



Early Buddhist Meditation, Part 5: Dimensions of Mindfulness

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This is the final in a series of five explorations of the topic of early Buddhist meditation. The purpose of what follows is to summarize what the previous four contributions can reveal about mindfulness, followed by complementing this with relevant perspectives from other mindfulness-related practices described in early Buddhist discourses. Before getting into the actual topic, it needs to be mentioned that the present discussion only concerns one out of several constructs of mindfulness. Besides the early Buddhist version and its practical implementation under discussion here, there are several other constructs in different Buddhist traditions as well as in contemporary cognitive psychology. Each of these has its value and fulfils its specific purpose within its respective setting. What follows is therefore not meant to narrow down the perspective so as to arrive at the one and only “correct” type of mindfulness, instead of which the intention is much rather to broaden perspective by exploring just one out of several valid alternatives.

Mindfulness as Breadth of Mind

The early Buddhist approach to the cultivation of the immeasurables, taken up in the first of the present set of five explorations, lives up to this qualification in both possible senses, as each of these sublime attitudes is not confined in any way and the actual practice takes the form of a boundless radiation. The relevant texts apply the same qualification of being immeasurable also to mindfulness of the body. Such mindfulness relates to remaining free from reactivity by way of likes and dislikes in relation to whatever may be perceived through any of the senses. This modality of mindfulness appears to combine a rootedness in the body with an attitude of broad openness in regard to anything experienced through the senses, and it may be in particular such breadth of mind

that makes it comparable to the boundless radiation of the immeasurables.

This notion of breadth of mind can be related to a simile found in the early discourses that describes a cowherd in two distinct situations (Anālayo, 2022a). As long the crops are ripening, the cowherd has to watch the cows closely, even at times beat them, to prevent them from straying into the crop and eating it. Once the crop has been harvested, however, the cowherd can just watch over them from a relaxed distance. The relevant passage employs “mindfulness” when describing the latter alternative. The image of the cowherd just watching from a relaxed distance, overlooking the whole area where the cows are grazing, resonates with the notion of a broadly receptive type of mindfulness. This could indeed be cultivated through remaining established in awareness of the whole body, by way of providing an anchor in the present moment, combined with a broad state of mind that is comparable to a wide-angle lens.

Whether it is watching a herd of cows grazing or remaining balanced with anything perceived through the senses, the type of mindful attitude described in this way is not tied down to a particular object but much rather remains openly receptive of whatever manifests. The impression that mindfulness need not be tied down to particular objects can be related to the four establishments of mindfulness. Contrary to a position taken in the Pāli commentaries, the term *satipaṭṭhāna* does not combine mindfulness with the term *paṭṭhāna*, “foundation,” but much rather with the term *upaṭṭhāna*, “establishment.” This is evident from the corresponding Sanskrit term *smṛtyupasthāna* and also from regular references in Pāli discourses to mindfulness being established, *upaṭṭhita*. In other words, the emphasis with *satipaṭṭhāna* is less on particular objects as a “foundation” for being mindful, instead of which the central aspect is the attitude of being mindful, its “establishment” in relation to whatever may become the object of the mind.

This proposition finds support in an alternative set of *three* establishments of mindfulness mentioned in the early Buddhist discourses (Anālayo, 2020c). These describe the Buddha’s equanimous attitude toward his disciples, independent of

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whether all of them listen to his instructions, none of them listen, or else some listen and some do not. Even though the same term *smṛtyupasthāna/satipaṭṭhāna* is used, the distinction into these three establishments differs from the standard fourfold distinction concerned with body, feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas. It follows that this set of four is indeed not the only possible “foundation” for mindfulness and that what relates the three to the four must be the attitude of being with mindful sufficiently well *established* to enable the maintenance of a balanced type of observation.

Another relevant presentation would be the instructions on 16 steps of mindfulness of breathing. All these 16 steps involve being mindful of the breath, but only the first two accord prominence to the breath itself, in terms of discerning whether it is long or short. The remaining fourteen steps instead present an exploration of other aspects of subjective experience that mirrors the four establishments by proceeding from the body to feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas. Although the breath remains present, which can be achieved by holding it in peripheral awareness, it is no longer the sole, primary object of practice. In this way, based on a single *object* of the breath, all four establishments of mindfulness can be explored in a way that leads up to the arousal of the awakening factors and thereby fulfils the same purpose that inspires the four establishments of mindfulness in general. This presentation supports the impression that it is not the object as such that determines the practice, instead of which the key aspect appears to be *establishing* an attitude of mindful observation.

The same emerges with further clarity in relation to what appears to be an antecedent to nondual mindfulness practices known from the Himalayan and East Asian Buddhist traditions. This is the cultivation of signless meditation, taken up in more detail in the second of the present set of five explorations. Alongside requiring a high degree of mindfulness, such signless meditation dispenses with objects in a rather thorough manner, as it involves remaining aware of the most comprehensive type of absence possible within the realm of what is conditioned. The possibility as such of attending to what is absent also features under contemplation of the mind, of the hindrances, and of the awakening factors in the scheme of four establishments of mindfulness, where it takes the more specific form of mindfully noting when a particular defilement or awakening factor is absent in the mind.

In sum, all of the practices taken up in the present series of explorations can be seen to converge in one way or another on the notion of a breadth of the mind that does not necessarily depend on focusing on a particular, circumscribed object. In general terms, a broad condition of the mind would be precisely what enables seeing causal relationships and putting things into proper perspective. It would enable interrelating different bits of information, thereby furnishing a crucial condition for the arising of liberating insight. This in turn can be related to the memory dimension of the Indic

term *smṛti* or *sati*. Differing from the position taken in some later traditions, in early Buddhist thought mindfulness is not just identifiable with an act of memory (Anālayo, 2018a, b, d). Although a practice like mindfulness of breathing, for example, requires remembering the instructions for the 16 steps, if the practitioner instead gets carried away by a distraction related to something that happened in the past, this also involves some form of memory, even though it is clearly a loss of mindfulness. Perhaps this example suffices to exemplify that mindfulness is not just about remembering something, and it seems best to see mindfulness and memory as interrelated but nevertheless distinct.

The breadth of mind that can be cultivated through establishing mindfulness can naturally enhance memory. For one, it enables clearer and more accurate awareness of whatever is happening in the moment, making it easier to remember it later. Moreover, at the time of trying to remember, due to establishing breadth of mind it becomes easier to retrieve the information.

Both dimensions can be appreciated from the viewpoint of personal experience. When being fully focused on a particular issue, we may at times perform tasks in such an automated manner that later we are unsure if we have actually done them. Brushing the teeth in the morning with the mind fully focused on the problem(s) to be solved later at work, it becomes difficult if not impossible to recall afterwards the act of brushing the teeth. We may even have to go back to the bathroom and check if the toothbrush is wet, as the whole process of brushing has been done so absent-mindedly that nothing of it has left an imprint in memory. Again, trying to remember something that does not spring to mind naturally becomes rather difficult if we are under the impression that we must remember it right now. Being in a situation of perhaps giving a public talk or facing an exam can result in a strong, excessive focus that can actually prevent recall. A little later, once the focus has been released and the mind is in a more relaxed condition, the information may quite naturally come to mind. In other words, arousing an openly receptive state of mind that is able to accommodate various bits of information will strengthen memory of what is taking place now. When trying to recall what happened earlier, giving prominence to mindfulness, again in the sense of an openly receptive mental condition rather than a strong focus, will considerably facilitate such recall.

On this understanding, then, a cultivation of the type of mindfulness under discussion here could conveniently be evaluated in terms of improved memory performance. Another dimension of nourishing the same quality should be an overall increase in broadminded states, and thereby an ability to live with cognitive dissonance, to allow for different opinions without immediately having to decide on the only correct one, and becoming overall less dogmatic and fundamentalist.

Mindful Monitoring

A central task of mindfulness that stands in close relationship to breadth of mind is monitoring. This combines the chief quality of remaining in the present moment with a clear apperception of what is taking place, within and without. Key in this respect is a stance of receptivity rather than immediately reacting.

Such a quality of monitoring appears to be relevant to all of the meditation practices surveyed in the present series. A particularly prominent example here are the four establishments of mindfulness, especially when understood to require a progression from internal contemplation—in the sense of being related to oneself—to its external counterpart as related to others. With mindfulness of breathing, the same monitoring takes place, here in particular by combining continuous knowing of inhalations and exhalations, best held in peripheral awareness, with mindful contemplation of the state of the body, feeling tones, and mind as they occur in the present moment. This leads to insight perspectives that build on impermanence, in relation to which the monitoring task of mindfulness provides the crucial input. Even with the immeasurables or signless meditation, mindfulness in its function of monitoring has an important contribution to offer.

When the successful establishment of mindfulness leads to progress to awakening, which from the traditional, soteriological perspective features as its most prominent benefit, then mindfulness continues this very same monitoring function in relation to the other six awakening factors. Mindfulness is also present during the different stages of concentrative absorption, where its natural breadth is less prominent due to the concomitant presence of a stronger focus through concentration. Nevertheless, even in this case, the tasks of monitoring and staying in the present moment remain the central contributions offered by mindfulness (Anālayo, 2019). The same also holds for implementing the eightfold path, which in early Buddhist thought features as the indispensable setting within which mindfulness evolves. Here, too, mindfulness serves to monitor the cultivation of the other factors of the path (Anālayo 2022b).

The monitoring function of mindfulness is not confined to progress to awakening. An instance that is of special relevance to the employment of mindfulness for health purposes involves an overweight king (Anālayo, 2018c). The Buddha is on record for commending to the king the cultivation of mindfulness, specifically for knowing his measure with food. Here, mindfulness serves to keep an eye on the process of partaking of food in order to help the king counter a tendency to overeat. Besides illustrating the range of possible options for implementing mindfulness in its function of supervising, this episode provides a fairly clear-cut early Buddhist precedent for an employment of mindfulness explicitly aimed at health benefits.

The Pearl of Mindfulness

Based on a detailed survey of the rather broad range of applications of mindfulness in early Buddhist texts, an attempt at bringing together some of its salient features can be expressed with the help of the acronym PEARL (Anālayo, 2020b). The acronym is based on combining the first letters of the qualities protective, embodied, attentive/awake, receptive, and liberating.

In its monitoring function, mindfulness is eminently *protective*. This can take place by encouraging the taking of a pause before reaction, thereby enabling a better overview of the situation that can then inform wise action rather than blind reaction. In the early Buddhist discourses, this protective function finds illustration in several similes. One of these describes a quail able to outwit a hawk by staying in its home turf (Anālayo, 2022c). Similar to the quail, practitioners can make mindfulness their home turf. The image provided in this way can serve as a source of inspiration, conveying that even what may seem overwhelming—comparable to a hawk swooping down to catch a quail—can in principle be handled through mindfulness, if, and only if, we indeed remain established in mindfulness as our home turf.

The notion of *embodiment* through mindfulness is rather central to the particular approach presented here. This emerges out of the observation that often meditators, in particular those from Westernized societies, can be caught up in their heads. An important requirement for quite literally bringing them to their senses is an embodied approach, which can conveniently be achieved through the practice of body scans. The idea is that awareness of the whole body, by relying on the innate sense of proprioception, can provide an anchor for the continuity of mindfulness throughout daily activities. Establishing this anchor does not require a strong focus or additional attentional resources and for this reason stands less chance of interfering with whatever task is at hand, in contrast to attempting to find such an anchor in a more focused type of practice. Cultivating mindful embodiment also enables a better assessment of emotions, as their somatic repercussions are more easily noticed, and these tend to be more truthful and accurate than the accompanying mental comments.

The pair *attentive/awake* intends to convey a gradual progress in the cultivation of mindfulness. Especially for beginners in the practice, it is rather important to avoid unrealistic expectations that proficiency in mindfulness can be acquired quickly, which can easily lead to frustration, at times even stimulating a forsaking of the practice altogether. Here, the term *attentive* represents the basic improvement in mental operation once even a little bit of mindfulness comes to be present. However unstable and intermittent it may be, there will be an overall increase in attentional capacity, in the ability to be more in touch with reality. With ongoing practice, mindfulness becomes stronger and

steadier, leading to an *awake* quality of the mind in its literal sense, that is, in being more awake and less mentally absent or even numb. This can just take the form of being fully present with what is. It can also, eventually, reflect the more specifically Buddhist notion of awakening, in the sense of diminishing and eventually eradicating the defilements that tend to cloud and obscure the mind.

Receptivity features as an important facet of mindfulness that can hardly be overemphasized in this age of excessive activity and reactivity. Maintaining a stance of open receptivity is particularly challenging when having to face what is unwanted, be it in the outside world or within one's own mind. Yet, precisely this challenging task can be mastered through mindfulness, which enables us to stay with what is, rather than being carried away by cognitive dissonance into reactivity.

Liberation is the overall concern of mindfulness in its ancient soteriological setting, but the same can also be applied to more mundane matters, in line with a usage of the term “liberation” in early Buddhist discourse for different types of freedom, even those that are of a temporary type and fall short of being an instance of attaining the stages of awakening mapped by early Buddhist soteriology. The example of the overeating king could be taken to convey a lesser type of liberation that can be achieved through mindfulness, namely freeing him from a tendency to overeat. This type of application is clearly a rather minor aspect of early Buddhist meditation theory, whose overall interest is much rather progress toward the liberation of the definite type to be reached through awakening and the eradication of defilements. Nevertheless, this minor aspect is already present in the ancient Indian setting.

Bringing together these qualities of being protective, embodied, attentive/awake, receptive, and liberating then leads to the PEARL of mindfulness. A pearl forms when something irritating enters inside the shell of a mollusk, leading to an immune response by surrounding the irritating matter with calcium carbonate. The formation of a pearl can be taken to illustrate how establishing mindfulness can facilitate an encompassing of whatever irritates, providing an immune response in the form of resilience when facing the challenges of life with mindfulness. Just as an actual immune response helps to the body to stay safe and protected, in the same way mindfulness can play an instrumental role in helping the mind to stay safe and protected. Over time, cultivating this mental type of immune response will lead to the beauty of a mind ever more at ease and free, comparable to the beauty of a pearl.

With the image of mindfulness as a pearl, the present series of explorations comes to its conclusion. According to a passage found among the early discourses, the Buddha could have given continuous teachings on the four establishments of mindfulness even for a hundred years without running out of material (Anālayo, 2020a). In other words, the topic is inexhaustible. The present survey in five parts has therefore hardly scratched the

surface of even just mindfulness in early Buddhist meditation. Others will hopefully add more to the conversation on practical implications of different constructs of mindfulness, thereby shining various beams of light on the beautiful pearl of mindfulness.

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