up the reality of our lives as a whole when we can spend the next 45 minutes playing a slasher scene in the movie of “Me”? Open to reality and interrupt the movie? Not now. Not yet. Maybe later, like when I have to go to a sitting at the monastery and there’s nothing else to do.

In “The Development of Buddhist Psychology” series of classes the Roshi says,

Through attending directly and openly to the process by which attention becomes distorted and seems to be contained by the states arising in it, the distortions cease just as the air held in your mouth returns to the sky when you exhale.

Something that all of the traditions of Abhidharma would agree on is that knowing is an active, changing process. Mind is considered to be the activity of individual moments of knowing.

Some traditions would hold that this mental factor cannot be present when this other one is or that all of certain factors are present in every moment of knowing (for example the seven or five universal factors). In both cases this means that mind is a process, not an entity. When attention is focused in one particular way, it excludes from view other potential factors. This is an activity. The act of focusing and engagement, of sensory knowing, cognition and so on, are each activities. Mind is a verb.

We commonly tend to behave not only as if the mind were a noun rather than a knowing, but also that that which is known is a noun, an object. A feeling of fear, anxiety, loneliness, guilt or whatever is treated as if it were a thing rather than a process. Since it is thus objectified, we behave as if we can be overcome by it or else we struggle against it.

The main thing that we can learn from the Abhidharma's teachings on the habitual patterning of the sankhara skandha is that anything that is known or felt or sensed is a process. Since it is a process, it is something that is arising from moment to moment. Since it is arising from moment to moment, anything that arises for us is workable since there is only this moment of it occurring now. There is no past, no future, and this present moment itself; a process of dynamic activity and change.

As I mentioned previously, all mental factors have sati as part of them, but it is not the dominant factor within them. By practising mindfulness, sati can become the dominant factor. What this means is that if you practice in the midst of happiness, anger, fear, anxiety, passivity and so forth, what you will discover is that any of those things (and a host of other kinds of states) can come up and you can still be mindful. This is very important because it means that regardless of the states that come up, you can know a state as a state, and you can still do what needs to be done. You can stop propagating your own craziness.

Any state that you experience that seems to occur in isolation, separate from the details of present experiencing needs to be questioned. It is not necessary to withdraw from reality in order to think a thought or feel a feeling. If it does seem necessary to withdraw, to internalize attention in order to sustain a state, it is because the state you are propagating is like some bizarre hothouse orchid that can only survive in "special conditions" and if that is the case, it deserves to die. Open around it.

When attention is open, although there might be a feeling of anger or grief or joy present, it is experienced in context – together with sensations and colours and forms and sounds. There is the knowing that there is no one inside the state, that the state is arising within Knowing. There is nobody inside the state and so there is no attempt to use the state in any way or mark off territory within the space of experiencing. Experiencing is always open and expansive and the state is known as a temporary movement within the space rather than as something solid and unchanging that must be acted out or acted upon.

Students sometimes think that if they open around a state, they will be unable to think clearly or be effective in situations that come up for them. This is simply not true. What it does mean is that instead of acting from a state of anger, or fear or confusion, one can address the situation clearly and without the distortion of feeling tones. You cannot think clearly when attention is compromised by a feeling tone and so opening around the state allows for clear, intelligent thought.

Mindfulness is not "mindfully talking to yourself" or "mindfully watching yourself. It is not about seeing thoughts and then trying to follow them to their "source". It's not about struggling with or trying to cut off thoughts and feelings, or trying to think nice, pure, clean thoughts so that we can become saintly boys and girls. It is attending to our experience as it actually is – directly, without strategy, without interpretation.

As practice continues, attention, which always and necessarily arises along with any and all mental events, becomes subtle, quicker, more spontaneous. In fact it begins to reveal itself rather than being directed. This is what the Roshi refers to as the process of attending to, and then attending with, and then attending as; or simply "attentiveness." Practising this attentiveness is releasing yourself into the sensations and colours and forms and sounds. It is letting go of the endless internalized babble of self-image to experience the bodymind and the world in which it arises – as they actually are. Attentiveness can only be surrendered into, it cannot be manipulated.

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wordlessly attending to our experiencing as it actually is. It is opening to not just the fragments of our lives that we like or dislike or view as important, but the whole of our experiencing. Thus, mindfulness is never having to say you're sorry or that you are lonely or that you are angry or sad or in love or too fat, too tall, too short, too stupid, too smart, especially to yourself. Because there's nobody there to hear you. It is the active recognition that any perceptions you have of "you" are just details rising and falling within countless other details, shifting and changing moment after moment. Mindfulness means please, please, please shut up and pay attention to this life as it really is, opening attention again and again through remembrance to some aspect of present experience in order to open past that to the context in which experiences rise and fall as such. This is the gift that has been given to me. I can only give it to you in the sense of reminding you of it. You have to give it to yourself.

Go on. You're worth it.

Have a good morning.