

Everyday Mindfulness

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 3 min read

Full Awareness

The Buddha asks us to act in ‘full awareness’ when we go about the ordinary tasks of daily life. The first exercise he prescribes is full awareness while going forth and returning.

Say we are walking to our workplace. As we note the sensations of walking in the legs and feet, attention is drawn into the present moment. For full awareness the context must also be born in mind: we are going to work. Full awareness requires a broad understanding of our actions alongside the stream of sensations that accompanies them.

Instead of the detailed note we use for Mahasi practice, broad-brush phrases work better here. On our way to work we can note: ‘Going to work... going to work.’ Sounds obvious but how easy it is to forget the bigger picture. We go to work on autopilot, so familiar with every step of the journey that we can devote our time to worrying or daydreaming. The note ‘going to work’ lifts us out of the doldrums, lets us feel more purposeful, helps us appreciate our surroundings.

Reminding ourselves of the broader context can expose hidden emotions. We might feel a deep reluctance to note ‘going to work’, for example, but feel happy later in the days as we retrace our steps, noting ‘going home’. This highlights a negative attitude to work. If we do not make the note, that negativity might later sneak out as carelessness, not bothering to finish tasks properly, alienating colleagues and making the situation worse.

However, if we note ‘going to work’ the weariness or anxiety or depression we associate with work comes to the fore. Although it might feel worse than heading for the job on autopilot, bearing with the feelings means the negativity can be acknowledged. Acknowledging suffering is a form of self-care and has a very beneficial impact psychologically. We are much less likely to act from negativity once we’re aware of it. We might note some satisfaction in completing a task, find pleasure in cooperating with colleagues. Imperceptibly, perhaps, the situation starts to improve.

Even for less emotionally charged activities, the experience of going forward can differ from returning. Say I have to nip down to the shop for groceries. I may be bright and purposeful at the outset. My step is light and I look with interest at the neighbour’s gardens. Coming home my steps might be more plodding, my eyes downcast. What I am seeing here is the dukkha of transience. Each new activity offers a glimmer of hope that this world can make us happy. But when the choice between carrots and broccoli, biscuits and cake have been made and all the money spent, it becomes clear that my shopping spree has not

delivered the goods I was secretly hoping for.

Of course the pattern can vary. For instance, the prospect of meeting friends may find us brighter on the way home than heading out. Worthwhile noting as it helps us appreciate our friends when we see how they lift our mood.

The second task the Buddha prescribes is to be fully aware when looking ahead and looking away. Say we are returning from the shops on autopilot, rehashing our problems, eyes vaguely scanning the pavement. Now and again, we look up and ahead in a semi-automatic health-and-safety check of the broader environment. If we have primed ourselves to see 'looking ahead' as worth registering, that automatic check might remind us to be mindful. Looking ahead reminds us of our destination, so we can return to full awareness instead of being lost in negativity.

While looking ahead is often stimulating, looking away often carries subtle dukkha. A friend practising mindfulness of speech found that when reacting against what another person was saying, her head turned slightly aside. Once she had detected the pattern, she was then able to use this as a 'wake-up' call to notice aversion and her communication could then be much more honest and straightforward.

Full awareness does not mean self-awareness. Say we are preparing dinner. We may be cutting carrots, too absorbed in the task to note 'preparing dinner' or 'cutting carrots'. Then suddenly we become aware of 'me' who is cutting carrots and worry that we weren't being mindful because we hadn't been self-aware. That's a mistake. If we hadn't been lost in thought while cutting carrots, then we were being mindful. The sense of self comes and goes and can disappear altogether when we are fully absorbed in an activity.

Following the Buddha's exercises for Full Awareness supports mindfulness throughout all aspects of daily life. Instead of taking ourselves and our situation for granted we wake up to the extraordinary treasure we call awareness.

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