

Mindfulness in early Buddhism

Excerpt from *SD 60.11 (Satipaṭṭhāna) Sati Sutta (S 47.2)*¹, Mindfulness is being here and now by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 2023.

2.1.2.1 Mindfulness, a well-known and widely accepted translation of the key Pali term *sati* can mean anything to any scholar, especially the mind scientists (a broad term for psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, etc). Such modern definitions are “purpose-driven” or “professionally limited,” depending on the purpose of the professional using them.² Such definitions often quickly attract criticism and are often debunked within a generation. To determine which of such terms are useful in the study of a history of modern psychology, we need to keep to the sutta-based definitions and implications of the term, *sati*, if we are interested in Buddhist studies and practice.³

If the “**professional notion of mindfulness**” is a psychological Scylla, then there is the “sectarian notion of *sati*” that is an ethnic Charybdis.⁴ In the competitive market of ethnic Buddhism, **sectarian teachers** tend to come up with their own, often curious, even bizarre, definitions or interpretations of *sati* and other early teachings. Those who put the teacher above the teaching are easily and profoundly driven by such developments. Again, such personal and private teachings often last only as long as the teacher lives. Although such teachers may have produced prodigious writings on their systems, such sources are hardly read by their followers, but can be useful to research scholars studying the development of Buddhist dogma or some aspects of comparative Buddhism.

2.1.2.2 In this lesson (SD 60.11), it is essential and sufficient that we understand that *sati* is not “present-moment awareness” but simply *mindfulness* *the object in mind*. It is **awareness** (*sampajañña*) that discerns whether the object is wholesome or unwholesome: the former to be cultivated and the latter to be abandoned. Thus, we have both mindfulness and awareness (*sati, sampajañña*).

Secondly, mindfulness is *not* merely awareness of the present; it is also minding past objects (memories) and future objects (imagination). It is awareness that discerns these aspects of the object and deals with them accordingly, such as letting go of the past and of the future. It is awareness that watches the present rising and ending of mental states; mindfulness keeps the focus to effect the process.

Finally, it should be noted that mindfulness as a pregnant term—that is, as “mindfulness and awareness”—has a significant presence throughout our spiritual training, thus, **mindfulness**:

¹ SD 60.11: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/60.11-Satipatthana-Sati-S-47.2-piya.pdf>

² This is sometimes called “the scholars’ Buddhism”: see SD 60.1c (6.3).

³ For other meditation terms in modern usage (but not necessarily current), see SD 60.1f (0.3). For a detailed survey on modern conceptions of “mindfulness,” see SD 60.1e (1-5).

⁴ Scylla and Charybdis were mythical sea-monsters in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Greek mythology locates them on opposite sides of the Strait of Messina between Sicily and Calabria (on the Italian mainland). Scylla was a 6-headed sea-monster (rationalized as a treacherous rock shoal) and Charybdis was a whirlpool. Here this allusion refers to a difficult choice best avoided by resorting to sutta-based definitions informing our own experiences. On this mythology, see SD60.1c (6.2.3).

- (1) stands at the head of **the 7 awakening factors** (*satta bojjhaṅga*);
- (2) stands right in the middle amongst **the 5 faculties** (*pañc'indriya*) and **the 5 powers** (*pañca,bala*); and
- (3) stands near the end as the 3rd training amongst **the 8 path-factors** (*magg'aṅga*).

Mindfulness appears like a captain commanding the ship that is our conscious body; it works as awareness investigating states (*dhammā*) as they arise. Mindfulness as effort keeps going on the proper course; this brings on zest, which leads on to tranquillity (the body fully settles leaving the calm and bright mind). In this profound peace, the mind focuses in samadhi, resulting in equanimity (including dhyana).

While we are meditating, mindfulness is the conductor or moderator that harmonizes *faith* with wisdom, and *effort* with *concentration*—they work as the 5 spiritual faculties—so that we mentally progress on a sure and even keel. With *awareness*, mindfulness penetrates ever deeper into seeing true reality until we are mentally free with the attaining of some level of concentration, even dhyana.

As path-factors, that is, qualities bringing about the path of freedom (even if only a momentary vision of it), right mindfulness is preceded by right effort and fruits in right concentration. In simple terms, *right effort* keeps away distractions and cultivates the right conditions, bringing on *right mindfulness*, when the mind focuses on the object, and this results in *right concentration*, that is, dhyana.

Underlying all this process is, of course, mindfulness and awareness at ever more refined levels.

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