



Ajahn Sucitto

**MINDFULNESS,
ITS FRIENDS AND RELATIVES**

Mindfulness, its friends and relatives

Ajahn Sucitto



AMARAVATI
PUBLICATIONS

What does mindfulness mean?

The term 'mindfulness' has become a buzz-word in recent years. We hear of mindfulness being used in many ways to increase calm, to rectify attention disorders and to offer emotional stability. It is employed in a number of ways: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Childbirth, Mindfulness for Sports people, Mindfulness for Businessmen, and Mindfulness in the Military. A calm collected emotional state and a clear present-moment attention can have many applications to improve how a human being functions, and mindfulness is commonly understood to provide just that. In terms of its popularity (in the West at least) it has outgrown, and often doesn't even acknowledge, its ancient Buddhist parent with all her religious mannerisms. Understandably so: recent accounts of Buddhist fundamentalist attacks on Muslims in Burma and Sri Lanka offer a deeply disappointing vision of how even Buddhism can get swamped by views.

But what is mindfulness? Is it a technique of noting, a moment-at-a-time, phenomena that arise within an unwaveringly focused attention? Finding the rigour of this approach too rigid and stressful, some teachers have espoused a less object-centred approach of tuning into awareness itself – an approach that is backed up in Tibetan Dzogchen practice, or in Advaita Vedanta, but which finds less secure ground in the Pali texts of Theravada. So this can be confusing for people who are approaching mindfulness through the Pali Canon.

One problem seems to be that of taking the method through which mindfulness is *applied* microscopically, a method taught by acknowledged masters such as the Mahasi Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Pandita (and a foundation for Goenka and Western Vipassana teachers), to be mindfulness itself. But to swing the other way and to say the mindfulness is just about being aware in the present, seems to miss a salient feature of what the texts (and the practice) are about. Mindfulness entails more than being choicelessly aware in the present moment. Take for example: *'he possesses the highest mindfulness and skill, he recollects and remembers what was done long ago and spoken long ago.'* (M53.16). Here, the mindful practitioner, keen to follow the teachings, brings them to mind to act as a frame of reference of his/her present experience.

So mindfulness has a referential quality; it connects present-moment experience to a frame of reference. The teachings on the four establishments, or bases, of mindfulness exemplify this. Mindfulness of body, feeling, mind-state and mental qualities in the 'establishment of mindfulness' discourses (M.10, D.22) – is a referential practice. In these suttas, mindfulness is the kind of attention that refers bodily experience to the body, feeling to the realm of feeling, the current state of mind to the

domain of mind, and mental qualities – potentials such as ill-will or goodwill that support mind-states – to themselves, just as they are. Why? Because in this way, which is called the *'direct path ... for the disappearance of pain and grief ... for the realization of nibbāna'* one isn't referring them to 'my self' and 'how I should look' and 'why is my mind in this state?' and so on. Nor is one distracting oneself, spacing out, or suppressing mind-states. This reference, bare or judgement and self-representation is of course at the heart of mindfulness as a therapeutic tool: it clears out the mis-reference of judgement – of feeling bad about one's body and so on – which always adds some self-bias in its assessments. In the practice of the four establishments, mindfulness replaces that tension and reactivity with clarity and calm. That steady calm allows mind-states to unravel to the great 'unbinding' of nibbāna.

Right view, virtue and attention

Reference to an object in and of itself is then part of what mindfulness offers. But in mindfulness as a factor for liberation, there's more to it than that. The texts present mindfulness as being accompanied by other factors – I call them 'friends and relatives' – some or all of whom tag along with mindfulness so that motivation and application is clear, and that there is a learning from what the frame of reference presents. For instance, take mindfulness in the eightfold path: it's only one factor of an unfolding process which begins with right view and leads on through right speech and right action through right mindfulness and into *samādhi* – right unification of mind. In this process the most important factor is right view – the wise perspective that reminds us that everything we say, do or even think has results, for good or for bad. This view is the basis and the motivation behind cultivating one's life: *'there is the result of good and bad deeds ...'* Right view affirms that we can enter on a good way through being fully and responsibly conscious; it motivates us to pay attention. Mindfulness then carries right view into living experience; by highlighting the mind-states that are the causes and results of our actions, it gets the mind to see which ones are for our true benefit.

Then in terms of attention, there are teachings such as: *'...when your virtue is well-purified and your view is straight, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, you should develop the four establishments of mindfulness.'* (S47.15) The act of paying attention is qualified; this instruction isn't about merely noting an object. The requirement to establish virtue and awareness of the causes and effects of one's actions indicate that in Dhamma practice, it's not enough to notice that one's body is doing something and sensations are arising, but *how* and *why*. Robbing a bank or slaughtering a chicken might require clarity, focus and calm, but they wouldn't be themes for right mindfulness (although there is such a thing

as 'wrong' / *miccha* mindfulness), because they don't reveal the accompanying mental quality, in this case the qualities of avarice, shamelessness and harmfulness. So, for right mindfulness, the attentive aspect of mind has to connect with felt awareness of one's approach and intention. This is because taken on its own, attention is amoral; assassins can cultivate it to a high degree. But attention is not mindfulness.

Attention (*manasikāra*) is the aspect of mind that is operated through *manas* – mind as rational, object-defining tool. This is the function that gets tuned to high degrees of efficiency and speed. People racing through piles of data, people rapidly trading stocks and shares, people behind screens, scanning and taking notes have high degrees of attention and rapid reference. But what they're not referring to is their own awareness, mind as 'heart' or '*citta*'.

Clear comprehension and deep attention

Citta is the mind of feelings and impressions and of 'how I am'; mind as an empathic awareness. It is the all-important focus of mindfulness, because if it is steadied and cleared of wrong views and unknowing, there is liberation. So mindfulness refers the objects of attention to this mental awareness (or 'heart') to know what it is being affected by, and how that affect arises and passes. This knowledge is called 'clear comprehension' or 'full knowing' (*sampajañña*); it is a vital relative of mindfulness, one that gives it a crucial role in mind-cultivation, and in fact in our well-being. Through lack of the knowing that arises through mindful reference to *citta*, people lose themselves in what grabs attention, or get stressed out. In both cases they lose full contact with their awareness – even to the extent of not knowing that in that a steady basis is available. Therefore we have rampant social and individual disease, anxiety, stress, and depression – because our systems and cultures have lost touch with awareness and the ease that is its fundamental nature. Instead the message is that happiness and success only come through chasing and acquiring what's 'out there'; all of which agitates the *citta*. And the scenario 'out there' is that as soon as you get and become something, then that's out of date – so get a new one and develop a bit more. This is the world of surface, of which the touch screen is the icon: contact is instant, glassy, and lacking depth. You just bounce from one thing to the next. In such a scenario, there's no inner home, just a centre that remains swampy, hungry and restless.

That's why right mindfulness is vital. If there is one life-saving feature that I'd say mindfulness is about is that it connects *manas*, the object-definer, to *citta*, awareness, the subjective sense. Mindfulness is there in the moment of holding the question 'How am I with this?' If we liken the mind to a hand: attention is like the fingers, and *citta* is like the palm.

Fingers can probe, twiddle and touch, but are unable to collect anything. The palm can't probe and inquire, but it receives, collects and fully feels what the fingers place in it. So *citta* has a storekeeper's wisdom – it wants to know what is worth being in touch with, what can be held for one's welfare. It certainly needs educating, and that is the function of 'deep' or 'wise' attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), the attention that selects which sense data mindfulness should bear in mind. There's a huge amount of stuff that the mind can potentially linger in or get lost in, so deep attention is another friend of mindfulness. It requires skilful intention and clarifies what you're experiencing. Deep attention means that rather than note every thought that runs through your head, you get to the point: what is the overall trend here, in one word? Restlessness, anxiety? Irritation, friendliness? Then mindfulness bears that mind-state in mind, lets it sit in awareness. So when right view and deep attention guide mindfulness, it draws *manas* and *citta* together; you know where you're actions and thoughts are coming from, you're ethically attuned.

If deep attention prepares the ground for mindfulness, clear comprehension or full knowing helps you to more fully meet and come to terms with what you're experiencing. For example, as you attend to how your body feels and how you sense it internally, you establish mindfulness of body. By directing your attention to how your body feels in itself, you establish the embodied sense that gets you grounded and stable. You more fully get to know what the body is about: it's not just a visual object that you compare with others or worry about. With clear comprehension you know it not as a self-image but as a base of consciousness, and a resource for the mind. That replaces a source of anxiety and passion with something you can use to notice and understand how you're being affected, because as you get embodied, feeling, both physical and mental, becomes more evident. Then if you attend to feeling in itself without rejecting, resisting or sinking into it, you're mindful of how agreeable and disagreeable mental feeling both change; clear comprehension makes you less reactive. Consequently, as the mind-state of complaining or exaggerating or fascination is no longer supported, it too passes. The mind is left clear and balanced. There's another life-changer: you don't have to feel cheerful and bright all the time; and when the mind is low, you don't have to make a person out of it. Through mindfulness and full knowing of mental feelings and states their true nature is revealed: they're not a self, not fixed things at all. If you get to fully know the mind, you know it goes through moods; but they change and you can arrive at clarity.

***Samādhi* and wisdom**

So this reference and the full knowing that it supports opens and clarifies

the heart. As the various reactions and distractions die down, the fingers of attention and the palm of awareness can meet with no aim and object other than that meeting. Then you have *samādhi* - the mind is unified. Through mindfulness, attention comes home to awareness, and finding that this is a very comfortable place to be, intention settles into appreciation and ease.

But of greater significance in the long run, mindfulness is involved with wisdom. It may be correct to say that mindfulness is non-judgemental – but that doesn't mean that it doesn't support assessment. It is in the putting aside self-judgements and short-term impulses (*'covetousness and grief regarding the world'*) that an assessment of what is really useful can take place. So to avoid having its attention hijacked, mindfulness has to be established and made firm: one image is of a man carrying a bowl of oil on his head with another walking behind him with a sword ready to cut his head off if he spills a drop. 'If even,' to paraphrase the Buddha, 'the most beautiful girl in the world sings and dances in front of him, would he give her any attention?' (S.47.20) No, his mindfulness is firmly established on balance, the key to clear assessment of what is really needed or true in any situation.

It's fortunate that this 'head-lobbing' technique is not offered in meditation retreats! Instead we make our way supported by the energy of patient persistence; the ability to keep beginning again, without getting side-tracked by self-criticism or doubt. Mindfulness has to be established and re-established through patience and a lot of kind encouragement so that the fingers of attention don't keep grabbing hot coal. Knowing what burns or stabs the heart, or entangles it with no benefit, is up to each of us to find out; but to keep that patient persistence going mindfulness needs enthusiasm, or 'eagerness'. In this way persistence (*viriya*) and eagerness (*atapi*) become two more members of the mindfulness team. They're important assets in their own right. People get put off by the idea of making an effort, but right energy comes from interest and fullness of heart, not blind will. When you feel obliged to work at things that are not meaningful, effort is tiresome and difficult to sustain. But when something gives us good results or is interesting to do, then energy's not a problem. So we need to recall and be mindful of why we do what we do, whether that's cultivating *samādhi* or cooking; keep it relevant. Get interested in how your mind or body work, use mindfulness with interest; then the application of right effort is a way of coming more fully into your life. It takes mindfulness to ride a bike! And to do so reliably and well in any weather requires persistence. So with mindfulness you learn how to know and how support your body, and to train, encourage, gladden and soothe the mind in a range of activities. Right effort and right mindfulness give rise to a pragmatic wisdom that makes a decade of

persistence worthwhile; but they're also about the present with immediate results: to be more fully and knowingly here. What else is mindfulness about than that?

Investigation

Transcendence, that's what. In another parable (S.47.8), the Buddha presents the examples of two cooks; both present their master, the king, with his meal – but one does and one doesn't notice what food the king enjoys. The one who doesn't notice serves the same food every day, regardless – and gets fired. The one who notices what food the king chooses from the meal, continues to refine the meal he prepares in line with what most satisfies his master – and gets promoted. The parable then likens these to the way that two bhikkhus – who are *both* described as being mindful and clearly comprehending – present a meditation theme to their minds. Of the two, the 'foolish, incompetent' bhikkhu doesn't note how his mind responds, so he gets no good results; but the 'wise, competent' bhikkhu takes note and 'his corruptions are abandoned.' This makes the point that mindfulness needs to attend to 'the sign of the mind.' This is beautiful: as it clears itself of its burdens and inner conflicts, the *citta* will present subtle signs of luminosity, ease, vastness or stillness. Any of these may be a key to be picked up, held and explored. So we need to look and feel more deeply to what meditation theme it picks up readily and enjoys rather than keep blindly plugging away.

'Picking up the sign of the mind' is the entry to the mystical experience, when the heart attunes to a felt sense that isn't coming from one's normal personality programs. The required fine-tuning comes through another of mindfulness' friends, one that tastes the mental qualities that support any state of mind. This is 'investigation of qualities', *dhammavicaya*. It has to be applied to the *citta* as in: 'What effect is this having on my mind?' or 'What is there at the periphery of attention?' Sometimes through tunnel vision we miss the most important messages that the *citta* is telling us. Like 'I'm pinched and pressurised' or 'It's time to just enjoy this.' The spirit of investigation encourages us to assess the mind at any time. For example: 'Can my mind find focus on this aspect of breathing or does it settle more readily while walking? Or is this the time when kindness is a more suitable place in which to dwell?' Through investigation the corruptions of forcefulness, ambition, or our ideas about what we should be experiencing get weeded out. They are replaced by a more subtle invitation into Truth.

In this way, *citta* educates *manas* in the ways of directly-experienced wisdom. And *manas* pays back by casting that wisdom into concepts that form the storehouse of one's contemplative know-how.

Without mindful reference, awakening, wisdom, and even genuine kindness are just concepts and ideals that remain out of reach. And without its supportive companions, mindfulness doesn't penetrate much deeper than granting an improved quality of attention. On the other hand, as a member of a team, mindfulness frees the mind from the burden of self-consciousness, self-hatred and self-orientation – the shift that is the heart of awakening. Sometimes it's the case that practitioners cultivate this team naturally: you don't need to know all their names! But when the mind is like a hand, you do need to consider what you're picking up, whether you're pushing, stroking or grabbing, and how to turn things over with curiosity. It's up to you. For some it may, as with hatha yoga, become another commodity that improves people's capacity to work on the same treadmill as before. For others it will bring fresh life to its forgetful Buddhist parent. And for others it's an open opportunity. Eventually how we use it is our own ongoing responsibility.

Copyright

Mindfulness, its friends and relatives

Amaravati Publications
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ
United Kingdom,

www.amaravati.org

Amaravati Publications is a part of The English Sangha Trust Ltd, UK
registered charity no. 231310

First published by Amaravati Publications 2015

This electronic edition published 2015

Digital Edition 1.0

Copyright © Amaravati Publications 2015

This book is offered as a gift of Dhamma. It has been made available through the faith, effort and generosity of people who wish to share the understanding it contains with whomever is interested. This act of freely offering is itself part of what makes this a 'Dhamma publication,' a book based on spiritual values. Please do not sell this book in any form, nor otherwise use it for commercial purposes.

If you wish to help publications such as this one continue to be made available, you can make a contribution, however small or large, by either contacting one of our monasteries (for a listing see www.forestsangha.org) or by visiting www.amaravati.org



This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/>

Summary:

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must give the original author credit.
- Non-Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works: You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

With the understanding that:

- Waiver: Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Public Domain: Where the work or any of its elements is in the public domain under applicable law, that status is in no way affected by the license.
- Other Rights: In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:
 - Your fair dealing or fair use rights, or other applicable copyright exceptions and limitations;
 - The author's moral rights;
 - Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights.
- Notice: For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the licence terms of this work.

The English Sangha Trust Ltd operating as Amaravati Publications asserts its moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

The English Sangha Trust Ltd requests that you attribute ownership of the work to Amaravati Publications on copying, distribution, display or performance of the work.