

MINDFULNESS : TRADITIONS AND COMPASSIONATE APPLICATIONS

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS FROM THE THERAVADA TEXTUAL VIEWPOINT

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To all those who care for mental stability and sanity through a systematic utilization of human deliberation and effort in order to transform the mechanical processes of thought in such a way that one could gain mastery over one's thought resulting in overcoming self-produced psychological suffering, the practice of mindfulness is considered to take the highest priority. It is for this reason that in the field of modern psychotherapeutic practice the term mindfulness has become one used frequently in the vocabulary of the therapists. Emphasis on the practice of mindfulness is to be seen in the adoption of effective methods of healing the sick mind by means of methodologies proposed in the form of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). There is no doubt that a considerable number of modern psychotherapists, engaged in the use of mindfulness as their principal method of therapy for psychological illness, acknowledge their indebtedness to what they have gained as theoretical information and practical experience regarding the role of mindfulness in the Buddhist soteriological system. However, in the context of the recent utilization of mindfulness for purposes of psychotherapy it is to be noted that it has been confined to applications within the narrower realm of achieving success and overcoming hindrances associated with the mundane life, while in the Buddhist tradition the emphasis has been oriented towards the attainment of the ultimate goal of a human being conceived as the total elimination of suffering and attainment of Nibbàna. This is not to say that the former way of

applying mindfulness is incompatible with compassionate applications of it, but merely to note that the latter which is represented in the body of Theravàda textual tradition is of a much more holistic and wider application.

It is with the intention of focusing attention on this wider compassionate application of mindfulness, based on the original teachings of the Buddha as represented in the Theravàda canonical texts and its subsequent interpretations in the early post-canonical texts inclusive of the Pali commentarial tradition that the present discussion is attempted. In dealing with the Pali commentarial tradition the textual analyses will be drawn mainly from the writings of the great commentator Buddhaghosa. In the selected body of scriptures mindfulness is discussed invariably in connection with the ultimate end of Buddhist soteriology.

‘Mindfulness’ happens to be the modern English rendering of the Buddhist psychological term ‘*sati*’. Therefore, in order to understand the Buddhist concept of mindfulness it is necessary to inquire into the meaning and significance of the Buddhist term *Sati*. Pali ‘*sati*’ used as a noun corresponds to ‘*smṛti*’ in Sanskrit and is related to the verbal form ‘*sarati*’ meaning ‘remembers’. The contextual meaning of the term could be understood through its different uses in the Theravàda textual tradition which includes the canonical and commentarial works. We can find standard definitions of the term in the Abhidhamma and the commentaries. Dhammasaïgaõi, the first book of the Theravàda Abhidhammapiñaka mentions the faculty of *sati* (*satindriya*) as a concomitant (*cetasika*) arising with the sensuous wholesome consciousness and explains it as *sati, anussati, pañissati, sati, saraõatà, dhàraõatà, apilàpanatà, asammussanatà, sati, satindriyaü, satibalaü, sammàsati*.¹ This is an attempt to convey to us the meaning of *sati* as exhaustively as possible in such a way that all its Buddhist uses are covered. The prefix *anu-* in *anussati* suggests that it signifies the noting of something by the mind closely followed by its occurrence exactly in accordance with the way it occurs. The use of the term *anussati* in different contexts and in relation to a variety of reflective

activities of the mind suggest that it is an employment of the mental faculty to focus reflectively on certain observable events, things and processes with the presence of mind. The prefix *pañi-* in *pañissati* suggests the attention of the mind in reaction to the occurrence of something. *Saraõatà* and *dhàraõatà* suggest the inherent capacity of the mind to record in the mind and sustain in the memory or mental attention such an occurrence. *Apilàpanatà* which is usually rendered as ‘not floating’ or ‘not wobbling’ suggests the thoroughness and non-superficial nature of the experience of noting something by the mind. *Asammussanatà* suggests the capacity of the mind not to be unaware of, or not carelessly and non-attentively forget or be unmindful of what is going on. *Satindriya* and *satibala* suggest the employability of mindfulness as a faculty as well as a power. *Sammàsati* draws attention to the right employment of mindfulness for attaining the ultimate goal of the Buddhist noble path.

The above definition of *Sati* is found also in the Niddesa of the Khuddakanikàya with the addition of the term *satisambojjhaõga*.² The post-canonical and commentarial explanations of the term *sati* usually follow the method of explaining it in terms of its characteristic, function, manifestation and proximate cause. Thus the not-floating character of *sati* is mentioned in the post-canonical work Milindapaõha emphasizing not so much a definition in terms of the etymology of the term but in terms of the practical application and use of it. Thus, going by the definition in the Abhidhamma and the Niddesa, Nàgasena explains to king Milinda that with the arising of mindfulness one becomes unconfused about states of mind that are wholesome and unwholesome, right and wrong, inferior and superior, and good and bad and make clear to his mind the four establishments of mindfulness (*cattàrosatipaõñhàna*), the four foundations of psychic power (*cattàro iddhipàdà*), the five faculties (*pañcindriyàni*) etc. usually recognized as the factors conducive to the attainment of final awakening (*bodhipakkhiyadhammà*). It also maintains that *sati* has the characteristic of helping someone to drop harmful states of mind and take upon oneself beneficial and helpful things making one clearly perceptive of the distinction between what conduces to benefit and what conduces to harm (*hitàhitànaü dhammànaü gatiyo samanveti*).³

Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga has a number of references to *sati* where further explanations in terms of the early canonical and post-canonical definitions are attempted. According to Visuddhimagga, *sati* is so called because by its means one remembers, or it itself remembers, or it is mere remembering (*saranti tàya sayaü vā sarati saraõamattaü eva vā esàti sati*). Further it is said that it has the not-floating characteristic (*apilàpanalakkhaõà*). Its function is not to forget (*asammoharasà*); it is manifested as guarding or as the state of confronting and objective field (*à r a k k h a p a c c u p a ñ ñ h à n à visayàbhimukhabhàvapaccupaññhàna vā*). Its proximate cause is strong perception (*thirasaṃṣāpadaññhàna*) or the Foundations of Mindfulness concerned with the body (*kàyàdisatipaññhànapadaññhàna vā*), and so on. Because it is firmly established in the object, it is like a pillar (*ârammaõe daëhapatiññhitattà pana esikà viya*). It is also like a door-keeper because it guards the doors of the eye etc. (*cakkhudvāràdirakkhaõato dovàriko viya ca daññhabbà*).⁴

The emphasis on remembering as a prominent quality of mindfulness is expressed by ânanda in the Majjhimanikàya in his explanation to the Sàkyan Mahànàma of the Buddhist path of training. He mentions *sati* among seven good qualities to be cultivated and in explaining it says that it involves the ability to remember things done or words spoken even a long time ago in the past with the strength of memory (*paramena satinepakkena samannàgato cirakatampi cirabhàsitampi sarità anussarità*).⁵ Several writers have observed that what it implies is not that mindfulness itself is memory, but that it is a quality of the mind that facilitates memory.⁶ In addition to its relationship to memory, it is that quality that is to be sharpened in the Buddhist practice so that it finally leads to the liberation of mind from all cankers.

The term *sati* or variant forms of it are often seen to be used in the texts in close proximity to *sampajaṃṣa*.⁷ Such uses of the terms, the latter preceded by the former, has given rise to the question whether they denote distinctive states of mind or

are just synonymous. The usual order of the terms suggests that *sampajañña* as a state of mind is preceded by *sati*. It is therefore, plausible to consider *sati* as a state of mind which immediately precedes *sampajañña*, and facilitates the latter. In the Visuddhimagga Buddhaghosa has made an attempt to show the distinction between *sati* and *sampajañña* in the following manner:

Now as to mindful and fully aware: here, he remembers (*sarati*), thus he is mindful (*sata*); He has full awareness (*sampajānāti*), thus he is fully aware (*sampajāna*). This is mindfulness and full awareness stated as personal attributes. Herein, mindfulness has the characteristic of remembering. Its function is not to forget. It is manifested as guarding. Full awareness has the characteristic of non-confusion (*asammohana lakkhana*). Its function is to investigate (judge). It is manifested as scrutiny.⁸

The above explanation of Buddhaghosa confirms our hypothesis regarding *sati* as a special application of the mind followed by *sampajañña* as the comprehensive understanding of a situation

The practical role of mindfulness as expressed by the term *sati* has become partially clear from the early and late textual definitions mentioned above. An examination of the references to *sati* in the early as well as late texts shows that it is among the most esteemed states of mind recognized in the Buddhist teaching. The presence or absence of *sati* could make a difference to benefit or harm in different situations of a living being's existence. *Sati* is often referred to as a mental quality that has a controlling influence on all mental states (*satādhipateyyā sabbe dhammā*).⁹ The damaging consequences of the loss of mindfulness is often mentioned in the Suttas. The Dāghanikāya refers to a certain class of celestial beings called *Khióàpadāsikà* who lose their mindfulness when engrossed in and intoxicated with sensuous enjoyment, and as a consequence, fall from the heavenly realm.¹⁰ According to some

Sutta references *Sati* plays an important part in determining rebirth in higher or lower realms. In the latter part of the Sakkapaṃha Sutta, Sakka mentions to the Buddha about a female disciple of the latter who attentively listened to his teaching and was reborn among the superior realm of Tāvatiūsa gods as Gopaka Devaputta, whereas some male disciples were reborn in the inferior realm of Gandhabbakāya gods. Sakka says that when both parties came to attend upon him Gopaka Devaputta found fault with those who were born among inferior gods for not attentively listening to the Buddha's teaching and as a consequence obtaining an inferior rebirth. It is also reported that on being reprimanded for their lapse, at that very moment two of them got back their mindfulness (*satiū pañilabhiūsu*) and passed on to the superior realm of Brahmmapurohita gods.

The Mahātaḍhāsaīkhaya Sutta explains how a person born into this world and begins to interact with one's sensory environment finds oneself entrapped in the cycle of suffering due to one's inability to respond to the sensory process with established mindfulness. According to the explanation in this context when one sees a visible object with the eye (*cakkhunā rāpaū disvā*) one gets attached to the object that appears to be pleasant (*piyarāpe rape sārjati*) and is repelled by the object that appears to be unpleasant (*appiyarāpe rape vyāpajati*). As an automatic reaction lacking in the presence of mindfulness, attachment or aversion follows exhibiting in one's reactions a mean and uncultivated state of mind (*anupaññhitakāyasati ca viharati paritta cetaso*).¹¹ It is in order to escape this predicament that the systematic cultivation and practice of mindfulness is recommended in the teaching of the Buddha.

In the Theravāda texts the restraining function of *sati* is consistently emphasized. The defilements that flow into the mind and trap the person in the cycle of suffering as explained above is checked by the presence of mindfulness (*yāni sotāni lokasmiū sati tesaū nivāraḍāū*). When, as stated in the Pārāyanavagga of the Suttanipāta, Ajita questions the Buddha, "Streams flow in all directions. What obstruction is there for the streams, speak to me of the restraining of

the streams and by what would the streams be shut off?” the Buddha answers “Whatever streams there be in the world, mindfulness is their obstruction. I speak of the restraining of the streams and by wisdom would they be shut off.”¹² *Sati* as explained here prepares the mind to obtain insight by preventing the defiling influxes of the mind.

The main thing that protects a person (*ekàrakkho*) is *sati*.¹³ The simile of the gatekeeper is often used in the Buddhist texts to signify the role of mindfulness. In the Sutta texts where the Buddhist path of liberation is laid down systematically as a gradual training among others such as morality, and contentment the restraint of the senses is also considered as a pre-requisite. According to Theravàda textual descriptions, it is mindfulness that enables such restraint. This point is expressly stated by Buddhaghosa in the Visuddhimagga as: “What is signified by saying one protects one’s faculty of eye, and keeps restraint with regard to the faculty of eye is restraint by way of mindfulness (*rakkhati cakkhundriyaü cakkhundriye saüvaraü àpajjatãti ayaü sati saüvaro*).¹⁴ Buddhaghosa compares the senses to doors through which covetousness etc. might invade the mind in case the doors are not closed with mindfulness which is comparable to a door-panel (*satikavãña*).¹⁵ Mindfulness is what keeps a person alert and awake to the possibility of the intrusion of unwholesome states into the mind (*sati lokasmiü jãgaro*).¹⁶

Due to the recognition of the role *sati* plays in the Buddhist practice the Buddhist teaching characterizes it as a faculty (*indriya*), as a power (*bala*), as one of the enlightening factors (*bojjhaïga*) and as one of the factors in the noble eightfold path (*sammã sati*). It is a faculty and a power that needs to be cultivated and sharpened. It should be prevented from degrading itself by falling into wrong mindfulness (*micchã sati*). When it is cultivated in the right way, i.e. the way leading to the ultimate freedom of the mind and freedom through insight (*anuttaraü cetovimuttiü paññãvimuttiü*) it becomes right mindfulness (*sammã sati*). Therefore, the textual descriptions of the methods of mind development adopted in the Buddhist practice show how mindfulness is gradually sharpened through its systematic cultivation. This becomes evident in the descriptions of the transformation of consciousness in the progressive stages of contemplative absorptions often encountered in the canonical texts.

When *sati* is mentioned among the spiritual faculties and powers usually enumerated as five, among the enlightening factors enumerated as seven, and among the factors of the noble eightfold path it is placed before *samādhi*. The placement of *sati* in that order should not suggest that there is no mutual dependence between *sati* and *samādhi*. It is clear that the concentrative power of the mind is enhanced by *sati* while at the same time the sharpening of *sati* occurs with the development of the concentrative power. This fact becomes evident from the emphasis given to the sharpening of *sati* from the stage of the attainment of the third *jhāna*. The fourth *jhāna* is described as consisting of *upekkhāsatipārisuddhi*. Buddhaghosa in his explanation of the term says that mindfulness has at this stage attained purity born out of equanimity (*upekkhāyajanitapārisuddhiū*). He says that in this *jhāna* mindfulness is immaculately pure (*imasmiū hi jhāne supārisuddhā sati*). Whatever purity is found in that mindfulness, has been brought about by equanimity and nothing else (*Yà ca tassā satiyā pārisuddhi sà upekkhāya katā na aññena*).¹⁷

The employment of *sati* in the Buddhist practices related to the higher development of the mind is indicated in contexts where certain meditative practices are recommended as forms of *anussati*. The canonical sources as well as post-canonical works like the Visuddhimagga mention of six kinds of *anussati* (recollections). They are recollection of the Buddha (*Buddhānussati*), dhamma (*dhammānussati*), saṅgha (*saṅghānussati*), ethical conduct (*sālanussati*), liberality (*cāgānussati*) and heavenly beings (*devatānussati*).¹⁸ In these contexts it is not so much in the sense of being mindful of the immediate present that is in focus but reflection on certain chosen objects along with their associations so that they could be utilized for the cultivation of one's own spirituality. They have been considered as quite useful in the development of *samādhi* or *samatha*. Another use of *anussati* that may not have a direct relationship with mindfulness but with memory occurs in contexts where reference to a higher form of knowing experience is made as *pubbenivāsānussati* *ṛāṭṭā*. This kind of knowledge is obtained by the systematic cultivation of memory in such a way that one could retrieve one's

memories across the past series of saüsàric lives and bring those memories to one’s present consciousness.

The uniqueness of the Buddhist employment of mindfulness from the broad holistic perspective of eradicating human suffering is expressed through its teaching on the practice of the four establishments of mindfulness (*cattàro satipaññànà*). It is the employment of mindfulness in this context that sharply marks the difference between the Buddhist method of mental culture and those of the pre-Buddhist ones. It is also relevant to the distinction that Buddhism made between two forms of mind culture as *samatha* and *vipassanà*. Buddhism proposed that the most rewarding application of mindfulness is that which enables a person to gain insight into the underlying reality of all mental and material phenomena. The most rewarding practice of mindfulness is described introducing a classification of the practice of *sati* into four principal categories as the mindful watching of the processes of the body (*kàyànupassanà*), the processes of sensation (*vedanànupassanà*), the processes of the mind (*cittànupassanà*) and the objects of mind formulated in terms of observable principles that have a liberating effect upon the mind (*dhammànupassanà*). The Satipaññhàna Sutta of the Majjhimanikàya opens with the Buddha’s statement: “Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the ending of *dukkha* and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of *nibbàna*, namely the four establishments of mindfulness.¹⁹ While the Satipaññhàna Sutta of the Majjhimanikàya and the slightly different version of it in the Dāghanikàya provide the full descriptions of the way of developing mindfulness leading to the goal of liberation through the application of the four modes of developing the presence of mindfulness, there are other instances where mention is made of it but no detailed elaboration is given.²⁰ References made to the four modes of cultivating the presence of mindfulness by the Buddha himself in other contexts of the Pali canon emphasize that it was a unique discovery of the Buddha and was not known before. He says: “In me arose the vision, knowledge, insight and light regarding the fact that this is observing the body with reference to the body on matters not heard of before from the previous traditions of

revelation” (*ayaü kàye kàyàñupassanàti me bhikkhave pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuü udapàdi ãàõaü udapàdi vijjà udapàdi àloko udapàdi*).²¹ This observation is extended in this context to the other three *satipaññhànas* as well. Soon after the Buddha’s enlightenment he is supposed to have reflected on the fact that the four *satipaññhàna* are the direct path to awakening and the surmounting of suffering. In this instance Brahmà Sahampati is said to have applauded this reflection.²²

In his brilliant study of the Satipaññhàna Sutta Bhikkhu Anàlayo has made several important observations regarding its content which may clarify the role as well as the effective employment of mindfulness in the Buddha’s teaching. He points to strong evidence from the canonical texts themselves to show that the use of the Pali term *ekàyano* in the Sutta suggests directness of the path, but not its exclusiveness.²³ He also ascribes greater authenticity and etymological accuracy to the use of the term in Buddhist Sanskrit sources as *smçtyupasthàna* according to which the term is considered as a combination of *smçti* and *upasthàna*. He rightly disagrees with the derivation of *satipaññhàna* from a combination of *sati* and *paññhàna* as explained in the Pali commentaries pointing out that the canonical discourses frequently relate *sati* to the verb *upaññhahati* indicating that “presence” (*upaññhàna*) is the etymologically correct derivation. He concludes that the term signifies “presence of mindfulness” rather than mindfulness as a “foundation” or “cause” as explained by the commentators.²⁴

Another remarkable observation made by Bhikkhu Anàlayo is that closer inspection of the contemplations listed in the Satipaññhàna Sutta reveals a progressive pattern. The sequence of the *satipaññhàna* contemplations leads progressively from grosser to more subtle levels.²⁵ It is to be noted that this is in keeping with the Buddha’s method of taking into account causal connections and relationships in the realm of human psychology when proposing practical techniques to be adopted in the path of liberation. One begins the practice of mindfully observing in the first instance the bodily processes because they can be more easily observed due

to their gross nature. From that point onwards one could move towards close observation of sensations, thought processes and also identifiable principles having a connection with liberating insight moving gradually from the gross to the subtle.

As described in the Satipaññhàna Sutta observing the body mindfully begins with the mindful observation of the breath, a practice which is sometimes separately described under mindfulness of breathing in the ânàpànasati Sutta of the Majjhimanikàya.²⁶ It is said in the ânàpànasati Sutta that when mindfulness of breathing is properly cultivated it fulfills the requirements of the practice of the four Satipaññhànas. Breathing is understood as an activity of the body (*assàsapassàsà kàyasaikhàrà*) and it is made a basis in the Buddhist practice for mindfulness training in the Satipaññhàna Sutta as well as well as other Suttas that introduce the technique of the meditative cultivation of the mind. As given in the Satipaññhàna Sutta from the mindful observation of breathing one proceeds to observe mindfully the postures of the body, the anatomical parts of the body, the material elements constituting the body and the reality to which the body is subject when life leaves it. The same procedure relating to the employment of mindfulness is laid down in a separate Sutta of the Majjhimanikàya called Kàyagatàsati Sutta.²⁷ In the Satipaññhàna Sutta the way to practice mindful observation of the body (*kàyànupassanà*) is indicated in the refrain that comes at each step of the practice in the following terms:

In this way in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally, or he abides contemplating the body externally, or he abides contemplating the body both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of passing away in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.²⁸

The same refrain is repeated with regard to the mindful observation of sensations, of thoughts, and of mental objects. The point of the practice of mindfulness in this context becomes clear from the refrain which selectively emphasizes the need to observe the reality both subjectively or introspectively and objectively, seeing the reality of arising and passing away with sustained but detached bare attention without any clinging to or personal involvement with what goes on. The Buddha assures at the end of the Satipaññhàna Sutta that one who practices mindfulness in this way would definitely attain the goal of destruction of all suffering.

From the above discussion it becomes evident that mindfulness plays a key role from the beginning to the end of the Buddhist practice. It is not without consideration of this fact that in the scheme of enlightening factors (*bojjhaṅga*) mindfulness is placed first. According to the Buddhist teaching the ultimate goal of liberation from suffering cannot be attained without knowing things as they really come to be (*yathabhūtaṃ*). At every stage of the cultivation of such knowledge mindfulness matters. This explains why it is said that the teaching of the Buddha is for one who has presence of mindfulness, but not for one who has lost mindfulness (*upaññhitasatiss ayaṃ dhammo nāyaṃ dhammo muññhassatissa*).²⁹

¹ Dhammasaṅgāyī p. 11.

² Kāmasuttaniddesa.

³ Satilakkhaṇapaṭha.

⁴ P. 464.

⁵ Majjhimanikàya Vol. I, p. 356.

⁶ See Bhikkhu Analayo *Satipaññhàna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Buddhist Publication Society, Asian Edition 2003) p. 47.

⁷ In Dāghanikàya Vol. I, p. 196 is found *pàmojja^ṃceva jàyati pāti ca passaddhi ca sati ca sampaja^ṃssa^ṃca*; in Dāghanikàya Vol. III, p. 213 where in the Saīgāti Sutta the dhammas are tabulated in groups that closely go together we find *sati ca sampaja^ṃssa^ṃca*; In instances where the third *jhàna* experience is described occur *sato sampajāno* together as in D.N. I, p.75.

⁸ Visuddhimagga p. 162 translated by Bhikkhu Æādamoli *The Path of Purification* (Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre) p. 169.

⁹ Aīguttaranikàya Vol. IV, p. 339; V, 107.

¹⁰ Dāghanikàya Vol. I, p. 19.

¹¹ Majjhimanikàya Vol. I, p. 266.

¹² Suttanipāta verses 1034 and 1035 translated into English by N.A. Jayawickrama (Post-Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka)

¹³ Aīguttaranikàya Vol. V, p. 30.

¹⁴ Visuddhimagga p. 7.

¹⁵ Visuddhimagga p. 21.

¹⁶ Devatāsaūyutta.

¹⁷ Visuddhimagga p. 167.

¹⁸ Aīguttaranikàya Vol. III, 284; Visuddhimagga 197-228.

¹⁹ Majjhimanikàya Vol. I, p. 55 f.

²⁰ See Saūyuttanikàya Vol. V, pp. 141-192; Aīguttaranikàya Vol. IV, pp. 457-462; Vibhaīga pp. 193-207.

²¹ Ibid. p. 178.

²² Ibid. p. 167.

²³ *Satipaññhàna* p. 28.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 29.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 19-20.

²⁶ Majjhimanikàya Vol. III, p. 78f.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 88

²⁸ Translated by Bhikkhu Analayo in *Satipaññhàna* p. 4.

²⁹ Dāghanikāya Vol. III, p. 287.