



The Compassion of Mindfulness

by Doko Hatchett

Mindfulness holds the key to the artful precision required to understand and refine our lives. It holds the key to ending how we create suffering. It is the art of remembering to hold something steady enough, for long enough, and in such a way, that causes concentration, insight, and wisdom to flourish. Thus real mindfulness is suffused with a *generosity*; a willingness to put aside our blindness, aggression and greed and really *give* our best attention.

It is a basic Buddhist tenet that what must always 'come first' is generosity. To live mindfully is thus never far from a sense of surrendering, of a giving back, of an undoing of what I personally bring to life that causes beings to feel isolated, alone, misunderstood, and unheard. It is a *giving* of patience, non-superficiality, non-despair, non-panic, non-aversion to *this* moment, *this* sensation. It is a giving of a simple readiness to meet this moment as best as I can. This generosity is fundamentally transformative. It stops the mental momentum of panicked searching for avoidance, blame, or strategies to cover over or 'get rid of' this or that. It is fundamentally non-violent. The full picture of what mindfulness brings to our lives therefore extends beyond the developing of a 'clever' mental power. True mindfulness must be driven by the heart; our inner *inescapable* vow to end our hurtful ways of ignorance towards ourselves and others. For its full effect to shine, it must stay within the realm of compassion.

Mindfulness has a long history of being a key facilitator of profound transformation. This is not just because of its role in allowing a human being to develop deep concentration and insight, but because it has the ability to awaken a

sensitivity for compassion and non-violence in us. For so many of us we have gotten into a mess through the losing of a tenderness towards life and ourselves and it has hurt our ability to see well and feel what needs to be felt for positive changes to be made.

Mindfulness shows us not only that we can tame the mind to a great extent, but we can come to have such a *deep goodwill for our mind* that we learn how to be its heartfelt *caretaker* rather than a powerless 'victim' of it. Mindfulness shows us that there is no need for us to 'look away' from pain or the help we can offer it. It shows us how to first steady then expand our awareness of what is within us to help that pain and end its' ongoing causes. This is not a sentimental journey of vague emotion and wishes. It is a sober one of clear seeing, that stops us being enchanted by our sense contact, our stories, and our vanity. Mindfulness allows us to move past the mental players that are limiting us, and into an ability to stay connected to skilfulness.

In Buddhism there is a term - Kalyanamitta. This means our 'lovely friends'. The Buddha used this word to remind us of the importance of good friends in general, but more deeply he used it to point out that the essence of what he has clearly seen ends a human beings pain and suffering – our greed, anger, and ignorance - is to grow into a more precise association with 'lovely friends' such as stillness, concentration, compassion, joy, equanimity, and kindness. Mindfulness allows these skilful qualities *to be seen and to work at the forefront of our efforts to understand ourselves and the world*. So the Buddha is pointing out that what really counts in terms of ending our pain and

suffering are not philosophies or beliefs. What counts is to learn how to see and use these universal mental qualities well.

Mindfulness *allows us* to become better acquainted with these friends by holding the mind and heart steady enough to see them and use them with awareness, wisdom, and compassion. All of this adds up to a training in recognising a fuller picture of our mind and its potentials. It works to skilfully tease out positive qualities within us, stabilise and strengthen them, and not mindlessly spiral around in circles of confusion, anger, blame, self-hatred, and despair towards ourselves and others. Mindfulness makes way for a growing sense of self-capability and personal sanity to establish itself. This is what practitioners of mindfulness declare and have done so for thousands of years.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is not a set of ideas *about* the mind. It is the power of mind that allows us to clearly experience our bodies and minds, as they meet the moment, and what actually happens from that precise point onwards. In other words, mindfulness gives us the ability to see *what we are making* out of this present sense meeting. It is essentially the mind's capacity to remember to stay present, awake, clear, and *connected* to the present

moment and connected to what we are personally bringing to it. It affects a 'giving of presence' and 'paying of attention' to finer and finer layers of life; from our personality as a whole and its effect upon the world, to the small sensory 'happenings' that are constantly occurring, being reacted to, and made into something personal.

The term 'Mindfulness' comes from the Pali word 'sati' which means 'to remember', 'to recall'. It means 'to deliberately keep in mind', 'keep in view', 'keep the object here now'. It is the mind in its mode of '*non-forgetfulness*'. It 'stops and seizes', 'occupies' the object (a sensation, a thing, a thought, person, moment, scene, cup of tea) and prevents it from 'wobbling'. It is the power of mind that doesn't allow things to slip away from our attention and vision. It remembers that it is best to meet this moment without hurry and greed. The word itself doesn't exclude the common meaning of *remembering* things, actions, consequences and wisdom *from the past* – that is a very important component in fact – but more fully it means *remembering* in the sense of voluntarily 'keeping track of', 'staying with', 'being with', what's *now* going on in your mind and environment. It is remembering what needs to be remembered to achieve the goal of stopping the wars we usually make with ourselves in order to deepen our penetration into reality instead of fantasy.

Traditionally mindfulness is said to have:

The characteristic of *non-superficiality*. The function of *keeping the object in view*.

It includes the Two Aspects of:

Remembering the object.
Remembering the appropriate way to be with it to end ignorance.

So you can see that mindfulness, by keeping something in view, *allows* clear seeing and wise action to fulfil their destiny. It *allows* us to see deeply. It *allows* us to concentrate. It *allows* awareness. It *allows* discernment. It *allows* a *skillfulness* to come onto the scene and '*disentangle this tangle*'. It allows us to learn, to live well, love well, and die well. It allows us to see for ourselves what works best to *guard against and abandon* unskillful mental qualities and what works to *develop and maintain* the skillful ones that end our greed and anger born from ignorance. It allows us to be in touch with our deepest values, our positive desires to help the

world and it allows us to regulate our efforts around these matters with wisdom. This allowing can occur because mindfulness is the power to consistently *keep here* what is most relevant to ending our self-made stress in this living moment and in the future. It keeps the object *here*, concentration *here*, awareness *here*, effort *here*. It keeps the 'point' of ending our ignorance *here* and whatever other mental factors *here* that help penetrate through our mental habits and out the other side into clarity and understanding.

It is not just all about 'letting go'. That can be an empty concept that brings unskillfulness and harm to oneself and others. There must be an ability to *not let go* of what is needed for wisdom and compassion to flourish here now. So discernment is needed. *Holding well (Mindfulness) is what teaches us about letting go.*

Mindfulness works within the *living present moment*, its sensations and the mental responses to those sensations, not its hurried imaginings and stories. *It keeps connected to the incoming relevant sense information amid the weaving currents of sense experience, and keeps present what will unravel any ignorance and ill-will hanging around.* In other words, it pulls us into the real components that make up our present experience and serves to show us how to live first as a peacemaker to what is lost, confused, or angry, then as a liberator to their causes.

It takes certain key mental states, or factors, deep into the object we are observing (be it a sensation, an emotion, a thought, a state). It can do this because of its ability to *saturate* the object with its *occupying power*. In the classic commentaries on mindfulness it is said to have the quality of "not floating on the surface". It doesn't just hold the surface of the object, it penetrates within, occupying the layers of the object right down to the core. This makes it like a trojan horse that transports the skillful mental factors *into* the object or the 'field' of experience. It takes in deep a willingness to make peace, to see clearly. There is a grounded-ness now

in which the rich qualities of awareness can begin to reveal themselves.

Because of this deep occupying power, 'sati' works with the factor of concentration and acts like a guard for our mind. Together they don't let distracting factors, irrelevant factors, take us away from where we wish to be applying our awareness and effort. It allows us to attend to what we wish, for as long as we wish, in the way we wish. It does this because its allowing certain concentration factors (the primary mental factors that allow us to steadily be with something), to be so deeply soaked into the object/moment there is no room for any 'defiling' irrelevant factors to take over.

As you can probably see there's a very fine line between mindfulness and what we would normally describe as 'concentration'. Some scholars point out that the Buddha often used them interchangeably. Nevertheless, it is wise to see and appreciate the nature of the difference between the two. Simply put, mindfulness *allows* concentration to have something to concentrate on. It is ever so slightly *before* the coming in of concentration. It gathers the field together for concentration to work upon and stops it from slipping away. 'Right' mindfulness isn't the end point. It's supposed to lead to right concentration.

Memory is critically linked to attention. The mind can only sustain awareness for short periods of time. It keeps slipping away. It's not continuous. It has to be stitched together. This is what mindfulness is for. It keeps the object of your attention and the purpose of your attention in mind. In order to deliberately sustain one's attention upon a chosen object, modern neuroscience points out that one must continue to remember to do so from moment to moment, faithfully returning back to refocus on the object whenever the mind wanders away from it. In other words, continuous attention—the type that can observe things over time—has to be stitched together from short

intervals. Lots of students of the meditative arts try hard to get their awareness quality 'just so'. Sure the attention must be of a certain quality but it also primarily needs to be sustained.

Overall, this means that mindfulness is the remembering to engage with the changing flow of life, or a specific object of our choosing, in a way that saturates and penetrates the object with our deepest attentiveness. It remembers what it takes to do this in a way that doesn't generate greed, panic, anger, despair, or continuing ignorance. It provides the continuity of scene and steadiness to stop all that, but it needs friends to help.

Helpful Friends

Mindfulness doesn't do any of this self-understanding and 'letting go' stuff by itself. Mindfulness *allows wise things to happen*. It is not the various skills we use - the mental factors we are coming to understand are essential for mental and emotional health - it's simply the silent remembering to keep the moment here and use skill. This remembering keeps the mind 'full' of what we are doing and the way we want and need to do it. Without mindfulness, our many skills cannot be applied or developed. It is essentially keeping a set of skilful mental factors turned on and in tune with our overall theme – our desire to end suffering.

Mental factors such as:

Patience
Concentration
Investigation
Acuity of vision
Persistence
Relaxation
Energy
Non-reactivity
Equanimity
Compassion
Goodwill
Appreciative joy
Empathy
Gratitude

These factors are just some examples. Each one in itself is a profound tool and reality unto itself. With time we

come to understand which factor is or isn't needed when, in what dose, and in what combinations. In addition, we come to understand how the factors weave through and support each other to get our mind fit, strong, and healthy - suffused with sensitivity, joy and compassion.

The Buddha said, "I teach stress and its end". In this he keeps reminding us we must see and understand, without a fuss, that what we do with our minds, how we meet this moments experiencing, is the key to understanding why we suffer and how it can end. Nothing else is truly relevant and we need to stay concentrated upon this phenomenologically based observation in a calm and kind way. We can joyfully train in these skills. Being an Eeyore or a drama-queen is counter-productive. We are training in intervening into unskilful action with more skilful action (kamma).

It's interesting to note how this mental quality of 'remembering' has been so esteemed by spiritual paths throughout history with phrases like 'Always remember God', 'Always keep Allah in mind', 'Remember the Love that shines in you', 'Remember your vows'. So what are so-called 'Buddhists' remembering? Well, as you can see, it's not a something or someone. It's qualities of mind, universal mental factors available to everyone. Factors that may not be fully developed, but factors that we all sense we have the seed of within. We have the *capacity* for them and all we need to do is to tease them out from their hiding places, get them up off the couch, give them a good meal and put them to work. How empowering. How in control we can be of our portion of responsibility.

I love the fuss-free self-accountability of Buddhism. We are truly producing ourselves. We may not be able to change what has already become, or is inevitably about to become, but we can influence the way it is met and the direction things take. *There is always something we can do to help*. We can have a say in how this, our river of mentality, flows. Kamma (or Karma) is the law based upon this; "If I'm the

result of what I've done before, I can be the cause of what I will be in the future." In the Way of mindfulness we see how to transform the emotions that produce what we don't want to be. We are not stuck with the depression, anxiety, anger, self-loathing and negativity. Essentially the 'transformation of emotions' is less a *seeking* to 'get rid of' or 'change' the emotions, it's more a *seeing of them* so clearly and deeply that we cease to do unskilful things with them and around them. This is how change begins.

The Two Main Factors

The Buddha listed two main friends that must always be here alongside mindfulness. They are so close together that they are usually just seen as one quality. They are '*awareness*' (sampajanna) and '*ardency*' (atapa). We mustn't get carried away though and include too much under the banner of 'mindfulness'. However, to include these two as a broader definition is part of skilful understanding. Give sati as 'memory' some respect, understand what sati is, then see how sati and these other two factors are a team.

Together these three (mindfulness, awareness and ardency) help us *to meet life* in a way that dries up what have become our default states, what are classically known in Buddhism as greed, hatred, and ignorance.

Only when the three friends work together, in constant peaceful relation to the goal of ending ignorance and its' suffering, can it be said that mindfulness is fulfilling its' intended purpose.

We are not developing mindfulness and concentration to escape from life, we are developing concentration to 'end' our meeting of it unskillfully. You can concentrate on something and be full of impatience, strange ideas and aggression. That's definitely not mindfulness, nor what the Buddha means by concentration.

Awareness

Mindfulness means being able to remember where you want to keep your awareness. Awareness itself is simply the knowing of what is occurring now, the knowing of what is here. This implies seeing *what is not*

here as well. Awareness is the thing that helps to determine what we should be mindful of and how. These two together cause the arising of understanding. They sort out what is relevant and irrelevant for the task at hand in terms of 'staying wise' and fulfilling our goal.

Awareness is also called 'alertness', 'clarity', 'not being ignorant', 'not lost', 'ready on-the-go comprehension'. Awareness is asking "whats happening...whats here?" It is taut and full of brightness, seeing the components of the current sensory experience and not being fooled into imagining the presence of what is not here. Over time we see more and more of what is here and more and more of what is not here. We see more of just what is relevant right now and what isn't, with an ability to stay wise in relation to that.

Awareness stays *alert* to what needs to happen in terms of effort (ardency), alert in terms of attentional, attitudinal, or intentional adjustments. Awareness is the factor that knows if stress is manifesting or not and whether that stress is inevitable or not, in our efforts to keep concentrated upon the object or task. It helps us to see what kinds of stress we must accept and what we don't.

Awareness represents the 'Wisdom' wing of Buddhism. Mindfulness is part of the 'Concentration' wing. The two wings are needed otherwise we fly around in circles. Or more likely, never get off the ground.

Ardency

Ardency is an interesting one for it has two aspects. One is simply that it is basically 'effort', making appropriate, wise, consistent effort, being 'onto things' and quickly if need be. It is the right amount of effort,

not wasting it, not dispersing it. Mindfulness and awareness inform it and keep linking it into the moment so we can be naturally and effortlessly abiding in a skillful state.

The other meaning is found in the literal translation of the Pali word "*atapi*". It means the "heat of the sun." It is a heat, a fire that burns things away, a fire that cooks things. It is a word that is meant to indicate an effort that burns away what are called the *mental defilements*; things such as restless vague doubt, attachment to fixed views, ill will, conceit, restlessness and ignorance. One makes a real effort to be mindful and to clearly be aware of what is here and what is not here. Our effort is essentially to burn up our mental defilements in order to concentrate more deeply and set all things free from our personal ignorance, greed, and anger. It doesn't let us drift around in a fluffy awareness chanting 'everything is just fine as it is', nor in panic or despair saying 'everything is terrible'. It is the soberness that says "come on stay here, stay now, awake, aware. Stay connected and stay onto what, however tiny, *can* be done right now". I like to think that ardency has the element of not 'sooking', not caving in easily. In terms of mindful observation, it travels in the belly of mindfulness, working with mindfulness as it goes deep into the object and it keeps saying 'stay in deep, don't surface just yet'.

The Three Together

So mindfulness, awareness and ardency work together. They inform one another and work to establish a concentration that undoes our tangled heart and mind.

"Ardent...he succeeds in disentangling this tangle" - Buddha

They work to illuminate the mental activities that need to be understood, guarded against and abandoned from 'high rotation' in our minds, to put an end to suffering and stress. They work to develop and maintain the ones that need to be developed and maintained.

"Guarding & abandoning, developing & maintaining: these four exertions, taught by the Kinsman of the Sun [the Buddha]. One who strives ardently at them reaches the ending of stress."

The three work to discern *what* needs to be done here and now and *the way* to go forth here and now.

Mindfulness is thus an ardent, active process, not an across the board passive acceptance of all things. Our house is sometimes ablaze and needs strong and directed efforts to put it out. An element of acceptance is always in play, but if one sense, for example, that an addiction to alcohol has become a problem, no amount of 'watching it' or 'resting in equanimity' will really help. One needs to counteract it in some pro-active way, blending mindful awareness with going out the door and getting some help.

Mindfulness, awareness, and ardency are:

Here Now, Awake, with 'Right' Effort

These three factors work together to do what is commonly referred to as 'detachment'. This means a kind of 'secluding' of those things that get in the way of being with an object. Detachment isn't an aloof attitude of not caring, it is the fabric of *how to care* for things such as thoughts, daydreams, pre- judgements and expectations. It is not their suppression. It is a kind, necessary 'keeping aside' in an atmosphere of generosity and non-aggression. Awareness and ardency are informing mindfulness what to keep aside to deepen concentration, penetration, and understanding.

But remember, there are things that won't get in the way, things that will actually enhance stability and enhance the minds capacity to 'keep something in mind'. So as well as 'secluding' *irrelevant thoughts, stories, sensations, self-talk and mental images*, there is the 'including' of the helpful factors mentioned above. Mindfulness, awareness and ardency keep this process all on track.

Compassion Begins at Home

Understanding the difficult players and insistent visitors in our minds as *well-meaning adaptations* we can start seeing the mind and approaching it as 'family', and ourselves more as a parent or guardian than as one of the children. Compassion is not passive. It is not a feeling to indulge in and it never settles down as some sort of victim. The 'awakening' of a human being takes the form of ever expanding circles of upright and patient self-responsibility. In Zen Buddhism it is said, 'strong back, soft front'. Seeing for ourselves the way our mind behaves to unravel the roots of the stress and unskilful responses, we find an authentic emotional strength and an inner positivity that lasts. We see that along with elements of ourselves we see as broken, we also see what is unbroken in us. Perhaps even what is *unbreakable*.

The Buddha was wise to the fact that most of our mental anguish is based upon our incessant desire to get, have, gain. The great shift came when he, like so many have done since him, realized that what we really desire, what will really calm us down, is not to gain but to give and how we give is the very centre of a well-lived life. *Mindfulness gives us the opportunity to give to things*. We can, if mindfulness is keeping the field of attention steady and in view, give our anxiety or negative thoughts our ardent and aware warmth, patience, and precision.

Even though we sense that this path will lead to the goal of a deep purification and optimisation of our being, we simultaneously sense that just to walk this way is what we have been looking for. What beauty there is in arriving fully into each small step, each small victory over our personal blindness and hurry, towards the goal of fully ending our distress. Gratitude seems to start taking the place of greed and envy. This esteeming of meeting all things without this blindness and hurry becomes the path. With this 'esteeming' established, we slow down our searching for answers and start asking better questions.

This is a process of coming to feel our way back into a deeper recognition of our choices and what it takes to stay in contact with the causes and conditions of good choices. For example, mindfulness teaches us how to stay in contact with the choice for fresh loving action over action based upon anger and jealousy. With a clearer capacity for experiencing single mental energies we have an increased ability to choose the secondary energies we bring to what has arisen in our mind upon its contact with a situation.

Mindfulness brings a sense that the underlying sanity within us is more contactable than we thought and that underneath the waves we ourselves are steadier than what our ego has been telling us we are.

Mindfulness may 'just' be the mental faculty of 'remembering' but it is always working with other skilful factors to end our stupidity. It is never disconnected from them. As a broader concept it infers *a whole way of being with life* that is wholehearted and always in touch with the intention to end suffering for ourselves and others. It may start off as a kind of training in 'bare attention' but as we grow in awareness and ardency, we grow in seeing what is skilful and what is not for living life fully and well.

The more we train in living more mindfully, as well as training in the formal practices of mindfulness, the more we understand ourselves and what medicine we are capable of giving to a world that really needs it.

With that, the tale is ended. Right or wrong, please ponder with discernment till you know. — Phra Bhuridatto (Mun)