

What is Mindfulness?

by Rebecca Dixon

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Here's a question for all you mindfulness practitioners: What *is* Mindfulness? We use the word all the time, often without looking closely at what it means. Generally, we think it's something that happens occasionally during meditation or spontaneously during the day, but we probably don't focus on what it *is*, or *what makes it happen*. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

Most thirty-minute dharma talks don't delve into the components of Mindfulness. Tonight, we can't either, really, but I want to give you a glimpse of how thoroughly Buddhist scholars have mapped the mental processes that lead to mindfulness in a massive collection of treatises called the Abhidharma, or Abhidhamma in Pali.

So what is the Abhidharma? It's part of the mass of early Buddhist writings that have been collected into a section of the Pali canon. The canon, or all the texts containing the essential teachings of early Buddhism, is divided into three categories, or Pitaka: the rules of conducts for monastics, the Suttas (which we study) and the Abhidharma.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi said in the 1995 Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, the treatises organized in this Pitaka, "are attempting nothing less than to articulate a comprehensive vision of the totality of experienced reality." This collection is often referred to as Buddhist Psychology, or you might just say, "how the mind works."

There's a mystical aspect to the Abhidharma. Early Buddhist tradition said it had a magical origin, that the Buddha dictated it after his death. Modern historians, on the other hand, say the Abhidharma is the work of many scholars over many, many years. Tradition also says these treatises were first collected in writing during Medieval times by a Buddhist sage called Acariya Anuruddha, who is so obscure we don't where he came from or in what century he lived.

Now, let's look at what the Abhidharma has to say about Mindfulness. We'll also look later at what the Satipatthana Sutta says. That's what most dharma talks cover, probably because it's much shorter.

The Abhidharma says that the occurrence of mindfulness is influenced by up to fifty-two mental factors. Some of these *interfere* with mindfulness arising. Seven of them are universal whenever a person is mentally oriented and functional. Nineteen more are always operating together when mindfulness is present.

When teachers offer guidance during mindfulness meditation, they usually start by directing your attention to the experience of the body, which is where the Abhidharma starts. Both the Suttas and the Abhidharma say that “consciousness” occurs when one of the physical senses “contacts” an object, as when eyes see an apple, or hands touch it.

That’s why teachers bring you to the basic elements of consciousness – body and object – which are always accompanied by a feeling of liking or disliking the object. This happens along with perception, which recognizes that it’s an apple, based on our past experience.

These are the minimum four mental factors that let us experience anything. If they sound familiar it’s because these concepts occur repeatedly in the suttas.

Then, like Eve, we decide what we’re going to do about that apple. Have it for lunch? Learn the difference between good and evil, or drop it some place? This is where other mental factors come into play, and they’re moving at lighting speed – at the rate of “mind moments,” which is too fast for us even to imagine.

In an article from the September 2, 2016 issue of The Lion’s Roar, titled “the Real Practice of Mindfulness,” Andrew Olendzki notes that “Choices are made, but there is nobody who makes them.” That makes sense when you consider the speed at which these mental factors arise and pass away. Except during meditation, we’re usually not aware of choosing where to focus our attention, which is what teachers often guide us to do early in the meditation session. The Abhidharma says it is *intention* that *focuses* the mind’s attention.

Finally, “*mental vitality*” is the energy that supports the interaction of these factors. This completes the seven “universal factors” that are present in all moments of coherent experience. If we’re missing any of these factors, for example focusing attention, then our minds are just a jumble and we’re not present or functional.

The Satipatthana Sutta says to go sit and straighten your posture, and then establish mindfulness, like voila! – we have instant mindfulness. In contrast, the Abhidharma lays out all the factors necessary for mindfulness. It also says that no mindstate which leads toward liberation, referred to as a *wholesome* one, can exist in the same mind moment as an *unwholesome* one. So, if at any moment you’re stewing over some resentment, it has a hold on your mind and the wholesome mental factor of mindfulness cannot arise.

But, as Andy Olendzki says, “the moment immediately following... is a whole new beginning.” That’s why teachers say that when you realize you’re lost in thought, don’t stew over being lost. Just direct your attention back to an ever-present physical sensation, like the breath.

That lets you hit “reset” and go on. This exercise requires all seven of the mental factors we’ve covered, especially intention and mental vitality, that got us to sit down, straighten up and focus our attention. In addition to these basic seven mental factors, it takes nineteen more that always operate like a single “jewel,” to establish Mindfulness.

Rather than listing all nineteen factors that constitute this jewel, tonight I want to point out a few to convey the *character* of mindfulness. Mindfulness is equanimous, which does *not* mean it is detached. It’s balanced, mid-way between desire and aversion, without being either. This equanimity is accompanied by generosity and lovingkindness. Andy says these factors give rise to, “a sense of freedom that allows for greater intimacy with experience.”

This is what enables us turn and look closely at the resentment we’ve just let go of. Most people can’t imagine doing this exercise, and that’s OK. When the mind has become focused, accepting, loving and un-self-centered, mindfulness will make it possible.

Mindfulness also has the factors of self-respect and respect for other beings, reaching into our innate conscience so we know what is the appropriate response to our experience. Like that apple we started with, I think at this point we’ve eaten it but are still in the garden.

This group of mental factors can arise and pass away mind moment by mind moment, whether we’re meditating or going about our business. Mindfulness will be present any time we think, act or speak in a wholesome way. You might say that these are moments when the knowledge of good and evil has led us to be loving, kind and generous.

Through our practice, we train the mind by directing our attention to a chosen object and holding it there. Actually holding it steady is less important than the intention and the effort. When we come back from being lost in resentful thoughts, the best use of this re-focused attention is to turn that banished resentment into the new object to investigate mindfully.

This is the art of mindfulness meditation. As Andy says, each of these two efforts – turning away from an unwholesome mind state and then, once free of it, investigating it mindfully – is “no small challenge.”

The best way to maintain mindfulness while studying that unwholesome mindstate is to focus on the body, such as on the breath, for repeated mind moments. This keeps you from being thrown back into greed or aversion by memories about whatever attracted or repelled you.

We focus on the body in order to see how that unwholesome mindstate made the body *feel*, with a clear, loving and equanimous attention. I call this getting out of the story and into the body. We turn off the intellect, no longer looking for explanations, just experiencing the

physical sensations of resentment. We learn what that unwholesome state of mind made us feel: dukkha. And we will certainly remember, when we're no longer meditating, that this suffering was caused by that resentment.

For whatever length of time we can focus on this physical experience, we are putting mindfulness to one of its highest uses. We are also allowing the resentment to pass away as we comfort that suffering with our compassionate attention.

It's natural for unwholesome mind states to come up, so again and again we *intend* and *endeavor* 1) to abandon them, and 2) to prevent their arising again. This practice purifies the mind – it's the part of the Eightfold Path called Wise Effort.

In 2019, from November 3 to December 15, I gave a series of four dharma talks on the Satipatthana Sutta, or the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: body, liking or disliking, mind and dharma. For a little longer you can find these talks on Alameda Sangha's web site, and then on mine.

The Satipatthana Sutta is the other main text that defines Mindfulness. It has a refrain that is repeated very frequently, as if to keep bringing the practitioner back to a recognition of what mindfulness entails.

This refrain says we need to contemplate each one of the Foundations of Mindfulness with an attitude that's "diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world." This refrain doesn't contain the full list of the Abhidharma mental factors that give rise to mindfulness, but it gives a very good summation of them.

The refrain certainly does *not* mean we can't experience mindfulness until we're fully enlightened. It means we're observing these four facets of human experience with directed energy, understanding and equanimity.

We nurture those wholesome mental factors that combine *into* mindfulness, either in daily life or during formal meditation, by intentionally creating the conditions that let these mental factors arise. It's important to recognize that we already practice with the big ones: metta, equanimity, generosity, diligence, confidence, tranquility, lightness, ethics, etc. So mindfulness is already a frequent occurrence, whether or not we note it at the time.

For the mind moments when mindfulness is present, Andy says, we feel as if we're, "stepping back and observing." That stepping back, I find, usually includes several mind-moments of a joyful sense of freedom.

According to Andrew Olendzki, when we cultivate the nineteen factors needed for mindfulness in our regular meditation practice,

“mindfulness will emerge as if by some grace of the natural world, as if it were a gift of clarity from our deepest psyche... When it does, we gradually learn how to hold ourselves so that it lingers, to relocate or re-enact it when it fades, and to consistently water its roots and weed its soil so that it can blossom into a lovely and sustainable habit of heart and mind.”

While we are mindful, we can not act or speak unethically, intentionally harming other beings. But all it takes is one mind moment of an unwholesome mental factor, like hatred, for mindfulness to vanish. With mindfulness present, we can recognize and cut off the thoughts, emotions and impulses that make us unhappy, and provoke us to make others unhappy, too, through our un-mindful actions.

When we practice mindfulness, we also cultivate the conditions for wisdom to arise. It can come like a flash of light that lets us see that all we strive for or avoid is impermanent, and causes dukkha when we take it personally. Wisdom shows us how thoughts of “I, me or mine,” entrap us in dukkha, and which way freedom lies. Gradually wisdom guides and transforms the mind so that it’s impervious to more and more unwholesome mindstates. One by one, we eventually become liberated from each of them and their resulting dukkha by overcoming their causes.

As our practice continues, the mind transforms like a lotus. It’s rooted in the muck of the uncontrolled mind. But with training, the mind rises through gradually purer water until it blossoms, completely clean, into the air, reaching toward the sky.

Thank you.

Mr. Olendzki’s article, “[The Construction of Mindfulness](#),” in Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives, 2013, pgs. 55-69, was also very helpful although it wasn’t quoted directly in this talk.