Part 1: Establishing Mindfulness

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 37:16

Good evening, everyone.

Tonight and in my next talk, I'm going to be talking about mindfulness. Tonight we're going to focus on establishing mindfulness. The idea is that we're trying to get some understanding of what mindfulness is through the activity surrounding it and the kind of language that the Buddha uses when he talks about it.

When he talks about generating mindfulness, the term he uses can be translated into English as "establishing." Then we're going to look at how he talks about the absence of mindfulness—how we lose mindfulness. Two sides to that coin. And finally, we're going to examine the importance of continuity for the practice of mindfulness.

Let's start with how we generate mindfulness. We'll begin with meditation practice. The suttas are an oral tradition, so they're very formulaic and very dense. You get a lot of meaning packed into very few words, which means there's always the job of unpacking the sutras, the discourses. This is commentary. They're very compact because they were memorized and chanted. They're not texts to be read; they're chants to be sung in choir. So we have to take these formulas and unpack them.

When the Buddha talks about formal meditation practice—how one begins meditation practice—there's one sentence which appears again and again to describe this, roughly translated as: "The meditator sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back, and establishes her mindfulness directly." Then it goes on to describe whatever meditation practice the person is doing. You notice it all begins, actually begins with posture, but you set up a posture in order to establish mindfulness.

The original Pali word translated here as "establishes mindfulness" is the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, from the root *s thā*, which in Pali becomes *ṭhā*, but the Sanskrit root *sthā* gives us "stand," "station," "stable," "stability," "establish," and so on. So you have this root *sthā*, and then you have the prefix *upa*, which denotes nearness or intimacy.

This use of the root *sthā* implies a firm grounding or stationing of the mind, so awareness is firmly grounded on something, something quite definite. And that grounding is very intimate, which is the *upa* aspect. This is emphasized when the meditator is described as establishing her mindfulness directly.

Now, this takes the word *parimukhaṃ*, which gets translated here as "directly," and often you don't see it translated like that—it's a bit controversial. Basically, this word is *mukha*, meaning mouth or face or entrance, and the prefix *pari*, which can mean "around" but can also mean "completely." So *parimukhaṃ*: around the entrance, or around the face.

In two important meditation discourses, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta, this expression comes just before instructions on using breathing as the object of mindfulness. You have that sentence and then you get launched into a description of breathing meditation.

In the Orthodox Theravāda tradition, *parimukhaṃ* is taken as a noun and read literally as establishing the mindfulness around the mouth, or around the entrance—in other words, placing mindfulness at the point where the air enters and leaves the body. This tradition comes very early; it begins with the Paṭisambhidāmagga, which is the first path text in early Buddhism that tries to systematize the Buddhist teaching and create this whole path from beginning to end. All the Theravāda follows this interpretation.

But personally, I don't think it's right. So I'm not Orthodox Theravāda. What I'm doing is grammatically perfectly correct: I'm reading *parimukhaṃ* as an adverb, not a noun, as part of the action of establishing. And I'm also reading it as an idiom, not to be read literally.

It's like in English, if we want to travel by taxi, we might say, "I want to catch a taxi." Now, this does not mean that we go out on a hunt, perhaps armed, and then capture a taxi cab, presumably overpowering the driver. What it means is we hire the services of the taxi and its driver. It's an idiom.

If we see *parimukhaṃ* as an adverb and an idiom, we can see, first of all, that it does not refer to where mindfulness is established—around the face—so working out what's the object of mindfulness. What it does is qualify the action of establishing. So *parimukhaṃ* should be read as something like "completely" (*p ari*) "facing the object of experience." It indicates a face-to-face encounter with the experience.

And of course, when you do meditation practice, especially when you do intensive meditation practice, you often get this sense of being face-to-face with what's going on. In fact, often that can become uncomfortable, and it's a reason meditators might want to take a break. This is too much.

So this conveys a sense of being firm and direct in how we engage with the experience, whatever the experience is—establishing mindfulness directly.

And this fits in with the later Abhidhamma understanding, where mindfulness appears as the state of confronting or being face to face with an object.

So for example, let's say I'm working on breathing as my meditation object, but my mind is preoccupied by some thought stream or other, and I'm feeling discontented with the state of my meditation. Has anybody had that kind of experience in meditating? It might be just me.

Now, in this situation, clearly I am aware. If somebody asked me later what happened when we were meditating, I could complain about the whole situation. But although there's awareness, mindfulness is weak. And the reason why mindfulness is weak is because the mind is wobbling between at least three fields of experience: there's breathing, there's thinking, there's discontent. There's body, there's a cognitive aspect of mind, there's the affective aspect of mind or the heart. And I am not directly confronting any of

these fields of experience. The mind is not face to face with the situation but floating around it. The mind is not established.

Question from participant: Is that why there is that unclear feeling, that unclearness?

Yes, I would say so. And that lack of clarity is a sign that mindfulness is weak. One of the signs that mindfulness is getting stronger is that the experience becomes clearer.

I just came from teaching a nine-day retreat in the Blue Mountains, where people had the classic experience—it was cold and wet and windy, with this big garden. It was quite lovely actually, very good, because I came from a Brisbane heatwave. But people were reporting, you know, "The sky is incredibly blue, bluer than ever. The grass is greener than ever. The birds are birdier than ever." Everything is fresh and new. And this is characteristic of mindfulness.

So mindfulness is all about establishing a firm connection with what is really happening. In this situation, for example, I might realise that what's governing things is my attitude of discontent and resistance. And this is why I'm half-hearted about the breathing, easily distracted, generally restless.

So what to do? I turn toward my discontent. I face it fully. I put awareness bang right on it. Or I might renew my determination to place awareness on the breathing and just go for it. Or I might make the thought stream my meditation object. Or I could make even the whole package—the complete experience of sitting here and mentally wobbling—my meditation object. This last one is probably the most difficult, by the way. But in any case, what I need to do is to fix awareness firmly on something, and then mindfulness can emerge.

One way that the Buddha talks about all this is through the image of the strong post or pillar. Let's look at the Dantabhūmi Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 125. Here the Buddha is explaining how people can be tamed from their normal everyday wildness to living with a heart that is unified, cooled and at peace. And he uses the extended metaphor of taming a wild elephant.

Elephants were extremely important in the Buddha's time in terms of the economy. They were a major form of heavy machinery, heavy equipment, important for transport, very important for military uses. Training elephants was big business, and successful elephant trainers were highly regarded and presumably very well paid.

So he's using this extended metaphor of taming a wild elephant to indicate the practice, and he compares mindfulness to a large post firmly planted in the earth. He says, "Just as the elephant trainer plants a large post in the earth and ties the forest elephant to it by the neck in order to subdue his forest habits, these four establishments of mindfulness are ties for the cultivated student's heart in order to overcome her habits, her memories and intentions, and her distress, fatigue and fever based on the household life, so that she may attain the true way and realise Nibbana."

This is the Buddha's exposition of how mindfulness works. Basically what he's pointing out is: look, we come to the meditation practice. Why? We want the clarity of mind, the peace of heart spoken about by the Buddha. And then we start to practice. And what we find is that we're constantly hindered by our restlessness, our obsessions, our determination to live in the past and the future rather than be centered on the present.

The practice of establishing mindfulness is designed to ground us in the present. This is the post planted firmly in the earth, and mindfulness has this firm face-to-face quality that allows us to clearly confront our hindrances in order to see through them. It's training 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. This is the habit that we're developing.

The Buddha says the cultivated student—the Arya Savaka, basically the mature practitioner—the cultivated student's "memories and intentions" are overcome by mindfulness. The memories represent the habitual fevers and concerns of our ordinary everyday lives. They keep dragging us away from engaging with the present and into our habitual dreams and fantasies. And then you get "intentions based on the household life"—this refers to the ordinary movements of the heart restlessly seeking satisfaction based on the stimulus of the senses. Mindfulness counters this restlessness through the firmness of its stability, found in maintaining this continuous relationship with the meditation object.

That pillar or post—for example, the most obvious place we find it is in setting up a posture when we practice. I plant myself here, and now I'm going to face whatever comes. I'm not going to run away. I could run away physically, but I could also run away mentally and emotionally, just drifting off into thinking about this or that. But mindfulness is the opposite of running away. It's confrontation, face to face, direct.

A participant asked: "How does this work for someone who has been conditioned their whole life to think in certain ways, to react in certain ways? If you've spent fifty or sixty years living like that, can mindfulness still help? Can people still change, or is it very difficult?"

It's both difficult and change is possible. But certainly the older we are when we get started, the more stuff we have to work through. So it's always best to start as soon as possible, which in practical terms means let's start now. I could decide, "Look, I'm over sixty, that's it, it's too late, maybe next lifetime." But what am I doing then? I'm postponing the whole thing. What's important is my relationship with now. Right now I'm confronting what's going on.

The training in mindfulness is to keep coming back to the present. What's happening now? What's happening now? What's happening now? Usually when you take up meditation training, you're given a meditation object. They say, "You've got to spend the next thirty minutes face-to-face with meditation object X." But from a mindfulness point of view, it can be any meditation object.

You have more flexibility than people sometimes realize when they actually take up this practice. Often

people are told they must make the breath their meditation object, and some find that very difficult. They then decide they can't practice mindfulness because they don't have a good relationship with their breathing. But the point is it can be anything. The posture itself can serve as a good meditation object. It doesn't matter what the object is. What matters is that I'm going to confront what's happening now.

So when my habits take over—think, think, think, think, think—what is it that's happening now? It's the thinking. It's the habit. So what do I do? I confront it. This is it. This is what is going on. This is what it feels like. And I'm mindful. Gradually I learn to turn the Titanic around. It can be done.

Let's look at how mindfulness works within the realm of the six senses, or the six sense fields. We're going to examine the simile of the six animals, which refers to the six sense fields of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding.

The Buddha says, suppose a man caught six animals, each with their own domains and feeding grounds, and tied each with a strong rope. We know immediately this man is not very nice. 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 these six animals became worn out and exhausted, they would be dominated by the strongest among them, submitting to it and coming under its control.

So this image centers entirely on the six senses. The senses include mind, for the Buddha considers the mind a sense because a sense is a sensitivity—a sensitivity to a particular kind of data. The eyes are sensitive to light and color. Ears are sensitive to sound, and so on. Mind too is a sensitivity, responsive to its own particular stream of data: thoughts, perceptions, and so on. But it also takes in the data from the five physical sense fields. So in total, six senses.

These senses are always hungry. They're searching for pleasant stimuli and trying to avoid painful stimuli. This continual searching does not allow for any rest. What should I do now? What should I think now? What do I want now? We're living out an endless search for satisfaction that never comes, or if it does come, quickly ends. This searching in conflict reveals what the Buddha calls dukkha.

Notice that each of the senses heads off in its own direction. In other words, our impulses are not unified and coherent. Each sense searches for its own particular pleasantness and struggles to avoid its own particular pain. The senses, the Buddha is saying, are like six disparate animals tied together, lacking any firm central point of stability or direction, tossed about by their different obsessions. We find ourselves pushed and pulled according to our strongest aversion or our strongest desire of this moment.

This is our situation when mindfulness is absent. This is the unmindful person. Do you get a sense of what he's talking about? You quickly see it when you start to meditate.

And then the Buddha goes on to explain what happens when mindfulness is present. Here, instead of tying

the animals together, the man ties them to a strong post or pillar. And the Buddha says, when these six animals become worn out and exhausted, they would sit or lie down right there. This is the difference. Instead of being exhausted and pulled about by whatever animal is strongest for this particular moment, and then being dragged off in another direction when that animal is exhausted but another animal has another go, they're in the same place and that's where they lie down or sit down.

And the Buddha says the strong post or pillar represents mindfulness immersed in body. This is Kayagata Sati. So first of all, mindfulness gives us a central point of stability and balance. It gives us a place where we are at home and we can face our normal human drives and impulses. Without mindfulness, we don't have stability of the heart.

In one very striking image, the Buddha compares the normal state of the human heart to a fish that's caught and thrown up onto land. This comes from Dhammapada 34. The fish is thrashing about in a blind panic and it's not still for a single moment. And the Buddha says, this is the normal human condition. This is what we're doing all the time. And if the heart is to be tamed, trained, cooled, it has to be led into stillness, and mindfulness is absolutely central to this. It's central to meditation practice.

You notice how the mindfulness that's emphasized here is mindfulness immersed in body. The Buddha sees this as absolutely fundamental to the practice. And in fact, most modern meditation techniques use body as their central reference point in some way or another, as a kind of anchor to hold the heart and the mind firmly so the practitioner can calm down.

For the Buddha, our relationship to the body is absolutely central to the practice because when we're mindful of body, we are in the present. Body is necessarily and always in the present, and mindfulness practice can only take place in the present. So our relationship to body is extremely important.

One mistake that people make, especially beginners, is that they try to go for a subtle awareness right from the very beginning. "I'm going to track the movements of my breathing." Now, that's a very good meditation object, but it's relatively advanced. You need to be reasonably calm and clear to be able to do it. And of course, we're not calm and clear. So using body, setting up your meditation posture, feeling the whole body, and then opening yourself up to all the disturbances within the body—that's much more clear, much more obvious. And you can get your mindfulness going with that.

Maintaining that posture, refusing to move, again plants you. It creates that situation I call a posture of attention. It's like, here I am, confronting what's going on. And what's going on might be hopeless distraction—let's say sixty or seventy years of bad habits. Well, fine. That's what I'm mindful of. That's the meditation object. And it's a very good meditation object.

So this is how the Buddha talks about establishing mindfulness. How does he talk about losing it? And what does this tell us about mindfulness?

Let's actually look at the Pali word that gets translated as mindfulness. And this of course is sati. Sati

literally means memory. It comes from the verb sadati, to remember.

So the opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. When the Buddha speaks of lapses in mindfulness, the way that one loses mindfulness, one term he uses is *muṭṭha sati*, where *muṭṭha* means "forgotten" and *sati* is mindfulness. So: forgotten mindfulness. *Muṭṭha* comes from the verb *mussati*, to forget, to pass into oblivion—this according to the old Pali-English dictionary. So the opposite of mindfulness is oblivion, and specifically, the oblivion that comes from forgetting.

This has its own peculiar characteristic, its own peculiar flavor. When something is here, then suddenly it isn't. And that moment of loss is a total absence.

We can see this in normal everyday forgetting. Let's say we're cruising along, we don't have a worry in the world, and we confidently and calmly reach for our wallet. But that's odd—it's not there. There's a moment of confusion. That's very odd. It should be there. And then there's panic. It definitely should be there, but it definitely isn't. And then panic might be joined by realization: I must have left it in that shop. Suddenly, a clear understanding of the whole situation arises. I have a problem. I am acutely aware of all its dimensions. And I have a fairly good idea what to do to solve it. So I head back to the shop, and sure enough, there's the wallet. I paid for the item, I was so pleased with my purchase that I grabbed it, turned around, walked out, and forgot the wallet.

Now, if we look closely at this process: at the moment we forgot our wallet, did we have a problem? The answer is no. Nothing's the matter. All is well in the world. In fact, I'm clutching my new item and I'm very pleased with myself. In other words, there's no problem that can be discerned within the total absence that is *muṭṭha sati*, forgotten mindfulness.

Forgotten mindfulness, or simply forgetting, is a state of oblivion, of delusion, where there's no problem because there's no awareness of any problem. There's not even the awareness of the possibility of a problem. We don't know, and we don't know that we don't know. And this state, of course, is the very essence of delusion.

So the movement from mindfulness into loss of mindfulness is a movement from memory into forgetting, from clarity into delusion, from wisdom into ignorance. And conversely, the movement from forgetting to mindfulness is the movement from delusion to understanding—when suddenly you know the whole situation. That's right, I put the wallet down to pick up the item, and thinking I was done, I sped off without it. In that moment, everything is clear.

Mindfulness begins with the movement out of oblivion. And it is, in a sense, complete in that very moment. Because in that very movement, oblivion ceases and understanding arises.

For example, have you ever had the experience of sliding into distracted thinking? Has that ever happened? Do you notice that when you slide into thinking, you don't know that you've slid into thinking? You start to get distracted, you start to think, and you actually don't know that you're thinking. You think

you're meditating. And then suddenly—five nanoseconds, five seconds, five minutes, five hours later—it's like, "Whoops, I'm thinking. Aren't I supposed to be meditating?"

Has that ever happened? This amazing capacity to be thinking of something but not even know that we're thinking—this is just a miracle of the human mind. Here we have awareness, but we don't have mindfulness.

Now, the moment when I realise, "Oh, wait a minute, I'm thinking, I'm not supposed to be thinking"—that already is mindfulness. It's not that I come out of distraction and then think, "Now, where did I leave my mindfulness? I've got to pick this up somehow. I think I'll take a break first." The very action of realising "Oh, I'm distracted"—that is already mindfulness. And the mindfulness is already complete.

In other words, that moment for a meditator who's practising mindfulness is pure gold. Because you very clearly get a sense of what mindfulness is all about, what it feels like. So never take that moment for granted, and never waste it by criticising yourself: "Hopeless, I can't do this. I'm thinking again. It's ridiculous."

What you should be thinking is, "Wow, that's fantastic! I've just experienced spontaneous mindfulness. I did everything I could to prevent it, but I failed and the mindfulness arose. This must be because in previous lives I've practised mindfulness meditation, and now I'm expert at it."

So that moment of realising "Oh, I'm distracted"—watch that, because that's the movement from delusion into mindfulness.

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