



## SATIPATTHANA MEDITATION SOCIETY OF CANADA

### **MINDFULNESS (SATI)**

By: Sa-yar Myat, March 5, 2009

Sati (mindfulness) is a mental factor by which you remember physical or mental objects. Although this suggests a past tense, everything with mindfulness relates to the present moment. However, it requires a frame of reference from the past experience to cognize the object in the present. The word mindfulness is commonly known as 'bearing in mind', which denotes more of a passive nature. From a Buddhist point of view it is much more dynamic and engaging with a sense of confrontation. When one is mindful the mind darts and grabs an object and takes hold of it totally and observes it completely and thoroughly. Observing with mindfulness enables you to see every aspect of the object in minute detail. For example, if you look at a person's face will see a general shape and size. However, if you look at it intensely and thoroughly you will see the myriad of details from the colour of the eyes to the shape of the face, eyebrows, nose, etc., just as a painter sees his object to paint. That kind of observation is mindfulness. Therefore, Sati means "observing power". This observing power has a penetrative and profound effect. Mindfulness in a Buddhist meditative sense is not passive, it is active. It confronts and engages the object so it does not disappear and observes it thoroughly and completely to penetrate its true, profound nature.

What are the characteristics of mindfulness? Its characteristic is non-superficiality. If you look at something in a superficial way you are not applying mindfulness. If it is non-superficial it is non-wavering, non-floating and penetrative. It is simple as well as profound, depending on how you apply mindfulness. A cork floating on the water is superficial. Half is in touch with the water, half in touch with the air. It is floating, wavering, superficial. If you put a rock in the water it sinks and is encompassed on all sides by the water. That is what is called penetrative, thorough and complete. These are the characteristics of mindfulness.

What function does mindfulness have? It is a function of non-forgetting, non-heedlessness. It remembers to note the object in the present moment. It keeps the object from disappearing. If you apply mindfulness to an object you won't forget about it and that object won't disappear from your attention. One applies mindfulness moment to moment. If you are observing an object and then become unmindful (forget) about it you will find that the object disappears from your field of attention. You will then be engaging unmindfully with another object. If you become momentarily forgetful about an object while meditating then you are not being mindful. The function of mindfulness is not to be forgetting, not to be heedless, not to let the object disappear from sight but to remember to note and observe the object consistently and repeatedly, from moment to moment, in the present.

What does this mindfulness manifest as? Mindfulness manifests as a guard that protects the yogi from becoming heedless. It places the mind face to face with an object where it has no other choice but to confront and engage. In this way the object will not disappear as it is directly in confrontation with the mind. In a way it manifests as confrontation. When you come face to face with an object in this way you see the complete nature of the object.

In sitting meditation you watch the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. You notice the expansion and contraction, and as you watch you become very engaged and begin to see subtle movements. As your mindfulness becomes continuous and repeatedly follows the movements you begin to notice the pressure, tension, relaxation and stiffness. That is how one observes, engages and becomes face to face with an object. Do not try and look for these details. To begin with, simply watch from an overall point of view, and then through being consistently mindful all these details will unfold by themselves for you to observe. Eventually you will come to see that in reality the abdominal rising and falling is composed of a series of vibrations, tensions, pressures and stiffness. Although you started your noting with rising and falling movements of your abdomen, you come to understand that there is no rising, no falling, no abdomen. There is but a series of vibrations, pressures and tensions, which is simply the "wind element".

When your mindfulness becomes firm, strong, unwavering and steady you will find that at that specific moment you don't have any desire or attachment. There is no anger or aversion and you intuitively know with clarity that "body" (rising and falling movements of your abdomen) is nothing but a series of

vibrations, tensions and pressures. Therefore, the manifestation of mindfulness is keeping the mind away from desire (lobha), aversion (dosa) and confusion (moha), collectively known as mental defilements (kilesas). If one can maintain that purity of mind with repeated, constant mindfulness then one will begin to see (experience) that physical and mental phenomenon are constantly arising and passing away. This is the unfolding of the wisdom one experiences when practicing mindfulness correctly and according to the Satipatthana-Vipassana method.

What is the proximate cause of mindfulness? Simply put: mindfulness causes mindfulness. In other words, mindfulness is caused by wise attention (yoniso manasikara). Skillful attention causes mindfulness. When you apply wise attention skillfully and correctly then wholesomeness (kusala) arises. For example, if you forget to apply wise attention to an object (unskillful attention) then that thought pattern shifts into an unskilled, incorrect, unwholesome (akusala) nature. It is still attention, but it is unwise attention (ayoniso manasikara). When you develop wise attention you develop sammāsati (correct mindfulness). Absence of wise attention is forgetfulness (unmindfulness) that brings about an unwholesome state of mind.

At the beginning of your practice you are mindful, but it is a weak mindfulness. If you can repeatedly and constantly maintain mindfulness you build up a momentum. When you build up this momentum you produce a stronger mindfulness. Perfect mindfulness is attained at the level of Arahat. The key point is to work towards building up mindfulness. Do not give up. Persevere and put in great effort. This concerted and continuous effort towards stronger, firmer mindfulness will produce concentration. When your concentration is built up you are able to keep the kilesas away (the lobha, dosa and moha) and your mind becomes pure. At this stage you will begin to see any mental or physical phenomenon you are observing in its true nature. Seeing this phenomenon in its true nature is insight.

To sum up: Mindfulness is dynamic, engaging, confronting, penetrating and profound. It is observing power. It is the vital and key component of the Buddhist meditation (Satipatthana) which is built on the foundation of morality (Sila).

## Four ways to develop mindfulness

**1. Mindfulness and clear comprehension (satisampajanna)** Sati refers to the condition in a sitting meditation where one focuses on the rising and falling aspect of the abdomen. The frequencies of thoughts and emotions arise less and less as your mindfulness becomes stronger. Keep in mind that it is not to be confused with one-pointedness concentration, as that is when you are in a samatha zone. In sati you are observing the object completely, thoroughly and penetratively. You are in a state of awareness where you view an object in minute detail, from every angle possible. Sampajanna refers to a wider scope of observing, as in daily activities such as walking, sitting, stretching, lying, bending, looking, hearing, etc. We develop this skill in order to use it in every part of our daily life and so we are able to deal with anything and everything that comes our way. When you are able to do everything with full awareness you can be assured you will see everything with clarity and without doubt.

**2. Associate with people who are mindful.** When you are with a group of people who are mindful you automatically become more mindful yourself. Buddhism stresses the influence of your environment on you and your interrelation with your environment. This is one example of that philosophy. By being around mindful-people your own mindfulness will become stronger.

**3. Avoid people who are not mindful.** By engaging with others who are not mindful you will find that you become caught up in their thoughts and actions. It is the same as mentioned above; your environment influences you. In this case, it has an unbeneficial effect.

**4. Incline the mind towards mindfulness.** At all times, attempt to keep your mind inclined towards attainment of mindfulness.

Sati is the seventh factor (Sammāsati) in the Eightfold Noble Path. It is also one of the Five Mental Faculties, in which it plays a vital role in balancing the remaining two pairs: faith versus wisdom and effort versus concentration. It is the first factor in the Seven Factors of Enlightenment and acts as the foundation to bring about and develop the remaining six factors. The Buddha said “Satipatthana (the Four Foundations of Mindfulness) is the only way to overcome all form of ills, reaching the Path and realizing the state of Nibbana”.