



Cultivating the heart–mind

On mindfulness

by Patrick Kearney

Introduction

“Mindfulness” is a key concept in the teaching of the Buddha, and has been central to all Buddhist traditions for the past two and a half millennia. Mindfulness has also become central to a number of contemporary therapies, and is considered by some to be a new discovery. But what is mindfulness? The term is variously defined, in both the field of psychology and in Buddhist traditions. In contemporary Buddhist discourse, for example, mindfulness is often spoken of as awareness. This seems odd, however, since the Buddha already had a word for awareness, *viññāṇa*, so why would he need another? But if mindfulness is not awareness, what is it? And what is its relationship to awareness?

We find a variety of definitions of mindfulness among contemporary Theravāda¹ authorities. Nyanaponika Thera, for example, defines mindfulness as “a kind of attentiveness that ... is good, skilful or right (*kusala*).”² Bhikkhu Bodhi defines it as “focused awareness applied to immediate experience in both its subjective and objective factors.”³ Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu sees it as “the ability to keep something in mind.”⁴ Ñāṇavīra Thera says it is “general recollectedness, not being scatterbrained,”⁵ and he links it with “reflexion,” knowing what one knows or does as one knows or does it.⁶

Since mindfulness is so important to both Buddhism and psychology, and since there are so many variations in the way the term is understood, it may be useful to take a fresh look at mindfulness to clarify its meaning. The approach in this essay is to seek the meaning of mindfulness by examining some of the ways in which the Buddha and his students use the term. We will begin with a definition, and go on to examine the relationship between mindfulness on the one hand and memory and wisdom on the other. From there we will look at the Buddha speaking of how mindfulness is

¹ Theravāda (“the teaching of the elders”) is the form of Buddhism found in Sri Lanka and South East Asia. This is the tradition that has given rise to the modern insight movement.

² Nyanaponika Thera. *The heart of Buddhist meditation*. London: Rider & Company, 1969: 9.

³ Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The connected discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 1506.

⁴ Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *The wings to awakening. An anthology from the Pāli canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana Publications, 1998: 72.

⁵ Ñāṇavīra Thera. *Clearing the path. Writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera (1960-1965)*. Colombo: Path Press, 1987: 155.

⁶ Ñāṇavīra Thera (1987): 350.

established, how it is lost, and finally, how it is cultivated. By seeing mindfulness in action, so to speak, we may gain a more rounded picture of what it is.

What is mindfulness?

The word “mindfulness” as the standard translation of the Pāli⁷ word “*sati*” comes from T. W. Rhys Davids, the great nineteenth century pioneer of Pāli studies. What does “mindfulness” as an English word suggest? The OED defines “mindful” as “taking heed or care; being conscious or aware,” and “mindless” as “unintelligent, stupid; ... thoughtless, heedless, careless.” Mindfulness implies awareness, but more than awareness; it also suggests both care and intelligence.

The Pāli word “*sati*” literally means “memory.” Bhikkhu Bodhi says that *sati* comes from a root meaning “to remember,” and he adds that “as a mental factor it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past.”⁸ Mindfulness, then, is the act of remembering the present, rather than the past; keeping the present in mind. But does this mean that the past is excluded from mindfulness? Not according to Venerable Ānanda,⁹ who described the mindfulness of the mature practitioner in this way:

She has mindfulness; possessing supreme mindfulness [*sati*] and discrimination [*nepakka*], recalling and recollecting what was done and said long ago. (Sekha Sutta M53)¹⁰

Mindfulness here is linked to memory, in its normal sense of remembering the past, and to wisdom. Why is memory of the past so important to mindfulness? And why should memory be linked to wisdom? After all, a fundamental principle of contemporary Buddhist practice is the necessity for the practitioner to remain firmly in the present rather than being distracted by thoughts of past and future. This is neatly summed up in the slogan, “Be here now.” Then why is memory important?

A hint of this may be found in an incident I witnessed while teaching at a Buddhist gathering. Some mornings we saw a bird sitting on a branch just outside the glass window of the main hall. Suddenly the bird would fly toward the window, crash into it, and stagger back to its branch. It would resume its vigil, then at some point fly again into the window, crash, and stagger back to its branch. And so on. It seemed that in the morning the light was such that the bird could see its own reflection in the glass, and perhaps perceiving this as a rival bird would fly across to challenge the

⁷ Pāli is the scriptural language of Theravāda Buddhism and the earliest Indian language in which the teaching of the Buddha and his immediate circle is recorded.

⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed). *Abhidhammattha Sangaha. A comprehensive manual of abhidhamma*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Edition, 2000: 86.

⁹ The Buddha’s personal attendant for the last twenty years of his life, and subsequently one of the most important Buddhist teachers.

¹⁰ The translations used in this essay are based on those of Bhikkhu Bodhi, but with some modifications.

trespasser. Now, clearly the bird had awareness. It was “in the present,” it was “here-&-now,” for otherwise it could not have seen and reacted to its reflection. However, we can be confident that the bird was lacking mindfulness. Why? Because it never learned from its experience.

What do we mean by “experience” when, for example, we say, “He is an experienced carpenter,” or “She is very experienced in sorting out problems of this nature.” Experience refers to accumulated knowledge, which in turn implies an ability to learn from the past. This suggests that a present encounter which is informed by the past has a different quality to a present encounter which is innocent of any influence from the past. What’s the nature of this difference? I’m suggesting that whatever the difference is, that’s where we will uncover the nature of mindfulness.

Let us explore this issue further using a small section of Mahāsīhanāda Sutta (*Greater discourse on the lion’s roar* M12) as our text. Here the Buddha, at this time an old man of 80, is under attack from a disgruntled former follower and is forced to defend his authority as a teacher. The discourse is addressed to his close disciple Sāriputta, revered by the tradition as foremost in wisdom among the Buddha’s students and himself an old man. Towards the end of his discourse the Buddha comes to the subject of mindfulness and wisdom, and its relationship to age.

Mindfulness and lucidity

Sāriputta, there are certain *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*¹¹ whose doctrine and view is this: “While this good man is still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, so long is he perfect in the lucidity of his wisdom. But when he is old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage, being eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old, then the lucidity of his wisdom is lost.”

But it should not be seen in this way.

I am now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage: my years have turned eighty.

Now suppose I had four students, each with a life span of a hundred years, perfect in mindfulness [*sati*], retentiveness [*gati*], memory [*dhiti*] and lucidity of wisdom [*paññā-veyyattiya*]. ... Suppose they continuously asked me about the four establishments of mindfulness [*satipaṭṭhāna*]¹² and that I answered them when asked. Suppose they remembered each answer of mine, never asked a secondary question, and never paused except to eat, drink, ... piss, shit and rest ...

¹¹ *Samaṇas* (roughly meaning “philosophers” in the classical Greek sense) and *brāhmaṇas* (the hereditary Vedic priesthood) together constituted the religious/philosophical elite of the Buddha’s time. The Buddha himself was a *samaṇa*.

¹² The four establishments of mindfulness constitute a discrete way of practice in the Buddha’s teaching, centring on the cultivation of mindfulness. When contemporary practitioners refer to “insight meditation,” they are referring to these four establishments used as the basis for a meditation technique.

The *Tathāgata's* dharma¹³ teachings, his explanations of the detailed aspects of dharma and his replies to questions would not end before those four students of mine would be dead at the end of their hundred years.

Sāriputta, even if you have to carry me about on a bed, there will be no change in the lucidity of the Tathāgata's¹⁴ wisdom.

The Buddha's authority is under attack, and this authority is based on his spiritual accomplishments and abilities. Everything depends on his "lucidity of wisdom" (*paññā-veyyattiya*). The Buddha is old; even if he was lucid in his youth, how can he be lucid now? Even if he deserved his place as leader when he was in his prime, has he still got it in him? Is he "past it?"

Our discussion centres on the nature of the lucidity of wisdom, and in particular how long it lasts. And when this subject comes up, the Buddha speaks of mindfulness (*sati*) and the establishing of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). What is the relationship between mindfulness and wisdom?

The qualities of mindfulness

The Buddha gives the example of an intellectual discussion between dharma students and their teacher on meditation practice. So there is a link between the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), what we know as insight meditation, and wisdom, both intellectual and experiential. This link with wisdom comes out in the qualities that characterise the practice of mindfulness. They are: mindfulness itself (*sati*), retentiveness (*gati*), memory (*dhiti*), and lucidity of wisdom (*paññā-veyyattiya*).

Sati

Sati (mindfulness) implies keeping in mind the present, but more than the present. The present is held in the context of that which precedes it. Something from the past flows into the present and shapes it, informs it. It is this that makes "experience," in the sense of learning and the capacity to apply learning, possible.

Understanding language, for example, requires more than being present to the sound of a single word; it requires being present to the context revealed by the flow of words from past, through present, to future. The meaning of a single word or phrase is revealed only by something that happens later. A sentence — maybe a long sentence — is unrolled, and its meaning, its capacity to stimulate understanding, is revealed only at the end. The mind must hold all of the sentence as one as it unfolds over time.

¹³ "Dharma" is a complex and multivalent term that essentially refers to truth, and the teaching that point to that truth. Hence "Buddhism" is Buddha-Dharma. In Pāli, the word is *dhamma*, but since the Sanskrit form "*dharma*" is in the English dictionary, it is now an English word.

¹⁴ "Tathāgata" is an ancient title of the Buddha, essentially meaning one who is fully awakened.

Mindfulness of present experience has three closely related aspects.

- This present experience must be clearly registered. And for it to be clear, we must be face to face with it, not pulled away by the allure of past and future, or by something else happening at the same time. Just this, now. Not that, “*this!*” Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta¹⁵ describes the practitioner “contemplating body *as* body ... feeling *as* feeling ... mind *as* mind ... phenomena *as* phenomena.” This experience now, *as* just this experience now. Nothing added.
- This present experience must be held within a context that expands over time, including more and more past as it unfolds. We hold this present experience in such a way as to allow it to develop while we wait for something to happen which will enable it to make sense. And so we develop a skill. When a skilled yoga teacher looks at a student doing a basic posture, for example, she is focused on the present action of seeing this particular arrangement of the body; but her seeing contains a depth that comes from her 30 years of practice, study and teaching, which is beyond the imagination of a new student of yoga.
- As we hold this present experience we see that it moves over time. To register it fully, so that some understanding can emerge, we need a continuing engagement, a “contemplation” (*anupassanā*). *Anupassanā*, from *anu* (= “along”) + *passanā* (= “seeing”), means “seeing along,” or “tracking.” *Anupassanā* is the central activity of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishments of mindfulness. The practitioner of *satipaṭṭhāna* is described as “contemplating body as body ... contemplating feeling as feeling ... contemplating mind as mind ... contemplating phenomena as phenomena.” This implies a *tracking* of experience over time, maintaining a *continuity* of awareness and attention which allows a sensitivity to how things behave over time.

Gati

Gati (retentiveness) is the capacity to hold something in the mind, to be aware in a way that allows a broader picture to emerge. This entails the ability to wait — until something happens which will complete the picture, uncover the pattern, and so reveal what this present experience means. The ability to wait is extremely important in developing a skill. Practising basic exercises in a new skill, our experience is often mundane, even boring. It’s not what we want, or expect. But the development of any skill requires us to learn how to wait, to give the art we are practising time to reveal something of itself, at its own pace and in its own way.

Dhiti

Dhiti (memory) is the capacity to bring out from the deep places of the mind what is stored there. Memory entails a response to present experience which brings with it

¹⁵ This is a well-known discourse that lays out the method “establishing mindfulness.” It is the scriptural source of modern insight meditation techniques.

what has been held from the past. It therefore implies the capacity to apply one's experience (in the sense of what has been learned) to present circumstances. Something has been absorbed, and so becomes available when called upon.

Paññā-veyyattiya

Paññā-veyyattiya (lucidity of wisdom) is the capacity to discern the patterns and directions of what is held in mind. More than just holding data, it is the ability to *navigate* data. Something has been experienced; but how well do we know our way around it? Here the Buddha's lucidity of wisdom is shown by his capacity to discuss the subtle nuances of *satipaṭṭhāna* without repeating himself. He knows a complex landscape, in both its broad patterns and detailed aspects, and this landscape is always available to him.

Mindfulness & wisdom

Mindfulness is found in presence; but a presence that comes from keeping the past in mind. The present is *extended* by mindfulness. While we often link the word "present" with "moment," the Buddha sees the present as far wider than a mere moment. Mindfulness *begins* with this moment but is cultivated through continuity through time, which is central to memory and the ability to navigate through a landscape.

Let's say we are being driven to a place we have never been before. Naturally we are aware of our surroundings. But if next week we had to drive to the same place ourselves, we might find it difficult to remember the way. "I remember this corner — but was it early or late in the journey? Was I coming or going?"

If we were being driven to a new place after being warned that next week we would have to drive ourselves, then the quality of our awareness would be different. We would be aware of the present moment, but at the same time placing that awareness into a larger context — the journey over time from here to there. So we would not simply be looking at things, but placing the momentary experience of each of these things into a larger landscape. Not just this sight, replaced by this sight, replaced by this sight, but the emergence of an unfolding landscape that creates meaning out of each experience by recognising how it fits into a broader pattern.

This is the link between mindfulness and wisdom. Mindfulness enables a capacity to map out a landscape in which separate aspects of experience fit together to form a pattern, creating an understanding which is then available for later use.

In the practice of mindfulness we do not simply try to stay with present experience. We certainly *do* seek to stay with present experience, but accompanied by a sense of direction, as we learn to navigate our way through the landscape of our physical and mental world. We are concerned with developing understanding, and we do this by studying the patterns of things as they unfold over time.

There is a quality of creativity implied here. Cultivating mindfulness requires more than just being mechanically aware of what is happening now, but studying the nature of experience *as* it unfolds, learning *how* it unfolds. We make the landscape our own. The landscape we are exploring is vast, rich and diverse. No wonder the Buddha could talk about it for a century without repeating himself.

Returning to Venerable Ānanda's description of the mature mindfulness practitioner, we can begin to understand what he means:

She has mindfulness; possessing supreme mindfulness and discrimination, recalling and recollecting what was done and said long ago. (Sekha Sutta M53)

Mindfulness is linked to memory, in the sense that experience *is* memory. Let's consider our experienced yoga teacher looking at a posture. She *sees* the posture in its depth and subtleties. To understand the posture in front of her she does not have to try to recall all the lessons and training sessions she has gone through; she simply sees the posture, now. But that seeing *contains* her memories going back 30 years, and these memories manifest as present wisdom. Because of this depth, in simply seeing the posture the yoga teacher understands the posture.

Face-to-face with experience

Having looked at the nature of mindfulness and its relationship with both memory and wisdom, we will now focus on the nature of mindfulness through the activity of "establishing" it. We will also look at mindfulness by examining its opposite, the absence of mindfulness, and the implications this absence has for wisdom. And finally, we will get a sense of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishments of mindfulness, as a way of life.

The language the Buddha uses to describe how we create mindfulness gives us a sense of its nature. Mindfulness plays a central role in *bhāvanā*, the "cultivation" of the good, which in English is usually translated as "meditation." In several discourses the practitioner is described as beginning formal meditation practice in this way:

[The meditator] sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back and establishes her mindfulness directly [*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*].

Mindfulness is something that needs to be "set up, established." This word comes from the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, from *upa* (denoting nearness or close touch) + *√sthā* ("stand," "station"). *Upaṭṭhahati* means "to stand near," "to be present," and therefore "to serve." Rupert Gethin comments:

The regular Nikāya¹⁶ expression *satim upaṭṭhapetvā* means, then, "causing mindfulness to stand near," "causing mindfulness to be present" or even "causing mindfulness to come into service." ... What is meant ... is that *sati* is

¹⁶ "Nikāya" means "collection," here the earliest collections of the Buddha's discourses.

understood as a quality of mind that “stands near” or “serves” the mind; it watches over the mind. One might say that it is a form of “presence of mind.”¹⁷

The use of the root $\sqrt{sthā}$ implies a firm grounding or stationing of the mind. Awareness is firmly fixed — on something, something *definite*. This is emphasised in our passage when the meditator is described as “establishing her mindfulness *directly*,” using the adverb *parimukham*, from *pari* (“around,” “completely”) + *mukha* (“mouth,” “face,” “entrance”). Here, *parimukham* is an idiom, and is to be read as something like “completely (*pari*) facing (*mukha*)” the object of experience, indicating the establishment of a “face-to-face” encounter with it. It conveys a firmness and directness in the engagement with experience, whatever it may be. This fits with the Abhidhamma¹⁸ understanding, where mindfulness appears as the state of confronting or being face-to-face with an object.¹⁹

Let’s say in my meditation practice I’m working on breathing as my meditation object, but my mind is preoccupied by some thought-stream and I’m feeling discontented with the state of my meditation. Clearly there’s awareness here. If asked later, I could describe the situation. But mindfulness is weak, because the mind is wobbling between at least four fields of experience, and not directly confronting any of them. The mind is not fixed, established. Not face-to-face with the situation, but floating around it.

Mindfulness is concerned with establishing a firm contact with what’s really happening. For example, I might realise that what’s governing this situation is my attitude of discontent and resistance. This is why I’m half-hearted about the breathing, easily distracted and generally restless. So I turn towards my discontent, face it fully, and place awareness right there. Or I might renew my determination to place awareness on the breathing, directly engaging with it. Or I might make the distracting thought-stream my meditation object. I could even make the whole package, the complete experience of sitting there and mentally wobbling, my meditation object. But in any case I need to fix awareness, firmly, on something. Only then can mindfulness emerge.

The strong pillar

In Dantabhūmi Sutta (*The grade of the tamed* M125) the Buddha explains how people can be tamed from their normal, everyday wildness to living with a heart which is unified, cooled and at peace. The Buddha uses an extended metaphor of taming a

¹⁷ R. M. L. Gethin. *The Buddhist path to awakening: a study of the bodhi-pakkhiyā-dhammā*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001: 32.

¹⁸ Abhidhamma is the systematic philosophy / psychology of early Buddhism, developed by Buddhist scholars after the Buddha’s death.

¹⁹ Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed). *Abhidhammattha Sangaha. A comprehensive manual of abhidhamma*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Edition, 2000: 86.

wild elephant, during which he compares mindfulness to a large post firmly planted in the earth.

Just as the elephant trainer plants a large post in the earth and binds the forest elephant to it by the neck in order to subdue his forest habits ... these four establishments of mindfulness [*satipaṭṭhāna*] are bindings for the cultivated student's heart in order to subdue her habits, her memories and intentions, and her distress, fatigue, and fever based on the household life, so she may attain the true way and realise *nibbāna*.

We may want the clarity of mind and unification of the heart spoken of by the Buddha but when we begin to practise we find ourselves hindered by our restlessness, our obsessions, and by our determination to live in past and future rather than being fully centred in the present. The practice of establishing mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) is designed to ground us in this present reality, like a post planted firmly in the earth. Mindfulness has a firm, face-to-face quality that allows us to clearly confront our drives and impulses and see through them. It enables us to live in such a way that we are always directly facing our experience, regardless of what it is or what we want it to be.

The cultivated student's "memories and intentions" are subdued by mindfulness. These memories are of the fevers and concerns of our everyday lives, that threaten to drag us away from our engagement with the present into our habitual dreams and fantasies. Intentions based on the household life refer to the ordinary movements of the heart, restlessly seeking a satisfaction based on the stimulation of the senses. Mindfulness counters this restlessness through the firmness of its stability, found in our continuing relationship with our meditation object.

In *The simile of the six animals* the Buddha gives an example of how mindfulness works within the realm of the six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*) of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and "minding." He says:

Suppose a man caught six animals — with different domains and feeding grounds — and tied each with a strong rope. He caught a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal and a monkey, tied each with a strong rope, tied the ropes together and then released them. Those six animals, with their different domains and feeding grounds, would each pull in the direction of its own domain and feeding ground. ...

When those six animals became worn out and exhausted they would be dominated by the strongest among them, submitting to it and coming under its control. (Chappānakopama Sutta, Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta)

Our sense experiences continually rush in upon us through the six doors of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Like six disparate animals tied together and lacking any firm, central point of stability and direction, we are tossed about by our different drives. We find ourselves pushed or pulled according to our strongest aversion or desire of the moment. This is our situation when mindfulness is absent — in other words, this is the normal human condition. The Buddha goes on to explain what

happens when mindfulness is established. Here, instead of tying the animals together, the man ties them to “a strong post or pillar.”

When these six animals became worn out and exhausted, they would sit or lie down right there.

The “strong post or pillar,” the Buddha explains, represents “mindfulness immersed in body” (*kāyagati sati*). Mindfulness represents a central point of stability and balance, a place where we are at home and can face our normal human drives of impulse, desire and aggression. Without mindfulness we lack stability of the heart. The Buddha sees the normal state of the human heart to be like a fish caught and thrown up on to land (Dhammapada 34). It thrashes about in a blind panic, never still for a moment. If the heart is to be trained, tamed, cooled, it must be led into stillness, and mindfulness is central to this. Mindfulness, in other words, plays a fundamental role in the practice of meditation.

Notice the importance of the body. Most of the modern meditation techniques use the body as their central reference point, their anchor, to hold the heart and mind firmly so the practitioner can calm down. For the Buddha, our relationship to the body is central to cultivating mindfulness.

Losing mindfulness

We have looked at how the Buddha speaks of establishing mindfulness. But of course, many times we are not mindful, we lose mindfulness. How does the Buddha speak of this? And what does it tell us about the nature of mindfulness?

Sati, mindfulness, literally means “memory,” so the loss of mindfulness is forgetfulness. When the Buddha speaks of lapses in mindfulness, one term he uses is *muttha-sati*, from *muttha* (“forgotten”) + *sati* (“mindfulness”). *Muttha* is derived from the verb *mussati*, “to forget, to pass into oblivion.” So the opposite of mindfulness is oblivion, and specifically the oblivion that comes from forgetting. Which has its own peculiar characteristic. Something is there; suddenly it isn’t; and that moment of loss is a moment of total absence.

How does forgetting work? We are cruising along, without a worry in the world. We reach for our wallet, say ... but it’s not there! A moment of confusion — that’s odd! It should be there. Then, panic — it *definitely* should be there! Panic is joined by realisation — I left it in that shop! Suddenly, a clear understanding of the whole situation arises. I have a problem, and I am acutely aware of all its dimensions.

Let’s look closely at this process. At the moment we forgot our wallet, did we have a problem? No. Nothing the matter. Why not? There’s no problem that can be discerned within the total absence which is *muttha-sati*, forgotten mindfulness. Forgotten mindfulness is a state of oblivion, of delusion, in which there is no problem because there is no awareness of any problem or even the possibility of a problem. We don’t know, and we don’t know *that* we don’t know. This is the very essence of

delusion. So the movement from mindfulness into loss of mindfulness is a movement from memory into forgetting, clarity into delusion, wisdom into ignorance.

Conversely, the movement from forgetting into mindfulness — of remembering — is a movement from delusion into understanding. Suddenly, I know the whole situation. “Yes, I put the wallet down to pick up the box, and, thinking I was done, sped off without it!” In that moment, everything is clear. So mindfulness begins with the movement out of oblivion, and is, in a sense, complete in that moment, for in that very movement oblivion ceases and understanding arises. Yet while already complete, mindfulness, as we have seen, implies movement through time, and so continuity. Mindfulness is threatened by the discontinuity which comes from forgetting, and is cultivated by the continuity of remembering. Which brings us to the *practice* of mindfulness, *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Satipaṭṭhāna

Satipaṭṭhāna, the establishments of mindfulness, is the practice generally known in English as “insight meditation.” We can see now why mindfulness is associated with wisdom, and so it comes as no surprise to learn that *satipaṭṭhāna* is regarded in the tradition as a wisdom practice. It is concerned primarily with changing our view (*ditṭhi*) of ourselves and our world, and does so through cultivating mindfulness. *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice has a discourse dedicated to it, and here we will look at part of the opening section to get a general sense of what it involves.

The Blessed One said: “This way, the four establishments of mindfulness, is for the one purpose of purifying beings, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, destroying pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realising *nibbāna*.

“What are the four?

“Here a *bhikkhu*,²⁰ surrendering desire and grief for the world, lives contemplating body as body, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.

“Surrendering desire and grief for the world he lives contemplating feeling as feeling, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.

“Surrendering desire and grief for the world he lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.

“Surrendering desire and grief for the world he lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.” (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* M10; D22)

The first thing we notice about this discourse is that it does not recommend a specific meditation object, such as the breathing, nor does it specify a particular meditation

²⁰ A *bhikkhu* is a fully ordained Buddhist monk, and a *bhikkhunī* is a fully ordained Buddhist nun. The Buddha often addresses his discourses to the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*, but an ancient tradition dating to the Buddha himself also defines “*bhikkhu*” in this context as any committed practitioner, ordained or lay, male or female (*Dhammapada* 142).

technique. *Satipaṭṭhāna* does not represent a meditation technique, as such. Rather, it refers to a way of living characterised by being awake rather than asleep, of remembering rather than forgetting.

The central *activity* of *satipaṭṭhāna* is “contemplation,” *anupassanā*. *Anupassanā* is a compound word, derived from *anu* (= “along”) + *passanā* (= “seeing”). *Anupassanā* is “seeing along,” tracking something over time. This implies a deliberate directing of the mind toward something, *establishing* one’s awareness with a direct face-to-face encounter with the object of experience. It also implies *continuity over time*, conveyed by the prefix *anu*, making this relationship with experience a habit, our normal dwelling place. This is suggested by saying the practitioner “*lives* (*viharati*) contemplating body as body ...” Such a way of life is based on cultivating a habitual state of mind in which three mental factors are cultivated: energy, mindfulness and clear understanding.

The role of sati

Satipaṭṭhāna is the *upaṭṭhāna* of *sati*, mindfulness “standing near,” “staying present to,” and “serving” the mind. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the activities of bringing mindfulness into service, where it watches over or guards the mind.

Mindfulness, in other words, implies not just awareness, but *reflexive* awareness, awareness bending back to itself. Normally, we are aware. We don’t have to make any special effort to *be* aware; we are *already* aware. We see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. Technically, we can say that it is the nature of mind to contact an object; to be aware of something. So far, so good. We are already aware. But are we aware *that* we are aware? And of *what* we are aware?

Have you ever had the experience of driving a car along familiar streets and suddenly realising you have no memory of the previous three blocks? Clearly, while driving through those city blocks you were aware, for otherwise you would now be dead or seriously injured. But did you *know* you were aware? Were you aware of your awareness? Or did this understanding occur only at that moment when you *remembered* you are now driving this car?

Meditators are very familiar with this kind of event through their experience of distraction. As I meditate, I become lost in thought. There is certainly awareness here, images flowing through the mind, capturing attention. Then suddenly, I *know* I am thinking. What’s the difference between this new experience — knowing I am thinking — and what was going on just a second before — thinking? Previously, there was awareness; now, there is awareness *of* awareness. Here, within in this quality of reflexivity, is where we find mindfulness.

Mindfulness translates *sati*, literally “memory,” and means remembering the present. When we are meditating, tracking our meditation object, and then suddenly slide into distraction, what happens? We forget. We forget the object of meditation; or, we

forget we are meditating. So we are distracted, and *don't know that we are distracted*. We are in fantasy, and don't know that we are in fantasy. We are aware of our fantasy; later, we may be able to recall what it was about. But when we are fully immersed in distraction we don't know we are fully immersed in distraction, and this "not knowing" is the essence of distraction and, of course, of delusion.

Suddenly, we *know* we are distracted. It's an interesting experience. A moment ago we were distracted, and didn't know; now, we know. What happened? We remember. We remember the object of meditation; or, we remember we are meditating. And what's the difference between our distracted awareness now that we know we are distracted, and our distracted awareness back then, before we knew? The difference is mindfulness, which always contains a quality of reflexivity, of awareness knowing itself.

So mindfulness remembers awareness, or it remembers the object of awareness. The work of being mindful, of *practising* mindfulness, is the work of reminding ourselves *that* we are (already) aware, or reminding ourselves *to be* aware — of this. Mindfulness, then, is always associated with energy. Awareness itself can be passive, purely receptive. Right now I am seeing, and am making no particular effort to see. But mindfulness is active. Right now, I am reminding myself *that* I am seeing, or *what* I am seeing. This quality of energy, activity, seems essential to mindfulness, and I find it suggestive that in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the practitioner is described as "ardent" (*ātāpī*), and so energetic, committed; and in the eightfold path,²¹ mindfulness is listed next to *vāyāma*, "energy / effort."

Two aspects of satipaṭṭhāna

We said that mindfulness remembers awareness or the object of awareness. These two possibilities are found within the single word *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Satipaṭṭhāna is a compound word that can be read in two ways. Firstly, *sati + upa-(t)thāna* is an activity, that of remembering awareness or the object of awareness. This is how we have been using the term so far, translating it as the establishment of mindfulness. Secondly, *sati + pa-(t)thāna* is what is remembered as present to awareness. These are the objects of mindfulness, what we are mindful of. *Satipaṭṭhāna* read in this way is usually translated as the foundations of mindfulness.

The four *satipaṭṭhānas* in terms of our first meaning, *sati-upa-(t)thāna*, are the four activities that bring *sati*, mindfulness, into service, establishing mindfulness. These are the contemplations (*anupassanā*), tracking experience over time. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* in terms of our second meaning, *sati-pa-(t)thāna*, indicate what we tracking, the objects of our awareness. These are body (*kāya*), feeling (*vedanā*), heart / mind (*citta*) and the dharma / phenomena (*dhamma / dhammā*). Without going into details, we can simply say that these four foundations of mindfulness represent the entirety of human experience. We have already mentioned that the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta

²¹ The eightfold path is the Buddha's summary of his path of practice, or recommended way of life.

does not recommend any one specific meditation object. This is because *satipaṭṭhāna* practice uses *every* aspect of experience as its object.

Satipaṭṭhāna as way of life

The universality of the foundations of mindfulness shows us that practising *satipaṭṭhāna* involves more than performing a meditation technique. It is a way of life. The Buddha spoke of this using the term *gocara*, which literally means a cow's (go) grazing area/ activity (*cara*). *Gocara* carries a complex range of meanings that refer to the totality of our way of life. *Gocara* includes how we make a living, our life habits and our social relationships. All these are relevant to the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

The Buddha spoke of *satipaṭṭhāna* as the *gocara* of his students, illustrating his message with the story of the hawk and the quail. A hawk seized a quail, and as he was being carried off the quail lamented, "We were so unlucky ... ! We strayed out of our own territory [*gocara*] into the domain of others. If we had stayed in our own territory, in our own ancestral domain, this hawk would not have had a chance against me in a fight!"

The hawk was intrigued, and on being told that the quail's territory was "a freshly ploughed field covered with lumps of soil" she released him, boasting that he would not escape her there. Once the quail was released and the hawk flew up, the quail climbed onto a large lump of soil and shouted defiantly, "Come and get me now, hawk!"

The hawk dropped from the sky, aiming straight for the quail. But at the last possible moment the quail stepped aside and slipped under the lump of soil, and the hawk shattered herself against the earth. The Buddha warned his students that, like the quail, they should not move beyond their home territory, for then they could become victims of Māra, the god of death and of limits.

And what is a bhikkhu's territory [*gocara*], his own ancestral domain? The four establishments of mindfulness. (Sakuṇagghī Sutta, *Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta*)

Here, *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishments of mindfulness, is not spoken of as something restricted to a meditation technique. *Satipaṭṭhāna* is an approach to meditation, centred on cultivating mindfulness, and an approach to life itself — a commitment to a continuous remembering of what is happening, now. The Buddha seems to be suggesting that these two aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* are not meant to be separated, although people tend to do so, because they think of "meditation" as some kind of special activity that is taken up as a specialised practice.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is more than mere awareness. Mindfulness represents a relationship to our felt experience that comes from tracking it over time. It entails a continuity of attention that includes the past as it flows into and informs the present. The present,

for the Buddha is not a theoretical “moment,” but the experienced present that includes the immediately remembered past.

Mindfulness is remembering the present. Its opposite is forgetfulness, and the oblivion that comes with forgetting. Forgetting represents a discontinuity of awareness, a moment of total loss. Mindfulness is associated with continuity of awareness over time, and so the development of understanding, the understanding that comes with experience.

This understanding is nourished by the reflexivity contained within mindfulness. Mindfulness is not simply awareness, but awareness of awareness. Mindfulness is a remembering of what had been previously forgotten, a recognition of a situation not previously known. The continuity of mindfulness, emphasised in the practice of establishing mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), stimulates that recognition, making it part of the everyday furniture of the mind. From this emerges understanding, or wisdom.

Contemporary psychologists and therapists who are now discovering the apparently new concept of mindfulness are faced with a choice. Do we reinvent this particular wheel, or learn from those who have been using it for over two thousand years? An interesting choice, which will have consequences for the development of both psychology and Buddhism.