

Bare Attention

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Introduction

We learn meditation as a tool but often forget what the Buddha taught us to use it for. Furthermore, in this generation, especially in western Buddhism, we often use meditation terms loosely without quite knowing what they mean. A case in point would be the terms “bare awareness” and “bare attention,” which even long-time meditators, depending on how or by whom they have been taught, sometimes interchange.

To begin with “bare awareness,” some will say that it means focused attention on perception in the moment, empty and free of any arising-associations. This, at first, appears sound, but, some others would say that bare awareness is better designated by “bare attention”—getting in-between bare arising sense-feeling and mental reaction to it—“attention” being a more specific and active word than the more general term “awareness.” Yet others will say that as long as the human-consciousness element is present in sensuous and mental awareness, the mind will not be able to see wholly clearly.

There are also those who would say the problem arises out confusion between Pali-English translation terms* and should not be seen as a problem—but a problem it is, indeed, at least for some meditators, so let’s take a more investigative approach towards these two English translation words.

Some will explain that, (because it is hard to start off by being pure and perfect), in order to keep language simple, “bare awareness” should be seen as perception of the breath, free from anything else. That sounds fair, at first, but others will assert that “bare attention” means being aware of what is going on in the mind at any given moment and focusing on purifying arising mental action. Yet others will, quite rightly, say that anything defined in worldly words, (based on sense consciousness), will still contain distortion and that this will be an uncomfortable paradox with which we will be stuck in the end.

Those, who are perplexed, will ask whether “bare awareness” means empty mind or awareness of what is arising in the mind. When one is confused, in the face of an apparent paradox, there is no harm in admitting it and seeking an explanation. All of the above views may be said to be right, in their own way, as far as they go, but not quite wholly right, when they do not go far enough.

One reason is that every complex of perceptions and resultant consciousness will be different in every individual, and there is no “one and only” way to practice on the meditative path leading to final insight into ultimate truth. Meditation teachers will see that breathing is better for some and insight meditation is better for others or recommend a combination of both together as a middle path leading to the same ultimate end.

As we pursue the practise, we begin to realize we cannot just follow a prescribed set of general guidelines which works for others, and eventually reach a pre-programmed-goal called Nibbana. Indeed, we should not even try to compare ourselves with others practising on the path.

As no two so-called individuals are ever the same, dependent on millions of arising past and present factors and conditions, arising in one unique organism in one time-space continuum, how we see, or what we think we see, depends on understanding how this confluence of energies or dhammas is co-existing at one time, in one mind, for a moment that is forever changing.

Complex? Perplexed? Indeed!

Let's examine more closely. Certainly, most will agree that "bare attention" means focus on "one thing in one moment." Moreover, what that "one thing" may be need not be the same for everyone. Certainly, since we are only human, we must begin in awareness of what is happening (mentally-sensually) in the moment, whether it be focus on the breath, (as an initial, calming process) or focus on de-energizing the fire of the mind, (to cool it down so it can concentrate). Certainly, most will agree that there is no problem with the mind straying from the breath, as long as we see where the distracting impulse is coming from and where it is going and why we don't want follow it willy-nilly to its ultimately, unsatisfactory end. Most would definitely agree that the mind needs to cool down and come to rest. But how do we do that?

One way is concentration on the breath for as long as it takes to keep coming back from distractions and remain concentrated on the in-and-out breath—until it finally becomes so refined that awareness of the breath eventually ceases—leaving only a state of bare awareness. This method of practice is explained in well-known passages in the Suttas, i.e. *Anapanasati Sutta*.

Another way, however, which is not so commonly known, and much less commonly practiced is the process which the Buddha described of observing, analyzing and understanding the mental process the moment it is consciously arising in the mind. This is known as *vipassana* or insight meditation.

In our times, fraught full of fear and restless anxiety, in this generation, in this world, which is wild-to-nourish-its-needs, *vipassana* meditation,—a detached, analytical method of observing the workings of the mind as a basis for right concentration, for insight (and resultant mental health)— is, not quite as widely known and practised as it might well be.

Too often, when we try to meditate, when we are trying to concentrate on the breath, the mind seems to want to charge about like a wild elephant on a rampage, tearing through the tangle of the jungle in a state of raging abandon, especially when we are in pain. Even when we are not in pain, the mind habitually wanders to personal points of irritation and distress.

Even when we are able to make the mind calm and cool, a part of the mind-within-the-mind resists remaining in the clear, cool pool of tranquillity, continually striving to create mischief and mental instability. Indeed, at one and the same time (on both conscious and (hidden), unconscious, levels the mind can be both our best friend and our worst enemy. Even when we think we are maintaining bare awareness on a “conscious” level, the mind is often working on hidden, self-deceptive, dangerous or even savage primitive levels which we are not aware of.

Once we have learned to attempt to discern when the deceptive mind is trying to be tricky, we need to develop counter-strategies to constrain its capacity for creating harm and pain. We have to watch the potential enemy within the mind, (hidden in our arising associations), to see what strategy the ‘concealed enemy’ is up to now, and contrive ways of not letting it get its way. Although devising such a discipline of the “mind-watching-the-mind” may require slow and heedful and rigorous training, when we consider the damage an untrained-mind can do when unrestrained, we realize that the arduous and strenuous energy, so spent, will be well-worth making the effort until it bears fruit, because there appears to be no easier or more convenient way out.

If we can continue learning through practice to see through hidden and unconscious motives behind actions of arising consciousness, we will be more mentally healthy and morally pure in the end. However, since getting to the point of uncovering our own unconscious motives occurs, only towards the end of the middle of a long arduous process, leading towards an, as yet, unknown and unrealized, end; we should always keep in mind the Buddha’s words on the gradual teaching and continue resolutely continue questioning and testing our own meditation practise for consistency .

At some point, in our lives, we begin to recognize that there is something more to the Dhamma than book-learning and cultural convention, so we begin to look more closely at the Buddha’s actual instructions on what we should do. At some point after that, we realize that the Buddha is recommending individual practice based on understanding the relationship between the body and the mind. At some point further beyond that, we come to know that to proceed on the path as best we can, we have to devote our full energies to developing a mental culture of observation and analysis from the moment we awake in the morning until we sleep at night and, sometimes—once we have become firmer in our foundations—even when we sleep.

Bare attention generally means concentrated focus on one thing at a time, but what that one thing may be can vary. In breathing meditation, it can mean focus on the breath, while, in insight meditation, it can progress into focus on arising phenomena in the mind in the moment, from the coarsest to the most refined. Any thing that arises in consciousness may be used beneficially as an object of observation and analysis. What that one thing may be could be some state of will determining mind-body action in the moment.

In breathing meditation, we try to focus attention only on the breath to the exclusion of other arising conscious phenomena. In insight meditation, we focus attention upon the mental formulation that is arising to disturb focus on the mind and the breath.

Coming back to the battle of words, some meditators (or translators) may deem “bare awareness” and “bare attention” to have the same meaning, but there will be others who discern a difference between a state of bare sense-awareness, on the one hand, as the process of perception begins coming into focus prior to and during the arising of sense experience; and, on the other, a state of concentrated, attention directed towards focussing on arising conscious-reactions to sensed phenomena with detached mind, just as they are developing into consciousness, so as to more closely observe and analyze what is happening at that moment in the mind and understand why.

For the purposes of the present discussion, at least, “bare awareness,” may, in a purely epistemological sense, be said to mean “bare awareness” of sense experience, i.e. bare registering of mind-body sensations, prior to any resultant arising mental associations; whereas “bare attention” or mindfulness, may be said to mean, a detached act of observing a mental action, carefully and heedfully, as yet uninvolved in any sense contact leading to mental action, standing back with objective detachment, analyzing potential sources and causes in the processes of arising mental associations, avoiding mental attachments that may lead to effects in resultant mental actions and reactions that will upset equanimity—in other words, in other words—“the-mind watching-the-mind.”

In meditation, we come to realize that our central problem is consciousness of a “personal-self”—thinking about and trying to nourish and protect and satisfy self—thus, what we need to attempt to do is to penetrate, through consciousness directed-towards-self-gratification, back to the level of bare bio-organic sense awareness, prior to arising associations to external elements in what is actually nothing more than an organism feeling but not yet reacting to any external impulses. While that may make sense, it is still very hard for us to achieve.

Moreover, if mindfulness is the quality of bare attention that knows what is here in the moment, (i.e. only one thing at a time in the process of perception) there are, in fact many possible mind objects which may be observed and analysed, as we may see, if we closely examine and practice the steps of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eight-fold Path, (The Way of Mindfulness), which, if practised properly, may serve as a guide and a beacon through the treacherous personal shoals of the inevitable, perilous and previously uncharted personal waters through which we must navigate in order to survive in the course of our lives. Indeed, if we are to save ourselves from the treachery of our own minds, our meditation practice itself must also be observed and analyzed, with the determined object of clearly seeing where its limitations lie.

In this context, it would be appropriate to review the steps along the path, as explained by the Buddha in the Pali texts, to double-check against ourselves, following the instructions about how to hone the knife of knowledge and to learn to use it to discover how to cut ourselves free from our own deceptive, hidden hindrances. Instead of running into

obstacles arising out of self and consciousness arising out of our vainly anticipating the end, let's, instead, go back and review from the beginning what the Buddha said about *The Path to Deliverance*, following an outline as translated and rendered by the Venerable Nyanatiloka Maha Thera in his well-respected book of that name:

The Path to Deliverance

The Buddha's Path to Deliverance is anchored on non-self and dependent origination. According to the Venerable Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, the Pali scriptures, (excluding the Vinaya Pitaka,) contain "nothing but expositions and explanations of the Four Noble Truths and the Path to Deliverance, constituting the true and genuine teaching of the Buddha." (*The Buddha's Path to Deliverance*. Kandy: BPS, 5th ed., 2000, p. 5).

As the Buddha's words are so often quoted, and sound so familiar, that we often fail to hear their meaning, it may be worthwhile to look more closely at some of the important citations from the classical texts for the sake of clearer understanding.

Following are some pointers on how we can use the Four Noble Truths as a basis for noting mental actions in mind states:

First, when meditating, we should be mindful that, as the Buddha proclaimed, the aggregates—corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness—are "miserable, subject to suffering, impermanent, impersonal and void." Any idea of self and permanence is void. All the Buddha's explanations come back to this one point of understanding.

Second, suffering in this existence is conditioned through our own cravings. Our experience of all phenomena of existence is dependent on these cravings, as we experience them, arising in one form or another, and becoming active in body, speech or mind.

Third, to stop suffering, the mind must become free of selfish cravings for nourishment and the delusions that arise therefrom. The mind must, instead, concentrate on seeking and finding the source of suffering and making it cease. This is the cessation of suffering.

Fourth, there is a Noble Eight-fold Path of practice leading to clear concentration which may be tried and applied by a seeker after truth. This is the Fourth Noble Truth. For purposes of explanation and right understanding, it is broken-down into parts which will be described below:

Our misunderstanding of existence is based on ignorance of three things: (i) we assume that the world is permanent rather than impermanent; (ii) we assume that it is a source of pleasure and worldly satisfaction rather than suffering; (iii) we wrongly believe that life

is based on satisfaction of self rather than relinquishment of the illusion of self. Right understanding of non-self depends on *not seeing the world the way self wants it to be*. When we awaken to the Four Noble Truths, we can let go of these misunderstandings.

Below are some points of guidance we should be mindful of in our practice, not just once in a while, but continually, night and day, when walking, sitting, standing or lying.

As the Venerable Maha Thera Nyanatiloka's translations from Pali, to English, are widely accepted as being authoritative, we may profit by examining some references to Pali texts cited in *The Path to Deliverance*.

The Buddha says, "Not to get what one desires is suffering. In short, the five groups of existence forming the objects of attachment are suffering: the feeling group; the perception group; the mental formations group; the consciousness group" (DN 22; MN 141).

The Venerable Nyanatiloka has written, "The Buddha teaches that our existence consists in a mere process of mental and physical phenomena, and that there is nowhere to be found any real and independent entity." (*Path to Deliverance p.7*) If we don't know how this is happening in our minds, we should learn to observe and analyze and find out.

Concerning craving, we are told that through the total fading away and cessation of craving, clinging is extinguished and thereby pain, grief and despair. Yet, we ask, "How can we concentrate when we are in mental pain?"

The answer is in analyzing the source of mental pain, which we will surely find in ourselves, so that, through mindfulness, continuing effort and right concentration, we can get to the root of that pain, understand it, get friendly with it, and let it hang around a while, until it becomes ashamed of being recognized as the need for self-gratification that it really is, and eventually goes away. We can get to our unconscious levels, by seeing the result of clinging that leads to pain. This is a kind of self-healing taught by the Buddha, and it works, as we may see proclaimed in the texts, most particularly in the poems of enlightened monks and nuns.

It helps, on the path, to practice right thought and consistently cultivate the mind to be free from sensuous desire, ill-will and cruelty, based on the wholesome will for the fruit of moral purity. When such thoughts begin to arise, we should recognize them as unwholesome and relinquish them so that, with continuing practice, our minds and actions become more morally pure.

Similarly, we should cultivate habits of right speech by abstaining from lying, tale-bearing, harsh language and vain talk. Whenever we waste our time on such things, we are opening the doors of the mind to unwholesome thoughts that can taint the mind's already arisen wholesome purity. Instead of loose speech, we should cultivate truthful, conciliatory, mild and wise speech. The mind that watches the mind recognizes what is unwholesome and what is wholesome speech.

Similarly, we should avoid any thought arising out of bodily inclinations that lead to wilful destruction, taking what is not given, or selfish sexual gratification. Keep examining yourself on those points and see how often you are inclined towards unwholesome bodily action.

Similarly, in making a living to provide for your needs, you should never lie or commit any unwholesome or selfish deed because the fruit of it will come back to worry you and cause suffering which will impede you on the path. In the course of your daily practice, you should be avoiding all unwholesome actions. If you begin to get off the track, mindfulness should bring you back.

Of course cultivating and coming back to wholesome states is not easy. It takes a lot of effort and energy to flow against the stream of *samsara*. One should strive to develop and exert right effort to “overcome already arisen unwholesome things, and to arouse wholesome things not yet arisen—to maintain wholesome things already arisen and not let them disappear, but to bring them to growth, to maturity and to the full perfection of development.” (ibid. 9).

In summary, we should develop right mindfulness: As the Buddha says, “Herein the monk dwells in contemplation of the body—the feelings—the mind—mind-objects, ardent, clearly conscious and mindful, after putting away worldly greed and grief.” (ibid.)

Another important point is that we should not be doing the practice with expectation of achieving rapture. We should just keep on practicing mindfully without any expectation. Having expectation is setting oneself up for discouragement and mental stress. Instead of trying to discover what is ahead, we should focus our attention on what is in the here and now. We need to have a realistic look at how miserable we are in the world of *samsara* and accept the processes of the human state as they actually are.

“Did you never see in the world a man or a woman, sick, afflicted, grievously ill, wallowing in his own filth, lifted up by some and put to bed by others? And did the thought never come to you that you too are subject to decay, that you too cannot escape it?” (AN3:35). This is the Buddha talking to you. What he says applies to you and everybody else too. The old and decrepit experience it, but youth does not want to know.

The Buddha states that men falsely misunderstand this world and falsely believe: “That what is subject to decay may not decay—that what is subject to sickness may not fall sick—that what is subject to death may not die ...” (AN 4:182) The mind is fooling itself when it declines to accept that the body must die, and that it may not continue to exist. This is how mind deceives us into believing what we want to believe instead of accepting death.

And so it is with other things which we want to believe because we are not prepared to accept the actuality of the process of temporarily arising and disappearing phenomena, the way they really are. Avoiding the inclination towards wanting mind objects to be

permanent, we should recognize that we are making impermanent use of what is impermanent. We should always be mindful that.

We deceive ourselves about a lot of things, and we should make the effort for the sake of mental wholesomeness and health to find out what they are. Often, our greatest hindrances and enemies are the hidden views we have about ourselves.

The paradox is that we do not get what we want, but we can resolve the paradox in getting to the root of suffering by giving up wanting. Even the desired objects of the senses are not what we think they are.

The Buddha, instructing his own son asks:

“What do you think Rahula: are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind permanent or impermanent?

‘Impermanent, O Venerable One.’

Are corporality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness permanent or impermanent?

‘Impermanent, O Venerable One.’

But of that which is impermanent, is this happiness or suffering?

‘Suffering, O Venerable One.’

But of that which is impermanent, subject to suffering and change, can one rightly hold the view: “This belongs to me, this I am, this is myself”?

“No venerable one.”

Understanding thus, Rahula, the noble disciple turns away from these things, and through his turning away therefrom, he becomes detached; and through his being detached, he is liberated; and through his being liberated, the knowledge arises within him: ‘Liberated am I.’ And he knows: “Rebirth has ceased, the holy life is fulfilled, the task is done, and nothing further remains after this.”

The unreality of self is explained in another well known text with these words: “Corporality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are impermanent. And whatever is impermanent is suffering. And whatever is suffering is non-self. And of that which is non-self, one should understand according to reality and with true wisdom: “This does not belong to me, this I am not, this is not myself.” (SN 22:55)

Cessation is described in the texts as follows: “Corporality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness are impermanent, produced, have a dependent origination, are subject to perishing, destruction, disappearance and cessation. And because of these things come to cessation, therefore, one speaks of “cessation.” (SN 22:21)

In The Discourse on Non-Self (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*), the Buddha, speaking to his former companions in the Deer Park, near Benares, says:

“Corporality is non-self. If corporality were a self, then corporality would not lead to affliction, and one would succeed in one’s wish: “Thus my corporality shall be, thus shall

it not be!’ But as corporality is non-self, therefore, corporality leads to affliction, and one cannot succeed in one’s wish: ‘Thus my corporality shall be, thus it should not be!’

Feeling is non-self ... Perception is non-self ... Mental Formations are non-self ...

Consciousness is non-self. If consciousness were a self, then consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one would succeed in one’s wish: ‘Thus shall my consciousness be, thus shall it not be.’ But as consciousness is non-self, therefore consciousness leads to affliction, and one cannot succeed in one’s wish: ‘Thus shall my consciousness be, thus shall it not be!’

Understanding thus, the noble disciple turns away from these things; and through his turning away, he becomes detached; and through his being detached, he is liberated; and through his being liberated, the knowledge arises in him: ‘Liberated am I.’ And he knows: ‘Rebirth has ceased, the holy life is fulfilled, the task is done, and nothing further remains after this.’” (SN 22:59)

On the topic of dependent origination of suffering, the Buddha says:

“Through what is this craving (*thana*) brought about, through what condition does it arise, spring up, and enter into existence? Through feeling.

And feeling (*vedana*)? Through (sensorial or mental) impression.

And impression (*phassa*)? Through the six sense bases.

And the six sense bases (*ayatana*)? Through mind and corporeality.

And the mind and corporality (*nama-ruppa*)? Through consciousness.

And consciousness (*vinnana*); beginning from the moment of conception)?

Through kamma formations.

And the kamma formations (*sankhara*)? Through ignorance (*avijja*)

Thus, conditioned by ignorance are the kamma formations, by kamma formations, consciousness; by consciousness, mind and corporeality; by mind and corporeality, the six bases by the six bases, (sensorial and mental) impression; by impression, feeling; by feeling craving, clinging; by clinging, (the kamma process and the rebirth process of) becoming; by (the kamma process of) becoming, rebirth; by rebirth, old age and death, sorrow, lamentation and pain, grief and despair. Thus, arises this whole mass of suffering.” (MN 38)

The Buddha describes craving as the cause of suffering in this way:

“Truly, due to sensuous craving, continued by sensuous craving, impelled by sensuous craving, entirely moved by sensuous craving, kings fight with kings, princes with princes, Brahmins with Brahmins, citizen quarrels with citizen, mother quarrels with son, son with mother, father with son, son with father, brother with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. Thus given to dissention, quarrelling and fighting, they fall upon one another with fists, sticks or weapons. And thereby suffer death and deadly pain ...

And further, people take to evil ways in deeds, words and thoughts; and thus, at the dissolution of the body after death, they fall into a downward state ...” (MN 13)

Concerning kamma and rebirth, the teaching says,

“There is one who destroys living beings, takes what belongs to others, has unlawful intercourse with the other sex, speaks untruth, is a tale-bearer, uses harsh language, is an empty prattler, is covetous, cruel-minded, follows evil views.

And he is creeping in his actions by body, speech and mind. Hidden are his deeds, words and thoughts, hidden his ways and objects. But I tell you: whoever pursues hidden ways and objects will have to expect one of two results: either in the torments of hell or birth among creeping animals.” (AN 10:205)

And further, concerning the root conditions for the doing of actions, Venerable Nyanatiloka adds (*Path to Deliverance* 24), it is said that:

“Through unwise reflection on an attractive object, there may arise greed; and through unwise reflection on a repulsive object, there may arise hate. Thus, in its widest sense, the term *lobha* (greed) comprises all degrees of attraction, from the slightest trace of attachment up to the crassest forms of greed and egoism, while the term *dosa* (hate) comprises all the degrees of aversion, from the slightest touch of ill-humour up to extreme forms of violence and revenge.” (AN 3:33)

Concerning the dependent cessation of suffering, the Buddha asks:

“What O monks, is the cessation of suffering? Through the complete overcoming and cessation of ignorance (*avijja*), there comes about the cessation of kamma-formations; through the cessation of kamma-formations (*sankhara*), the cessation of conscious formations (after death); through the cessation of consciousness (*vinnana*) the cessation of mind and corporality; through the cessation of mind and corporality (*nama-rupa*) the cessation of the six bases (sense organs and mind); through the cessation of the six sense bases (*salyatana*), the cessation of sensorial and mental impression; through the cessation of impression (*phassa*), the cessation of feeling; through the cessation of feeling (*vedana*), the cessation of craving; through the cessation of craving (*thana*), through the cessation of clinging (*upadana*), the cessation of (the kamma and rebirth process) becoming; through the process of becoming (*bhava*), through the cessation of rebirth (*jati*), comes about the cessation of old age and death (*jara-marana*), sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair. Thus comes about the whole mass of suffering.” (AN3:61)

Concerning the end of mindful practice, Nibbana, the Buddha says:

“There Ananda, the monk considers thus: ‘This is the peace, this is the sublime, namely the standstill of all kamma formations, the forsaking of all strata of existence, the fading away of craving, detachment, cessation, Nibbana. Thus Ananda, the monk may attain such a concentration of mind wherein with regard to this body, endowed with consciousness and with regard to all external objects, no impulses of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ and no attacks of conceit can come upon him, and wherein he is in possession of that

deliverance of mind and that deliverance through wisdom, wherein no impulses of 'I' and 'mine,' no more attacks of conceit can come upon him." (AN 3:32)

Regarding the quest of the goal, He says:

"The following I have replied to the question about the goal.:

Who is not troubled any more
And knows both good and bad,
Stilled, freed from wrath, grief and desire,
He has escaped old age and death.
(Snp 1048)

Concerning the living Dhamma visible in the world, the Buddha says,

"Through greed, hate and delusion, overwhelmed by greed, one aims at one's own ruin, at other's ruin, at the ruin of both, and one suffers mental pain and grief. If however greed hate and delusion are given up, one aims at neither one's own ruin nor at others' ruin, nor at the ruin of both, and one suffers no more mental pain and grief. Thus is Nibbana realizable, even during lifetime, immediate, living, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. Now, in so far as the monk has realized the complete cessation of greed, hate and delusion, in so far as is Nibbana realizable, immediate, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise." (AN 3:55)

While some teachers say one should not talk about Nibbana, and perhaps rightly so, the Buddha, speaking from experience has told us where path is leading. If we did not know the purpose and meditation practice and where it leads, we might not have motivation to muster up the energy needed to swim against the stream.

Concerning how the mind can be unshakable in the face of any experience in this world, the Buddha says,

"Should ... to a monk thus liberated in mind, even extraordinary sublime and mighty visible forms come into his field of vision, sounds into his field of hearing, odours into his field of smelling, flavours into his field of tasting, bodily impressions come into his field of bodily touch, mentally cognizable objects into his field of mind, all these things can no longer overwhelm his mind. His mind remains untouched, steadfast, unshakeable, beholding the impermanence of everything." (AN 6:55)

Here, it is summed up in verse:

One who has turned to renunciation,
Turned to detachment of the mind,
Is filled with an all embracing love
And freed from thirsting after life

Has turned to quitting all desire,
To unobstructed sight of mind
Knowing the senses' origin;
His mind, indeed, is fully freed.

And such a monk with mind thus freed,
Who found the stillness of his heart,
Heaps up no more the deeds he did,
And naught remains for him to do.

Just as a big and solid rock
Cannot be shaken by the wind ...

Firm is his mind, his mind is freed,
He sees how all things pass away.
(AN 6:55)

Concerning the uncreated, the Nibbana element, the Buddha said:

“There is O monks, a realm where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind, neither the sphere of boundless space, nor the sphere of boundless consciousness, nor the sphere of nothingness, nor the sphere of perception nor non-perception, neither this world nor the next world, neither sun nor moon: this O monks, I call neither a coming nor a standstill. Without base is it, without continuity, without support: this is the end of suffering.” (Ud 8:1)

He who understands this subtle text knows where he is going in the practice,

“Hard is it to perceive the Deathless Realm,
Not easy is it to perceive the truth.
Yet craving is penetrated by the Master,
To nothing more is the seer attached.
(Deliverance 32)

Concerning the Unborn, the Buddha says,

“There is O Monks, an Unborn, Un-originated, Unformed, Uncreated. For, if there were not this Unborn, Un-originated, Unformed, Uncreated, there would be no escape possible from the born, originated, formed, created. But since O monks, there is this Unborn, Un-originated, Unformed, Uncreated, therefore, an escape is possible from the born, originated, formed, created.” (Ud 8:1-3)

The Buddha explains by using an analogy:

“Just as the oil lamp burns conditioned by oil and wick, but after consuming of oil and wick and through the lack of fuel, and through lack of fuel, the light comes to cessation,

similarly, the monk knows, while experiencing a feeling endangering the body: ‘I experience a feeling endangering the body.’ And he knows: ‘at the dissolution of the body, and after life has been consumed, all those feelings no longer desired here will become extinguished.’ Here, the monk thus endowed, is endowed with the highest wisdom as foundation. This, indeed, is the highest and holiest wisdom, to know that all suffering has vanished. And his wisdom is founded on truth and is unshakeable. What, indeed, is subject to fallibility, that is untrue; and only infallible Nibbana is true,” (MN 140)

And the greatest fallible object is the delusion of self, which must first be:

“Rooted out, like a palm tree razed to the ground, destroyed and subject to no further coming into existence. Therefore, the monk, thus endowed, is endowed with the highest renunciation as a foundation. This, indeed, O monks is the highest and holiest renunciation: the abandonment of all worldly things. (MN 140)

Further:

“I am” is an illusion. This “I am” is an illusion. “I shall be” is an illusion. “I shall be corporeal” is an illusion. “I shall be un-corporeal” is an illusion. “I shall be endowed with perception” is an illusion. “I shall be without perception” is an illusion. “I shall be neither with nor without perception” is an illusion. Illusion is an affliction, illusion is a boil, illusion is a thorn.

If, however illusion is overcome, one is called a stilled-one, a sage. (MN 140)

The Buddha is not holding anything back, but Ultimate Truth is subtle and difficult to understand. In another Sutta, He uses an analogy—personifying the process of arising consciousness as Mara:

“You should overcome the longing concerning Mara. But what is Mara? Corporality is Mara, the longing for it you should overcome. Feeling ...Perception ...Mental Formations ...Consciousness is Mara, the longing for it you should overcome.”

Indeed, he who has made progress on the path will realize this and strive to free himself from the mental affliction and irritation that accompanies corporality and arising perception and consciousness. The mind that has a glimpse of stilling of perceptions will be inclined towards relinquishing mental irritations. Meditation on the breath offers tranquillity. Mindfulness of the mind brings understanding leading to wisdom. Tranquillity without wisdom is not yet enough. To reach the higher stages one must also practice insight meditation, which through accumulation of wisdom leads to freedom from self in an unconditioned, uncreated end.

How one attains this depends on one’s insight. Once the insight is there, it becomes easier to renounce a preoccupation with self and everyday anxieties and longings of the mind and go beyond them. How that works in the individual case depends on conditions

coming together within each psycho-physical organism, in each arising moment, which will be different in every case. That's why we each have to find our own way.

The Buddha tells us how to do it:

“There are O brothers, two conditions for the arising of right understanding, namely, instruction through another person, and one's own wise consideration.” (MN43)

Once you get the instructions, the rest depends on you. This means, paradoxically, you must get rid of self or at least learn to contain it so you don't bring harm on yourself.

Before closing, we may look at the Buddha's analogy of the seed:

“If O monks, *nimba* seed or *kosataki* seed, or the seed of a bitter pumpkin is sewn on wet ground, then all the solid and liquid substances which it absorbs will get a bitter repulsive taste. And why? Because the seed is bitter. Just so O monks, whatever a man led by wrong views, carries out and undertakes, and whatever he thinks and whatever he strives for, whatever his longings and inclinations are, all this will lead him to an undesired, unpleasant, disagreeable state to misfortune and suffering.” (AN.1.17.9)

In summary, craving self is the root of the problem. Mind is the source of infection. Root out mind and the self, and the infection and irritation will be gone.

We may conclude with a final quote:

“It is impossible O monks, and unfounded that someone possessed of right understanding should consider any formation of existence as permanent ... any formation of existence as real happiness ... anything whatever as real self. But it is possible that the worldling may have such a belief. (AN 1:15.1-8)

Established in wrong view, with attachments to the world, we may have difficulty maintaining right mindfulness and concentration: however, if we read and understand the texts carefully and continue to practice mindfully, with determination and wise consideration, eventually, through developing equanimity, the path will slowly clear.

The Heart of Buddhist Meditation

Thus the focus of right mindfulness seems to be on Bare Attention.

Perhaps the most important work written in the West on the subject of mindfulness is the Venerable Nyanaponika Maha Thera's book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, (New York: Rider Press, 11th printing, 1991). Like his teacher, The Venerable Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, he explains about Bare Attention and the path to deliverance in a way that is

of benefit for those who take up meditation practise for the purpose of mind development on the path.

In the sub-section which follows, we shall cite some of the key points Venerable Nyanaponika makes about “Bare Attention.”

In his introduction, with regard to all Buddhist schools, he says,: “Notwithstanding the differences in method, aim and basic philosophical conceptions, the connecting links with *Sathipatthana* are close and strong ... In common are, for instance, the direct confrontation with actuality (including one’s own mind), the merging of everyday life with the meditative practice, the transcending of conceptual thought by direct observation and introspection on the here and now.” (ibid. 14)

Venerable Nyanaponika begins by saying that despite what men might have learned from history, they are still bungling on, with only “the symptoms of their malady, remaining blind to the source of the illness, which is nothing more than the three strong roots of everything evil (*akusala-mula*) pointed out by the Buddha: greed, hatred and delusion. (ibid.19)

He quotes the Buddha’s words: “Whatsoever there is of evil, connected with evil, belonging to evil—all issues from the mind.” (Anguttara Nikaya I.)

Venerable Nyanaponika, in his own words, says: “Only through a change within will there be a change without.” (ibid. 22) Or, in the words of the Buddha: “Thus it is our own mind that should be established in all the roots of the Good. It is our own minds that should be soaked by the rain of truth. It is our own mind that should be purified from all obstructive qualities; it is our own mind that should be made vigorous by energy.” (*Gandavyutha Sutta*) Hence the message of the Buddha consists just in the help it gives the mind and the Buddha’s message, here depends on three things: (i) it depends on *knowing* the mind that is so near and dear to us yet so unknown. (ii) it depends on *shaping* the mind that is so unwieldy and obstinate and may yet turn so pliant. (iii) and freeing the mind, that is in bondage all over and yet many will win freedom in the here and now. (ibid.)

Thus, we are concerned with knowing the mind which, although familiar to us, is as yet unknown to common men. In answer to the question, “What is mindfulness?” Venerable Nyanaponika says: “In its elementary manifestation, known under the term of *attention*, it is one of the cardinal functions of consciousness, without which there can be no perception of any object at all. If a sense object exercises a stimulus that is sufficiently strong, attention is aroused in its basic form as an initial *taking notice* of the object as the first *turning towards* it. Because of this, consciousness breaks through the dark stream of unconsciousness ... a function that according to the Abhidhamma ... is performed innumerable times during each second of waking life.” (ibid.24) The mind which seems so familiar is actually more complex than we realize.

The first phase of the perceptual process is an unclear an indistinct impression, but, then, if there is an interest, or the impact is strong, the mind begins to be directed towards the details and characteristics. It is at this point that there arises a relationship between the observer and the object. As Venerable Nyanaponika says: “Without memory, attention towards an object would furnish only isolated facts, as is the case with most of the perceptions of animals.” (ibid. 25)

In the second phase, arising Bare Attention will allow the mind to compare the perception with innumerable stored perceptions in memory in the past in a process of associating and categorizing to try to make sense out of primary sense impression. At this stage, perception is more detailed and comprehensive. It can recognize and categorize but perception can also be adulterated by wrong associations based on feelings of like or dislike or indifference. Indeed, prejudice and wishful thinking can colour sense perception. “By all these factors, the reliability of even the most common perceptions and judgements may be seriously impaired.” (ibid.) This is an interim phase where one has to watch the reactions of the mind. In this stage, consciousness acts both a danger and a tool. The common man, dependent on ignorance remains dwelling in basic reaction. A few with little dust in their eyes attain to another the third phase in which they, eventually, see that the mind as just a reactive process. They see there is no self as a reactor. There is just a reactive process.

The third phase of perception requires mindfulness or right attention to keep the mind free from distorting and falsifying influences. This, of course, takes systematic mind training following the instructions of the Buddha, in order to develop the required skilfulness in focusing attention with right mindfulness.

Through practice, right mindfulness produces an “increasingly greater clarity and consciousness ... presenting a picture of reality that is increasingly purged of any falsifications.” In the third phase, there “is an increase in the intensity and quality of attention,” that is instrumental in enabling a transition to a higher stage.” (ibid. 26-27)

Further, Venerable Nyanaponika writes: “Right Mindfulness is the seventh factor of The Noble Path leading to the extinction of suffering ... and is four-fold with regard to its objects: It is directed (1) towards the body, (2) the feelings, (3) the state of mind, i.e. the general condition of consciousness at the moment, (4) mental contents, i.e. the definite contents, or objects of consciousness at a given moment.” (ibid. 28) They are the basic objects of mindfulness. And further: “Mindfulness (*sati*) implies pre-eminently the attitude and practice of Bare Attention in a purely receptive state of mind.” It is “indispensable for the ... ‘investigation of (physical and mental) phenomena’ ... Direct experiential insight into reality can be accomplished only with the help of the enlightenment factor Mindfulness.” (ibid.29)

Speaking of mindfulness and clear comprehension, he tells us: “It is mindfulness, in its specific action of Bare Attention which provides the key to the distinctive method of *Satipatthana* and accompanies the systematic practice of it, from its very beginning to its very goal.”

“Bare Attention is the clear and single minded noting of what actually happens to us and in us, at successive moments of perception. It is called “bare” because it attends to just the bare facts of perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind which, for Buddhist thought, constitutes the sixth sense. (ibid. 30) Moreover: “When attending to that six-fold sense impression, attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed speech or mental comment which may be one of self reference (like, dislike, etc.) judgement or reflection.” (ibid. 30) We are told that if during the directing of bare attention any reactions should arise in the mind, they themselves should be made the “objects of Bare Attention, ... (and) dismissed, after a brief mental note has been made of them.” (ibid. 30)

The Venerable author stresses that our effort should be arduous and thorough for any neglect will have a detrimental effect and hinder success.

“Therefore, right mindfulness starts at the beginning. In employing the method of bare attention, it goes back to the seed of the state of things. Applied to the activity of mind, this means: observation reverts to the very first phase of the process of perception when the mind is in a purely receptive state, and when attention is restricted to bare noticing of the object ... that phase is of a very short and hardly perceptible duration” furnishing a superficial and incomplete picture of the object.

“It is the task of the next perceptual phase to correct and supplement that first impression, but this is not always done. Often the first impression is taken for granted, and even new distortions, characteristic of the more complex mental functions of the second stage are added. (ibid. 31)

This is where the work of Bare Attention begins as “a deliberate cultivating and strengthening of that first receptive the mind, giving it a longer chance to fulfil its important task in the process of cognition” in which Bare Attention is needed to carefully cleanse and prepare the ground for all subsequent mental processes. Bare and exact registering of the object is easier said than done, as it requires disinterested investigation free of any attachment to see things as they really are. Normally people register and attach to objects judging from the point of view of self-interest, (i.e.) How is this good for me? Such interests may be “wide or narrow, high or low.” We label them in accordance with our “interests” and label them, accordingly so, within a closed realm of limited vision. It is our wishful actions within this realm of self suggestion that determine an unsatisfied state of mind when the assemblage of our visions doesn’t fulfil arising expectations. This is the realm of the prison of attached senses and mind, but we can escape from that prison through developing Bare Attention to the primary arising of things.

“Hence,” writes the Venerable Nyanaponika, “the attitude of Bare Attention—bare of labels—will open to man a new world. He will first find out that, where he believed himself to be dealing with a unity, i.e. a single object presented by a single act of perception, there is in fact a multiplicity, i.e. a whole series of different and physical

processes presented by corresponding acts of perception, following each other in quick succession. He will further notice with consternation how rarely he is aware of a bare or pure object without an alien admixture.” (ibid.32)

Concerning self-interest, he continues to say, “For instance, the normal perception, if it is of any interest to the observer, will rarely present the object pure and simple, but the object will appear in the light of added, subjective judgements, as beautiful or ugly, pleasant or unpleasant, useful, useless, or harmful. If it concerns a human being, there will also enter into it, the preconceived notion, ‘This is a personality, just as ‘I’ am too.’

In that condition, (i.e.) closely intertwined with subjective additions, the perception will sink into the deep storehouse of memory. When recalled, by associative thinking, it will exert its distorting influence also on future perceptions of similar objects, as well as on judgements, decisions, moods, etc. connected to them.

It is the task of Bare Attention to eliminate all of those alien additions from the object proper that is then in the field of perception ... This will demand persistent practise during which the attention, gradually growing in its keenness, will, as it were, use sieves of increasingly finer meshes by which first the grosser and ever subtler-admixtures will be separated until the bare object remains. (ibid. 33)

The Buddha stated succinctly what a bare object means: “In what is seen, there should be only what is seen; in what is heard, only the heard; in what is sensed, (as smell, taste or touch), only the sensed; in thought, only the thought. (Udana I, 10)

Bare attention has the three-fold value of (i) knowing the mind, (ii) shaping the mind, and (iii) liberating the mind.

Knowing how the mind perceives objects is essential for dissecting and discriminating in analysing the actions of the mind to see how the mind connects objects with other things, its “relation to other things, its interaction with them, its conditioning and conditioned nature.” (ibid. 35)

“Many of these,” writes the author, “will escape notice if there is not a sufficiently long time of Bare Attention ... relations between things can only be ascertained if first the single members of that relationship have been carefully examined in their various aspects which are pointers to diverse connections. Insufficient analytic preparation is a frequent source of error...” (ibid.)

Bare Attention eventuates in knowing the object for what it is and what it is not. First the bare object must be uncovered, freed and saved from the realm of ignorance, where it is drowned in the inner and outer noise in which ordinary man lives, in a realm of rashness and habitual judgements.

“Patient pausing in such an attitude of Bare Attention will open wide horizons to one’s understanding, obtaining thus ... results which were denied to the strained efforts of an

impatient intellect. Owing to a rash or a habitual limiting, labelling or misjudging and mishandling of things, important sources of knowledge often remain closed. ... This distinction between the bare facts of the case and the attitude towards them, has ... a far-reaching practical significance: it locates the earliest, (i.e.) the most promising point where we can determine the further development of the given situation as far as it depends on our attitude towards it ...” (ibid. 35-36)

It is the factor of impermanence which will cause the greatest confrontation and challenge to the mind, but through the practice of Bare Attention we will become aware and learn to accept that “the factor of change is always with us—that even in a minute fraction of time, the frequency of occurring changes is beyond out ken. Probably for the first time it will strike us—not only intellectually but touching our whole being—in what kind of world we are actually living.” (ibid.37)

Countering the challenge of change, we come face to face with our own bodies. We begin to see the body as it really is, not the way we want it to be. Bare Attention to change changes the mind. “In the light Bare Attention focused on sense perception, the distinctive character of material and mental processes, in their interrelation and alternating occurrence, as well as the basic ‘objectifying’ function of mind, will gain in clarity. (ibid.)

Now, we are getting closer to the end, as the Venerable Nyanaponika says:” After the practice of Bare Attention has “resulted in a certain width and depth of experience in its dealings with mental events, it will become an immediate certainty to the meditator that the mind is *nothing but its cognizing function*. Nowhere, within or behind that function, can any individual agent or abiding entity be detected.” (ibid.38)

Through one’s own experience one will have realized the truth of non-self, and once we have realized that, we will see the mechanism of our emotions and passions. We will see our true and intended motives and all the other unworthy motives seeded within our secret mental lives. One by one, “clear light will fall on our weak and strong points as well.” (ibid. 39)

We come to see that the most of the suffering in the world arises not from intended evil or wickedness but has its source within the individual human mind—caused by “ignorance, heedlessness, thoughtlessness, rashness and lack of self control. The problem is not with the world outside; the problem lies hidden within the mind. When we realize this, our attention goes directly to the original impulse before it has time to react to associations in memory within a network of (often faulty) categorizations stored in the mind. When we use the instrument of Bare Attention, we slow down the process. We observe the bare object and watch the reactions arising in association to it. We analyze what is happening in the mind, and when we recognize faulty associations co-arising, we catch and quench the fire that could lead to a rash impulse and result in an unwise reaction.

Or, as the Venerable Maha Thera, explains it: “By pausing before action, in a habitual attitude of Bare Attention, one will be able to seize that decisive but brief moment when the mind has not yet settled upon a definite course of action or a definite attitude, but still open to skilful directions. The next moment may change the situation fully, giving final supremacy to tainted impulses and misjudgements from within, or harmful influences from without. ... Such slowing down is of vital importance as long as unprofitable, harmful or evil deeds possess an all too strong spontaneity of occurrence, (i.e.) as long as they appear as immediate reactions to events or thoughts, without giving ... the ‘inner brakes’ of wisdom, self-control and common sense a chance to operate.” (ibid. 40)

Concerning application of mindfulness in the worldly realm, Venerable Nyanaponika also adds: “Bare attention will also allow us time for the reflection, whether, in a given situation, activity by deed, word or mental application is necessary at all. There is often too great an inclination to interference ... (which) becomes another avoidable cause of much suffering and superfluous entanglement ... If in any way, complications and conflicts of all kinds are lessened, the endeavour to shape the mind will meet with less resistance. (ibid.)

He reminds us to remember also that “Bare Attention is concerned with the present. It teaches what so many have forgotten: to live with full awareness in the Here and Now. It teaches us to face the present without trying to escape into thoughts about the past or the future. In ordinary life, past and future are ... mostly just objects of day-dreaming and vain imaginings which are the main foes of right Mindfulness, Right Understanding and Right Action...” (ibid.)

He sums up by saying: “Right mindfulness recovers for man the lost pearl of his freedom, snatching it from the dragon time ... cuts man loose from the fetters of the past ... stops man from chaining himself ... through the imaginations of his fears and hopes, to anticipated events of the future. Thus Right Mindfulness restores to man a freedom that is to be found only in the present. (ibid. 41)

A sure way to exclude such futile thoughts is to focus on any immediate object in the present, especially when a mental vacuum is threatening that could easily fill with invading thoughts. If invading thoughts are trying to get in in, focus on them, as they are arising in the present, “in order to deprive them of their mind-diluting power and finally disperse them.” (ibid.) We transform disturbing thoughts in to meditation objects, analyzing and penetrating them clearly until the source of infection is cleared away.

The Venerable Nayanaponika Maha Thera concludes this section of his discourse with the following words, which are worthy of being quoted in their entirety:

“Bare Attention brings order into the untidy corners of the mind. It shows up the numerous, vague and fragmentary perceptions, unfinished lines of thought, confused ideas, stifled emotions, etc., which are daily passing through the mind. Taken singly, these vain consumers of mental activity are weak and powerless, but by their accumulation they will gradually impair the efficiency of mental functions. Since these

thought fragments are mostly allowed to sink into the subconscious without being properly attended to, they will naturally affect the basic structure of character, disposition, and tendencies. They will gradually reduce the range and lucidity of consciousness in general, as well as its plasticity, i.e. its capacity of being shaped, transformed and developed.

The unflattering self-knowledge gathered through introspective Bare Attention about the squalid and disreputable quarters of our own mind will rouse an inner resistance to a state of affairs where clarity and order are turned into untidiness and the precious metal of the mind into dross. By the pressure of that repugnance the earnest application to the Way of Mindfulness will increase and excessive squandering of mental energy will eventually come under control. It is the automatic tidying function of Bare Attention that serves here for shaping the mind.

Bare Attention turned to our own mind will supply that candid information about it which is indispensable for success in its shaping. By turning full attention to our thoughts as they arise, we shall get a better knowledge of our weak and our strong points, i.e. of our deficiencies and our capacities. Self deception about the former and ignorance about the latter make self-education impossible.

By the skill attained through Bare Attention to call bad or harmful things at once by their true names, one will take the first step towards their elimination ... This dispassionate and brief form of mere 'registering' will often prove more effective than a mustering of the will, emotioning or reason which frequently only provokes antagonistic forces of the mind to stiffer resistance.

Our positive qualities too will of course be focused more clearly, and those which are either weak or not duly noticed will get their chance and develop to full fruition. Untapped resources of energy and knowledge will come into the open. And capacities will be revealed which were hitherto unknown to oneself. And this will strengthen the self-confidence which is so important for inner progress. (ibid. 41-42)

This is a strong conclusion, and the text should be allowed to speak for itself.

In the essay above, we have cited only key points that the Venerable Nyanaponika Maha Thera has explained about Bare Attention. Those who feel that his guidance is beneficial to their meditation practice may be encouraged to read the whole book which goes into greater depth in more lengthy detail.

* Bhikkhu Bodhi has written, concerning the translation of Pali terms into English, specifically regarding the terms 'sati' and 'bare attention': "There are so many issues involved that it would be a major project for me to comment on it. Just to begin with, I myself am unsure how to match the terms coined by contemporary writers and teachers of meditation with the terms used in the classical texts. I am not even content with Venerable Nyanaponika's 'bare attention,' since in my opinion, there is no such thing as an act of attention that is utterly bare of a complex web of predispositions, purposes and

colourings provided by past experience, cultural and historical context, etc. I don't find enough evidence that *sati* as used in the Pali Suttas has this meaning. It seems to me that this sense of 'bare attention' derives from Mahasi Sayadaw's interpretation of mindfulness meditation rather than from the original meaning found in the Pali Suttas." (From an e-mail dated 28 April 2007, to the present author) Bhikkhu Bodhi concludes his comment, by suggesting, quite rightly, that *sati* can better be known through the depths of direct experience by a meditation master than through relying on scholarly renderings of texts and languages alone. This must, indeed, be the latest word on the topic, and those of us who understand must strive on with diligence alone.