

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

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Extracts from 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.

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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.

Mindfulness facilitates the achievement of both serenity and insight. It can lead to either deep concentration or wisdom, depending on the mode in which it is applied. Merely a slight shift in the mode of application can spell the difference between the course the contemplative process takes, whether it descends to deeper levels of inner calm culminating in the stages of absorption, the *jhanas*, or whether instead it strips away the veils of delusion to arrive at penetrating insight. To lead to the stages of serenity the primary chore of mindfulness is to keep the mind on the object, free from straying. Mindfulness serves as the guard charged with the responsibility of making sure that the mind does not slip away from the object to lose itself in random undirected thoughts. It also keeps watch over the factors stirring in the mind, catching the hindrances beneath their camouflages and expelling them before they can cause harm. To lead to insight and the realizations of wisdom, mindfulness is exercised in a more differentiated manner. Its task, in this phase of practice, is to observe, to note, to discern phenomena with utmost precision until their fundamental characteristics are brought to light.

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. As the Buddha explains:

And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Herein, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings... states of mind in states of mind... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world.

The Buddha says that the four foundations of mindfulness form "the only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain and grief, to the entering upon the right path and the realization of Nibbana." They are called "the only way" (*ekayano maggo*), not for the purpose of setting forth a narrow dogmatism, but to indicate that the attainment of liberation can only issue from the penetrating contemplation of the field of experience undertaken in the practice of right mindfulness.

The four foundations of mindfulness are:

- (1) Contemplation of the Body (*kayanupassana*)
- (2) Contemplation of Feeling (*vedananupassana*)
- (3) Contemplation of the State of Mind (*cittanupassana*)
- (4) Contemplation of Phenomena (*dhammanupassana*)