



Practical Insight

You may have heard that you should be mindful all the time, whether you are at home or in the office, or on the bus or in your car, etc. You may interpret this advice to mean that you should keep your mind focused all the time on your breath, but this may lead to problems. If you simply keep your mind on the breath while driving your car, you will probably get into accidents from not paying sufficient attention to driving.

Some of you may think that “to be mindful all the time” means to pay attention only to whatever you are doing at a particular time, but this is just what those who are seriously paying attention to their work normally do. A painter, writer, singer, composer, hunter, surgeon, cook, etc., must pay full attention to whatever they do when they are engaged in their work. Not only human beings do this. Cats pay total attention to their prey in order to catch them without startling the prey beforehand. Cranes stand still in one single spot for a long time, ready to catch a fish which swims by. Sheep dogs pay total attention to the movements of sheep so they can run very quickly to direct the herd in the right direction. Unfortunately neither cat, crane, nor sheep dog cultivate an iota of insight; they don't remove the unwholesome roots (*akusala-mūla*) of greed, hatred, and delusion by merely paying total attention to objects.

So, just paying full attention to whatever you are doing at any time is not going to eliminate the unwholesome roots, which is the purpose of insight meditation. Paying attention to just one thing is what is done in concentration meditation: you may focus your mind on one single object for fifty years, yet the causes for the mental defilements will still remain unchanged in your mind.

Some think that they will experience supreme liberation from suffering by means of a special practice such as observing all the moral rules, learning all the sacred texts by heart, gaining deep concentration, spending all the time in solitude, but none of them can experience that liberation without first completely destroying the unwholesome roots, the mental defilements. Therefore in addition to their practice they also must remove the unwholesome roots in order to experience the bliss of emancipation from all kinds of suffering.

What is missing in focusing total attention to one single object all the time is wisdom (*paññā*). Total attention should be coupled with wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). What is wise attention? It is attention accompanied by the three wholesome roots (*kusala-mūla*). What are the wholesome roots? They are non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, or, in other words, letting go or generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. This means that when you pay attention to something you always attempt to pay attention without the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred or delusion, and instead with thoughts of relinquishing, loving-kindness and wisdom. So you don't let your mind be affected by the unwholesome roots when you pay attention to something and instead let thoughts of relinquishing, loving-kindness and wisdom dominate your mind.

You should pay wise attention to any thought, whether regarding yourself or other living beings or anything, and note whether it is wholesome or unwholesome. You should wisely reflect while you are engaged in any activity: wearing clothes, eating food, drinking water, talking to someone, listening to sound, seeing an object, and walking or driving, etc.

When you pay total attention with wise attention, your greed, hatred and delusion fade away, because the opposite qualities of relinquishing, loving-kindness and wisdom are activated through wise attention. Thoughts of relinquishing, loving-kindness and wisdom have the power of minimizing greed, hatred and delusion while you are engaged in any activity. When paying attention to something without unwise attention, you develop greed, hatred and confusion: for instance when you see an object that is attractive, beautiful or pleasing to your eyes, or an unattractive one, if you do not have wise attention, you may end up developing greed or resentment for the object. Or you may get deluded ideas about the object, thinking that it is permanent instead of realizing that it is impermanent, satisfactory instead of unsatisfactory, or having a self instead of being selfless.

You may ask how thoughts of letting go can get rid of greedy thoughts. When you perceive the object with greed, your mind will cling to it and not open to any thought of letting go of greed, of generosity. You do not want to take your eyes away from the object. Your mind temporarily becomes blind to any thought of relinquishing. Even if you wish to let go of the attachment to it, you may do so with great reluctance. Greed has very strong super glue in it. At the very first contact with the desirable object the mind sticks fast to it, and you cannot let go of that object from your mind. Letting go of that object can be as painful as cutting off a limb or some flesh from your body.

The object you are perceiving is where your wise attention needs to be. This is where you must learn to see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness. Your wise attention indicates that neither the object you perceive nor your feeling or sensation regarding the object remains the same, even for two consecutive moments. You will not have the same sensation later on. You change, the object you perceive changes. With wise attention you will see that everything is impermanent. This knowledge of impermanence allows you to let go of your resentment. When you see with wisdom that everything that is impermanent is unsatisfactory, then you see the connection between unsatisfactoriness and greed. As you are attached to an impermanent object you will be disappointed with the change of the object that you are so attached to. When you have wise consideration you see that which is impermanent and unsatisfactory is without self.

Then you might think: "Ah! Since this object is going to change, I must be quick and smart to take the advantage of this object right now and enjoy myself as quickly as possible before it disappears. Tomorrow it will not be there." Here you must remember that haste makes waste. If you make a hasty decision and do something foolish, you will regret it later on. For instance, sometimes you are attracted to a person without giving consideration, and later on you will find many faults in that person. In any such hasty decision there is no mindfulness.

When mindfulness is well developed, then even in haste you make a right decision. The only thing that makes sense in rushing to beat impermanence is to step back and check your own mind and see whether or not you make the decision with wise consideration. When you are mindful, you will know how to take the advantage of the current moment so that you will not regret it later on. Any mindful decision you make will make you happy and peaceful and will never make you regret it later on.

Always remember that mindfulness gives rise to a state of mind free from greed, hatred and delusion and full of relinquishment, loving-kindness, and wisdom. Any time you pay attention to anything you must ask whether your mind is full of these factors. If not, you are not mindful.

When you have thoughts of relinquishing, of non-greed in the mind, you will let go of any attractive sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought without any hesitation. It is because of their attractiveness that people become attached to them and get involved in them. The deeper they get involved in them the deeper is their suffering. When you have loving-kindness in your

mind, you will not try to reject any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought if they happen to be unattractive. Mindfully you will perceive them as impermanent. When any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or thought appears and is identified as self, you will see it is an unreal concept inculcated in your mind by conditioning through generations of wrong notions, and look at it with wisdom.

Mindfulness is not the same as carefulness. It is not smartness. Anybody can be careful and smart. A man walking on a wire three hundred feet above ground is careful. Remember those gymnasts performing all kinds of balancing feats. The numerous daredevils who climb very steep mountains, go across rocks, slippery places, rivers, and so on are very careful too. Many thieves are very smart and outwit the police. Many drug dealers, bank robbers, criminals are very smart. But none of them can be considered to be mindful.

Mindfulness is that mind state which reflects upon itself and takes care not to get caught in any states of greed, hatred and delusion which cause suffering to yourself, to others or to both.

When we ask people to abandon greed, some people ask us how one can live without greed. This is the miracle of mindfulness: When you practise mindfulness, you can learn to do the most difficult things easily. Not being greedy, resentful, or confused is very difficult, but through constant training in mindfulness you learn to live without greed, hatred and delusion. To be mindful is more difficult than to be unmindful, but you eventually learn to do the more difficult and wholesome things more easily than the easier, unwholesome things. For this reason the Buddha said:

For the good to do what is good is easy,
For the bad to do what is bad is easy.
For the bad to do what is good is difficult
For the noble to do what is bad is difficult.

(Udāna 5.8)

This means that which is very difficult at the beginning becomes easy through constant practice.

—Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

Pictures of Nyanatiloka, etc

If anyone has original, old pictures of Nyanatiloka Thera, the Island Hermitage, disciples of Nyanatiloka such as Nyanamoli, or other early pictures of Western monks in Sri Lanka, then please contact the BPS editor. Regularly people tell me that their parents or grandparents met these monks so perhaps there are unknown pictures which could be useful. There are very few pictures of Western monks in Sri Lanka or the Island Hermitage from before the 1960s. The pictures will be digitally scanned in and promptly returned to their owners.

Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha

With the support of a generous donor the BPS arranged for Wisdom Publications to print 4000 copies of a special, cheaply priced Middle Length Discourses for distribution only in Sri Lanka and India. The books will probably be in Sri Lanka early next year and will be available at the BPS bookshop for Rs. 1500, more than two thirds cheaper than the current Sri Lankan price. BPS members in Sri Lanka and India can also order it at this price.

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- *Mindfulness of Breathing*, Ñāṇamoli Thera;
- *Buddha and his Teaching*, Nārada Thera;
- *Seven Stage of Purification*, Ñāṇarāma Thera;
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