**Mindfulness and concentration**

Mindfulness (*sati*)

Buddhism is perhaps unique in its emphasis on this quality – though in recent years, aspects of it have been taken up in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. The second of these secular therapies has been recognised by the UK National Health Service as an effective means to prevent people who have suffered from depression from relapsing back into it by being drawn into negative thought patterns.

Buddhism sees mindfulness as a crucial aspect of the process of meditatively *calming down* and *waking up* so as to see things as they really are. Both of these help us to reduce the suffering that we inflict on ourselves and others. As is said by the Buddha in his Discourse on the Applications of Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*), mindfulness is ‘the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the ending of pain and unhappiness, for acquiring the true method, and for experiencing Nirvana (the end of greed, hatred and delusion)’.

To be mindful is to be clearly aware of what is experienced in the present moment, being present with, and paying careful attention to, the wondrous flow of here … now. When we stand back from and alertly take stock of what we are thinking, feeling and doing, this allows things to naturally calm down. We are then open to experiencing a dropping away of normal mental horizons and limitations, a kind of timeless presence, with feelings of happiness and ease.

When we have developed more mindfulness, we tend to more easily notice simple natural events in the environment, such as a leaf gently falling to the ground, or ripples on the surface of a river or pool, or a trickle of rain running down a car windscreen while one waits in traffic. Mindful observation of these can allow a natural delight to arise…

Mindfulness is mind-ful-ness: full presence of mind, alert attention, mental clarity, being wide awake, fully with-it, vigilant, not on auto-pilot. During a normal day, much of the time we are operating on auto-pilot, involved in habitual actions and thought patterns. It is a bit like when rice pudding starts to cool, and gets a skin on it: a congealed barrier between it and the air. But when mindfulness arises, we are more alive and alert; something switches on that was previously inactive

Mindfulness is a thorough observation which is not careless in its watchfulness: it sees things as they are, without overlooking aspects of them, or projecting things onto them. It is also disinterested and non-judgemental, observing, without reacting for or against; a ‘bare attention’ that simply notes and registers what is going on, a full awareness of what is happening in and to us, as it happens – the aspect emphasised in secular forms of mindfulness.

Mindfulness also has an aspect of memory to it. It remembers what one is supposed to be attending to, so one does not ‘float away’ from it; and if the mind *has* wandered off, it reminds one to return to the focus of meditation. It is also used when one has undistorted memory of a past experience, especially of meditative experience and its beneficial qualities, so as to not lose one’s connection to these, and help them arise now.

An important fruit of mindfulness is that it conduces to a simple, natural, non-habitual state, in which things ‘flow’ better.

In particular, mindfulness *of breathing* takes a look at something seemingly very ordinary, always under one’s nose. It is the steady watching and clear awareness of a smooth breath – a natural flowing, if not at its *normal* length – particularly noting its length, and clearly noting the flow of sensations and related feelings. This allows one to feel what it is actually like, rather than just thinking about it: as if feeling it for the first time.

Its quality of careful observation helps one not be confused about the breath, and its quality of alertness prevents ‘switching off’ from the breath into a dull ‘staring’ attitude, as when the mind stops taking things in when reading.

It remembers that the aim is to stay with the breath in the present moment, so it guards against losing concentration and switching away from the breath, wandering away into the past, future, daydreams, worries, sleepiness ....

It carefully notices when attention nevertheless wanders onto such things, so that it can be gently brought back to the breath, so as to again mindfully feel it and know where one is in the process.

If annoyance arises in the mind, whether directed at one’s own wandering mind, external noises, or their source, mindfulness recognises this, but helps one step back from involvement in the irritation, so one can let go of it and return to the breath. The same applies, for example, with any anxiety on ‘am I doing this right?’.

Once the slow deep breathing has been established, mindfulness observes it without interference, so one can let the breath be, and not be anxious, as one nears the end of the in-breath, about when the out-breath will start, or vice versa; it will happen naturally.

When one has finished a meditation ‘sit’, it is good to mindfully recollect how it went. Mindfulness can also be used during the day, either to periodically notice what the breath is doing or how the mind is reacting. One can pause to check out how one feels: feeling one’s contact with the ground through the feet, noting any tensions in the body. Then note one’s emotional state. Mindfulness is a patient, kindly observation, which gives space for things to be what they are, and then to gradually change and pass. This is very helpful when applied, for example, when one feels low, or irritated, or worried, or afraid … It helps one to acknowledge these states, but then to let go of them.

Concentration, or mental unification (*samādhi*)

People’s normal experience of ‘concentration’ usually varies from a half-hearted paying attention, to becoming absorbed in a good book, when most extraneous mental chatter subsides. Buddhist meditation, in common with many other forms of meditation such as Hindu yoga, aims to cultivate the power of concentration till it can become truly ‘one-pointed’, with 100 per cent of the attention focused on a chosen calming object. In such a state, the mind becomes free from all distraction and wavering, in a unified state of inner stillness: mental unification.

In meditation, ‘concentration’ refers not so much to the gentle effort of concentrat*ing* – though this is also needed – as to the state(s) of mental unification that this leads to. Samatha teacher Sarah Shaw says:

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| The word concentration does not necessarily mean the kind of rigid application of mind that occurs when the maths teacher at school enjoins us to ‘concentrate!’ Here it is more akin to its earlier English sense of bringing together, as in a concentrate. *Samādhi* is like a pooling of the resources of the mind when faced with a pleasing and intricate problem, that absorbs all one’s interest – a state which interest in a mathematical problem can bring of course, or working out and digging a rock garden. Attention is governed not so much by one’s own effort, but by the object itself, which changes and influences the nature of the mind that considers it. The object starts to be perceived without ‘wanting’ or rejection, but for its own sake. This is the kind of concentration which, according to the *abhidhamma* [Buddhist systematic psychology] can and indeed is in a small part present in daily consciousness. When this is developed in *jhāna* [deep meditation], the mind is made unified and one-pointed, capable of seeing without distractions or hindrances. |

Concentration yokes the mind onto an object or project, be this good, bad or indifferent. It is a state of being focused, whatever the level of one’s alertness/awareness. It is possible to be quite focused, but not very aware/mindful: e.g. Sir Isaac Newton boiling his watch instead of an egg, when concentrating on an intellectual problem. It is possible to be very mindful without necessarily focusing on any one object, though if there is good mindfulness, this makes concentration easier. When concentration is combined with mindfulness, and focused on a simple object such as the breath, it becomes ‘right concentration’, and integrates the mind’s energies so as to bring about mental stillness, tranquillity and peace: a quiet yet positive state of mind.

Right concentration is a wholesome one-pointedness of mind: a wholesome state of mind steadily focused on a calming object. It is an intensified steadiness of mind, a state where the mind is like a clear flame burning in a windless place, or the surface of a clear, undisturbed lake.

It is a state of steady focus, mental composure and stillness, which unifies and harmonises the mind’s energies, as when a class of children are all intently listening to a good teacher, not fidgeting or looking out of the window. It is experienced as a state of tranquillity and clarity, and comes about when there is a state of happiness that allows the mind to contentedly stay on the object, as one has developed a natural interest in it.

In meditation on the breathing, *mindfulness* establishes a link between the mind and the breath, knowing its length and how it feels, while concentration is the state of being well-focused on the sensations known by mindfulness, aided by the counting. At any time in the meditation, *mindfulness* will give awareness of:

* the length of the breath, its speed, smoothness, and whether it is an in or out breath.
* the subtle sensations which arise along the path of the breath, and subtle feelings that come when one attends carefully to the flow of the ‘breath body’.
* where one is in the process, such as the stage of practice one is in, and what one is supposed to be doing.
* aspects of posture that may need re-tuning.
* whether the mind has wandered.

*Concentration* is the quality of remaining generally focused, ‘centred’, on the breath, hopefully including the sensations in a particular part of the path of the breath as one scans along this. At first, this is particularly aided by attention to the numbers one is counting as one breathes. The counting aids both mindfulness and concentration.

When the mind wanders, this is because, first of all, mindfulness slips, and one forgets what one is supposed to be doing. Concentration is then lost, as the mind becomes distracted, and loses its focus. If one then becomes involved in a long wandering thought, there may be concentration on *this*, but no mindfulness. When one notices that the mind is not on the breath, this marks the return of mindfulness, which then allows one to re-establish awareness of the breath, then concentration on it.

The practice starts to work well when there is a balance of a high degree of both mindfulness and concentration, so as to bring about a state of alert stillness.