

**Buddhist Broadcast Talks**

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# **Buddhist Mindfulness**

by V.F. Gunaratna

I propose to speak to you today on Buddhist Mindfulness.

We all know in a general way what Mindfulness is. We all know that the practice of Mindfulness makes us more and more alert, more and more precise and more and more careful in whatever we say or do.

We also know that the absence of Mindfulness results in the occurrence of these unfortunate lapses and slips, these accidental errors and emissions which form a fairly frequent disturbing feature in life.

Is there no cure for this ? Has no one prescribed a remedy for this?

No doubt, in the recorded sayings of sages and philosophers of old, as well as in the books of modern psychologists, Mindfulness is emphasized, Mindfulness is eulogized, Mindfulness is strongly recommended as a quality of mind which makes for efficiency in everything, but there is no special technique prescribed by them for the practice and development of this very desirable quality of mind.

It is just here that the difference is seen between Mindfulness in general and Mindfulness in the Buddhist sense.

Nowhere in the whole wide field of the world's literature, do we find Mindfulness treated as a special subject of mental exercise, treated as a profound process of mental culture, enriched with a special technique and loaded with a wealth of detailed instructions as in Buddhism.

All this could be found in the Buddha's discourse entitled "Satipapphána Sutta." Satipapphána means "establishment of Mindfulness." This is Buddhist Mindfulness so let us now learn something about this type of Mindfulness.

There are numerous things about which one can be mindful. In other words, the objects of Mindfulness are numerous, but in this discourse the objects of Mindfulness are brought within four categories:--

1. Mindfulness of body and bodily movement.
2. Mindfulness of sensations.
3. Mindfulness of thoughts.
4. Mindfulness of Dhamma.

There are sub-divisions within this first category of Mindfulness. **First**, we shall confine ourselves to one particular sub-division only, namely, Mindfulness of the Breath or breathing. It is called *Anapana Sati* which literally means "Mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out."

The trainee in mindfulness begins this practice by adopting

the prescribed posture and then taking in a breath slowly and calmly. As he thus breathes in slowly and calmly, he must train himself to be aware that breath is coming in. Then he slowly and calmly breathes out, and as he thus breathes out, he must train himself to be aware that breath is going out.

Then, gradually, he becomes fully concentrated on the breath, its rise and its fall and nothing else. The first effect of the continued practice of awareness of the rise and fall of breath, will be that the trainee develops a wonderful tranquillity and calm within himself, at first experienced during the moments of practice only, but later it is present right through the day.

The practice of this type of Mindfulness is specially beneficial to all of us in this hectic modern age with its countless factors which combine to create an atmosphere of rush and tension attended by a continual din and disturbance which robs us of that calm and quiet so necessary for our mental well-being.

The **second** type of mindfulness is Mindfulness of sensations. Sensations can be *pleasant*, *unpleasant* and *indifferent*, and they arise through the five senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.

Here the trainee should not identify himself with his sensations but must regard them objectively and not subjectively. He must concentrate on the sensation and the sensation only and not on the effect on himself. Continued

mindfulness on sensations as they arise and as they pass off will make him realize that sensations come and sooner or later they go. He will vividly realize the rise and fall of sensations in him.

The continued realization of the rise and fall of sensations combined with the objective way of considering them without identifying himself with them, will have the wonderful effect of making the trainee less sensitive to sensations of pain and pleasure while he is engaged in such practice.

This is especially useful to those suffering from chronic aches and pains of a serious nature, for such persons can by this method reduce these painful effects, instead of resorting to sedatives, tranquilizers and other pain-killing drugs which often have their after-effects.

The **third** type of mindfulness is Mindfulness of thoughts. Here too, the trainee in mindfulness must not identify himself with his thoughts. He must consider them objectively and not subjectively. He must stand outside himself as it were, and calmly, dispassionately and impartially watch the play of thoughts on his mind. He should watch the play of thoughts as if the play is on something external to him and not on his own mind. Then only can he see more of this play of thoughts just as a spectator sees more of a game than a player who is engaged and involved in the game itself.

This is what is meant by saying that the trainee should look at

his thoughts objectively.

If he looks at them subjectively and identifies himself with his thoughts, then a link is established between himself and the thoughts. In view of this affinity the trainee loses the power to view his thoughts impartially. His view is coloured by the colour of these thoughts.

The continued practice of this type of Mindfulness increases the trainee's power of self-control, and as a result he will not rashly rush headlong into action under the influence of an incoming thought however powerful it may be.

He is able to assess the desirability or undesirability of a thought that enters his mind. No thought can enter his mind without his being keenly aware of it, but if somehow there happens to be a sly entry of an undesirable thought, sooner or later the *watch-dog of Mindfulness* will *bark* at the unwelcome visitor and arouse the attention of the trainee. Gradually, there will arise to the trainee a vivid awareness of the rise and fall of thoughts.

We now come to the **fourth** type of mindfulness, Mindfulness of dhammas (arising phenomena in the mind). Dhammas here does not mean the doctrine itself but the many and various phenomena arising within the Dhamma. Several examples of these phenomena are given in the sermon itself such as the Five Mental Hindrances and the Four Noble Truths. The trainee must learn to recognize and be mindful of arising

mental phenomena whenever they become relevant to his life.

Whenever a situation occurs in respect of which one or other of these phenomena of the Dhamma appear to be applicable, the trainee must be mindful of such an phenomena and its applicability to the situation in question. In this way so many phenomena of the Dhamma can each day be brought into contact with his life at many points.

Then the seeing the pattern of arising and vanishing dhammas gradually gets absorbed into the thought-world of the trainee. The important result is that there will arise an awareness or Mindfulness of the phenomena arising within him as distinguished from an intellectual knowledge of the Dhamma. This is of immeasurable help to him to lead the Dhamma-life.

In respect of each of the **Four Practices of Mindfulness** with which we have dealt, we have naturally referred to the advantages that accrue to the trainee. But, friends, these are not the advantages the Buddha had in view when he preached the **Sermon on Mindfulness**. The advantages thus far referred to are just by-products of the system, the main purpose of which according to the Buddha is to help the trainee to attain to Nibbána.

Thus, in the case of the practice of Mindfulness of Breath, as the awareness of the rise and fall of the breath becomes more and more vivid, the trainee with equal vividness will develop

the awareness of the rise and fall of all beings and all phenomena. This is a deep spiritual experience in a higher plane of consciousness. To him Nibbána is near.

In the case of the practice of Mindfulness of Sensations the same deep spiritual experience comes since the awareness of the rise and fall of sensations leads to the awareness of the rise and fall of all beings and all phenomena.

In the case of the practice of Mindfulness of Thoughts the same deep spiritual experience comes, since the awareness of the rise and fall of thoughts leads to the awareness of the rise and fall of all beings and all phenomena.

Lastly, in the case of the practice of Mindfulness of Phenomena (dhammas), here too the same deep spiritual experience comes with the continued awareness of the vitality of the dhammas arising within the mind of the trainee.

In a moving peroration the Buddha concludes his sermon on Mindfulness with the assurance that if a trainee practises fully the Four Types of Mindfulness the state of Anágámi or Arahat can be reached in seven years.

In the very next sentence, he says, “No O Bhikkhus, leave aside seven years. Six years will suffice.” The successive sentences one by one bring down the period to six years—five years—four years etc. and the last sentence brings it down to seven days. It will thus be seen that what matters is



not so much the length of time as the intensity of the practice.

Let us also commence this great and powerful practice if we have not already done so.

Note:

1. In editing, with regard to the Four Practices of Mindfulness, I have changed the word *items* of the Dhamma to *phenomena*, agreeing with Bhikkhu Bodhi that it is a better translation of many mind objects than the more vague term *items*.DDH

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