

Right Mindfulness

The Seventh Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

What is Right Mindfulness?

Here a practitioner abides focused on the body in itself, on feeling tones in themselves, on mental states in themselves, and on mental processes in themselves, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having put away greed and distress for the world.

—The Buddha (MN 141.30)

When the steps of the Eightfold Path are practiced sequentially from Right View to Right Concentration, the journey of practice goes inward to the most intimate parts of our being. Right View and Right Intention provide the broad understanding for walking the path; Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood bring the practice home to our behavior in the world; Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration take the practice into the heart, to our innermost capacity to experience peace and ease.

Right Mindfulness is more than simply being mindful. In the Buddha's ancient instructions, *sati*—the word often rendered into English as “mindfulness,”—refers to the presence of mind needed for a strong, balanced awareness. “Mindfulness practice” occurs when this presence of mind is combined with clear comprehension, ardency, and a willingness to put aside pre-occupations with things of the world. And when this mindfulness practice is directed toward the four foundations of mindfulness it is known as Right Mindfulness.

Clear comprehension lies at the center of mindfulness practice. Whereas mindfulness allows us to be aware, clear comprehension understands whatever it is we are aware of. Because it is difficult to have clear understanding when we are in the grip of greed or distress, the instruction for mindfulness practice is to put these aside. When this is difficult to do, the practice requires us to at least let go of *focus-ing* on the thing we want or that distresses us. Instead, we begin tracking what is

happening in our body, feeling tones, and mind in the face of our own greed or distress.

Practicing Right Mindfulness is a journey inward. Traditionally, Right Mindfulness involves attention to four progressively more refined and intimate areas of our lives. These four, usually called the “Four Foundations of Mindfulness” are:

- the body
- feeling tones
- mental states
- mental processes

The journey begins with establishing mindfulness of the body, including our breathing, physical activities, and physical sensations. After focusing on the body, we then establish mindfulness of the simple feeling tones of our direct, present-moment experiences.

The feeling tones are the most basic way we experience sensations as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. As these tones come into focus it is possible to distinguish those that arise due to our contact with the outside world from those that, independent of the world, arise based on what is happening in our mind and heart. So, for example, sensations of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch arise from contact with the sense world. Buddhism includes as part of this the inner experiences that only have a physical source. Distinct from this are the sensations that do not arise from the stimulation of our five senses. These are the sensations associated with mental states or moods. They are sensations that can occur independent of what is happening in our immediate environment. Meditation, for example, can produce pleasant sensations that have nothing to do with the sense world. In fact, it is possible to experience unpleasant physical sensations simultaneously as having the pleasure of meditative joy.

Being mindful of the distinction between the experiences that arise from stimulation of our physical senses from those that arise from our mental states leads to a greater awareness of our mental states, which is the third foundation of mindfulness. Here, what is meant by mental states is the overall mood or attitude of the

mind. This can be the overall emotional state of the mind as well as the way the mind can feel contracted or expansive, caught up or free.

With greater awareness of mental states, the journey of mindfulness leads to the fourth foundation of mindfulness. This is where we have a clear recognition of the mental processes operating in relation to our mental states. This last foundation involves cultivating wisdom about what our minds do to cause suffering and what we can do to overcome this suffering. We learn to recognize the mental processes, such as the hindrances, that need to be let go of so we can realize a peaceful heart. It also includes recognizing and cultivating the seven mental processes that support the mind to be expansive, tranquil, and liberated. These are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

Additional Reading

- Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Right Mindfulness” in *The Noble Eightfold Path*, pp. 70---85
- Bhante Gunaratana, “Right Mindfulness” in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*
- Gil Fronsdal, “Right Mindfulness” found posted at the Audiodharma.org website under ‘Dharma Practice Series’

Reflections and Practices: Right Mindfulness

1- Mindfulness of the Body (Week 1)

What is your relationship to mindfulness of the body? How often do you practice mindfulness of your body? How is attention to your body beneficial? What are some of the lessons you learn through careful attention to your physical experience? In what areas of your life would it be useful for you to have more mindfulness of your body?

The traditional practice of mindfulness of the body begins by focusing on breathing and intentionally relaxing the body. Spend a period of time each day, outside of meditation, breathing mindfully and relaxing your body. Then engage in an ordinary daily activity while staying centered in your body, practicing mindfulness of your physical experience. What benefits come from doing this?

2- Mindfulness of Feeling Tones (Week 2)

Everything we experience falls into one of three “flavors.” Something can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. As you live your life, are you more concerned with one of these three or do you tend to be concerned with all three equally? Which of the three has the most influence on you? Which tends to agitate you the most? What are some of the beliefs you have about pleasure and pain? What wisdom do you have about relating to what is pleasant or unpleasant?

The traditional practice of mindfulness of feeling tones differentiates feeling tones that are “of the flesh” and those that are “not of the flesh.” This may be understood as feelings that arise through our ordinary senses and those which occur independent of our senses and perceptions of the external world. Some people refer to the latter kind of feelings as “spiritual.” Another way of thinking about this is that the second category refers to feelings associated with the quality of our inner life or inner emotional state.

During this week spend time nourishing your inner life. Rather than doing activities that bring you pleasure, do things that bring satisfaction, meaning, or happi-

ness to your heart. As you do so, be mindful of any pleasure or pleasantness that arises in your heart or inner life.

3– Mindfulness of Mental States (Week 3)

Mental states are the general moods of our minds. When we repeatedly think or intend the same thing, it can condition the general disposition or quality of the mind. Sometimes this is obvious when we see people who are visibly displaying a mood. With mindfulness we can become skilled at recognizing the mental state of our own mind.

While changeable, mental states are not as fleeting as particular thoughts. Mental states tend to persist for a while. What are the three most common mental states you experience? What causes these states to arise? What causes them to persist? What causes them to pass away? What beliefs or stories do you tell yourself about your mental states? What influence do these mental states have on you and your behavior? What has been your experience of practicing mindfulness of your mental states?

A simple way of practicing mindfulness of mental states is to notice where your state of mind fits on a spectrum—from expanded, light, and open to contracted, heavy, and closed. As you go through the day take time to be clearly aware of where you are on this spectrum. Notice how and when you shift along this spectrum. Also take time to notice what your degree of expansiveness or contractedness feels like. What happens to you as you recognize and feel this aspect of your mental state?

4–Mindfulness of Mental Processes (Week 4)

Mindfulness of mental processes is a wisdom practice because it involves understanding the attitudes, beliefs, and mental behaviors that either bring inner freedom or lead us to be to become caught up in attachment. What are some of the reasons you get attached or obsessed? What are some of your attachments that you understand so well that letting go of them is relatively easy? What are some of the psychological benefits you have seen from letting go? What are some of your stronger at-

tachments, the ones you can only let go of with considerable effort? What are some of the things you cling to that you can't imagine being able to let go of?

For this seven-day period, spend one day focused on each of the seven factors of awakening: mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Each day try to cultivate the factor of the day. To help you remember, write the factor down on a piece of paper and display it in a prominent place. Attempt small but frequent steps to make the factor more present, even at very mild levels. Are some factors easier for you to evoke than others? How does the increased presence of the factors affect you each day? What benefits come from working with the factors?