

Foundations of Mindfulness

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The origins of [mindful awareness] practice are found in Gautama's own discourse on the "Foundations of Mindfulness" (*Satipatthana Sutta*) in the Pali Canon. It has been described as "the most important discourse ever given by the Buddha on mental development," and as such is highly revered in all Theravada Buddhist countries of Asia. The Buddha opened the discourse by declaring:

There is, monks, this way that leads only to the purification of beings, to the overcoming of sorrow and distress, to the disappearance of pain and sadness, to the gaining of the right path, to the realization of Nirvana—that is to say the four foundations of mindfulness.

These four foundations are the four areas of life to which mindful awareness needs to be applied: body, feelings, mind and objects of mind. In other words, the totality of experience.

The Buddha recommends that a person retire to a forest, the root of a tree or a solitary place, sit cross-legged with body erect and then turn his or her attention to their breath. Then, "mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, he knows that he breathes in a long breath, and breathing out a long breath, he knows that he breathes out a long breath." There is no attempt to control the breath or in any way interfere with the immediacy of experience as it unfolds. If the breath is long, one recognizes it to be long; if short, one recognizes it to be short.

Yet for many this seemingly straightforward exercise turns out to be remarkably tricky. One finds that no matter how sincere one's intention to be attentive and aware, the mind rebels against such instructions and races off to indulge in all manner of distractions, memories and fantasies. One is forced to confront the sobering truth that one is only notionally "in charge" of one's psychological life. The comforting illusion of personal coherence and continuity is ripped away to expose only fragmentary islands of consciousness separated by yawning gulfs of unawareness. Similarly, the convenient fiction of a well-adjusted, consistent personality turns out to be merely a skillfully edited and censored version of a turbulent psyche. The first step in this practice of mindful awareness is radical self-acceptance.

Such self-acceptance, however, does not operate in an ethical vacuum, where no moral assessment is made of one's emotional states. The training in mindful awareness is part of a Buddhist path with values and goals. Emotional states are evaluated according to whether they increase or decrease the potential for suffering. If an emotion, such as hatred or envy, is judged to be destructive, then it is simply recognized as such. It is neither expressed through violent thoughts, words or deeds, nor is it suppressed or denied as incompatible with a "spiritual" life. In seeing it for what it is—a transient emotional state—one mindfully observes it follow its own nature: to arise, abide for a while, and then pass away.

The Buddha described his teaching as "going against the stream." The unflinching light of mindful awareness reveals the extent to which we are tossed along in the stream of past conditioning and habit. The moment we decide to stop and look at what is going on (like a

swimmer suddenly changing course to swim upstream instead of downstream), we find ourselves battered by powerful currents we had never even suspected—precisely because until that moment we were largely living at their command.

The practice of mindful awareness is a first step in the direction of inner freedom. Disciplining oneself to focus attention single-mindedly on the breath (for example) enables one to become progressively more quiet and concentrated. Such stillness, though, is not an end in itself. It serves as a platform from which to observe more dearly what is taking place within us. It allows the steady depth of awareness needed to understand the very origins of conditioning: namely, how delusion and craving are at the top of human suffering. Such meditative understanding is experiential rather than intellectual, therapeutic rather than dogmatic, liberating rather than merely convincing.

The aim of mindful awareness is the understanding that frees one from delusion and craving. In Pali, such understanding is called vipassana ("penetrative seeing"), and it is under this name that the traditional practice of mindful awareness is frequently presented in the West today. Vipassana is often translated as "insight" and courses are offered on "insight meditation."

This usage has given rise to some confusion. It has led to the impression that some Buddhists practice vipassana, while others (such as practitioners of Zen or Tibetan Buddhism) do not. In fact, vipassana is central to all forms of Buddhist meditation practice. The distinctive goal of any Buddhist contemplative tradition is a state in which inner calm (samatha) is unified with insight (vipassana). Over the centuries, each tradition has developed its own methods for actualizing this state. And it is in these methods that the traditions differ, not in their end objective of unified calm and insight.