
The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering

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Chapter VI - Right Mindfulness (Samma Sati)

The Buddha says that the Dhamma, the ultimate truth of things, is directly visible, timeless, calling out to be approached and seen. He says further that it is always available to us, and that the place where it is to be realized is within oneself. The ultimate truth, the Dhamma, is not something mysterious and remote, but the truth of our own experience. It can be reached only by understanding our experience, by penetrating it right through to its foundations. This truth, in order to become liberating truth, has to be known directly. It is not enough merely to accept it on faith, to believe it on the authority of books or a teacher, or to think it out through deductions and inferences. It has to be known by insight, grasped and absorbed by a kind of knowing which is also an immediate seeing.

What brings the field of experience into focus and makes it accessible to insight is a mental faculty called in Pali *sati*, usually translated as "mindfulness." Mindfulness is presence of mind, attentiveness or awareness. Yet the kind of awareness involved in mindfulness differs profoundly from the kind of awareness at work in our usual mode of consciousness. All consciousness involves awareness in the sense of a knowing or experiencing of an object. But with the practice of mindfulness awareness is applied at a special pitch. The mind is deliberately kept at the level of *bare attention*, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgments and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped. The task is simply to note whatever comes up just as it is occurring, riding the changes of events in the way a surfer rides the waves on the sea. The whole process is a way of coming back into the present, of standing in the here and now without slipping away, without getting swept away by the tides of distracting thoughts.

Mindfulness exercises a powerful grounding function. It anchors the mind securely in the present, so it does not float away into the past and future with their memories, regrets, fears, and hopes. The mind without mindfulness is sometimes compared to a pumpkin, the mind established in mindfulness to a stone. A pumpkin placed on the surface of a pond soon floats away and always remains on the water's surface. But a stone does not float away; it stays where it is put and at once sinks into the water until it reaches bottom. Similarly, when mindfulness is strong, the mind stays with its object and penetrates its characteristics deeply. It does not wander and merely skim the surface as the mind destitute of mindfulness does.

Right mindfulness is cultivated through a practice called "the four foundations of mindfulness" (*cattaro satipatthana*), the mindful contemplation of four objective spheres: the body, feelings, states of mind, and phenomena.