



SATIPATTHANA MEDITATION SOCIETY OF CANADA

On Watching Thoughts during Vipassana Meditation Mindful and Unmindful Thoughts

Sayar Myat

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During sitting or walking meditation, regardless of how much attention you pay towards the meditation objects (rising, falling, lifting, pushing, dropping) the attention still slips away, and you are not aware of that slipping moment so the mind drifts into another object (i.e., thought). The fact is that there always is an object to be aware of (mostly thoughts) in our minds. A thought or awareness is always arising at all times. As long as you are alive and awake, there is a conscious thought in your mind; if there is no thought, you are dead!

Thoughts (or awareness) can be divided into two categories: Unmindful and Mindful.

Unmindful thoughts are the everyday, ordinary thoughts such as “I have to go shopping”, “I feel lazy”, etc. We are aware of these just like a dog who is aware whenever anyone enters the yard by starting to bark, reacting to a situation. In humans, these thoughts are always related to concepts (apparent reality) or words. We are always chattering, mentally or verbally, with contents about remembering, planning, hoping, imagining, fantasizing or of a trivial and scattered nature. These are unmindful thoughts, unmindful awareness or reactive awareness.

Suppose you are practicing mindfulness meditation and watching the movements of the abdomen, suddenly you are not aware of the movements any more, and you get involved with a thought, e.g. “I have a lunch appointment, “I am out of milk”, “I feel bored”. You are not only thinking these words, but you are also aware of their contents, and start to plan or react, regret or get angry or be happy (express emotions) towards the contents of the thought. **According to mindfulness meditation, it means that you are not aware that you are thinking!** You are flowing into the process of thoughts; you react towards your thought; you and your thoughts are

together and intertwined, meaning -- identifying the thought process as self or taking it personally. These are the results of unmindful thoughts.

Mindful thoughts (or mindful awareness) are the moments when you are aware of your thinking process or thoughts without analyzing or getting involved. This unfolding is not aided with words or concepts. No chattering (mental or verbal) is required, but you are still aware of the thought process. For example, when you touch a carpet, you are aware of its softness without saying the word “soft”; when you touch a metallic object, you are aware that it is cold or hard without saying the word “cold or hard”. Similarly, you are aware of pain without saying or thinking the word “pain”; or you know that you are bored without naming, reacting or judging. These are not concepts, but ultimate reality and you are aware of them through direct contact, not through reflection. This kind of awareness is mindful awareness or mindful thought; you are directly, intuitively, and experientially aware of it. Everyone who knows that way will experience the same result or truth or basic immutable fact of all conditioned objects of observation. When being correctly mindful, you don’t react, judge, discriminate or be partial towards the object but are simply aware. These are the results of mindful thoughts at that moment.

When observing the rising/falling of the abdomen you are fully aware of the movement, tension, pressure, stiffness, hollowness, its beginning and ending; you don’t need to describe it or paint with words, you simply know. At beginner’s level, we are told to label these as “rising” and “falling” without focusing on words, but on the movements. However, once you become skilful in mindfulness, you do not need to label but be simply aware. This mindful awareness is a mindful thought.

Due to the power of the intent to be constantly mindful of all objects in the field of attention, even though you drift away from being mindful, you always come back to the state of mindfulness as if waking up from a dream. That is when you realize that you are in an unmindful thinking process. This awareness is a mindful thought. You are aware that you were thinking; you are not flowing or intertwined with the thought process anymore; you separated yourself from unmindful thought. In fact, that unmindful thought has already dissolved or passed away without having to be blocked or pushed away. That is the power of mindfulness: learning to let go of the moment (object) without desiring or wishing to let go. Now you are totally aware and alert; there is no more “I” because by letting go moment by moment you have no objects to hold on to and identify with. Your awareness is that there **was** an unmindful thought process. However, it is important to remember that as soon as you become aware that you were thinking, **don’t go back and analyze** the content of that thought; if you do, you would be going back into the state of unmindful thought again and get intertwined with it by analyzing it. Just say, it **was** an unmindful thought or “thinking, thinking”. Then the thought simply stops without counter force—it simply disappears!

Remember:

- Do not reflect into the content of thoughts
- Drifting away into thoughts without mindfulness is ignorance “Moha”.
- Getting upset about having drifted away (blaming) is aversion “Dosa”.

- Going back purposely into thought process because it is enjoyable to drift away, and also because you are getting bored in being mindful, is greed “Lobha”.
- Bare awareness of a thought at the moment of its arising creates lack of craving, aversion and delusion, i.e., Alobha (non-greed), Adosa (non-aversion) and Amoha (non-delusion) of the moment.

It is simple in technique yet very delicate and subtle! With persistent and constant practice, the duration of unmindful-thinking or drifting away will gradually shorten from several minutes to a few seconds and finally to nanoseconds.

Constant and continuous mindfulness (“Sati”) on all conditioned things that arise and pass away is required to build a certain level of concentration (“Samadhi”) that penetrates into the true nature of mind and matter, or intuitive wisdom (“Panna”).