

Chapter 2

Starting with Mindfulness

*Hard it is to train the mind,
which goes where it likes and does what it wants.
But a trained mind brings health and happiness.ⁱ*

—*The Dhammapada*, verse 35

If you go to a Buddhist centre, the first thing you are likely to be taught is meditation. Indeed, this is often the reason why people first attend a Buddhist centre. Quite likely the meditation that you will be taught is one based on mindfulness, such as the mindfulness of breathing. This is no accident, since meditation and especially mindfulness meditation are core to the Buddha's teaching. Practising mindfulness can have an immediate effect helping us to be more awake to our lives, thereby enriching them. When the Buddha gained enlightenment he is thought to have been practising something like the mindfulness of breathing. His very last words to his disciples before passing away were, 'With mindfulness, strive on'. Over the last 30 years mindfulness has been widely taken up by Western psychologists to treat a number of disorders including chronic pain, recurrent depression, anxiety and addiction.

What is Mindfulness?

The term mindfulness is used to translate a number of words found in Buddhist texts and is rich with connotations. The chief word it translates is *sati* (in Pāli; *smṛti* in

Sanskrit). *Sati* is related to the verb *sarati* to remember. As well as being translated as mindfulness, *sati* is often translated as awareness. So the basic meaning of mindfulness in Buddhism is awareness with the sense of remembering, recollecting or coming back to oneself and one's experience. This awareness has a warm and friendly quality. It's like the sort of attention a friend you haven't seen for some time might give you, with their curiosity to know how you are and what has been happening to you, and a friend who is happy to hear you out without rushing to jump in with their own judgements and biases about your experience. *Sati* is often linked with another word, *sampajāna*, which means clearly knowing, sometimes translated as clear comprehension of purpose. *Sampajāna* implies knowing what we are about, what our purpose is. For example, cycling and being aware of the body sensations of the legs pedalling, of the touch of the air on our face and the sights around us are all *sati*. Knowing where you are going and therefore which road to take at the traffic lights is *sampajāna*. Walking in the park and paying attention to the colour of autumn leaves is *sati*. Reflecting that you too are impermanent and that you want to make the most of this brief life is *sampajāna*.

Sometimes we recognize that we've not been very mindful. We walk into a room and can't remember what we came into the room for. Or we are returning home from work and had intended to stop off at the supermarket on the way home, but before we realize it we have passed the turning and are continuing on our normal route home. We have been running on automatic pilot. Being able to operate without too much conscious awareness is, of course, immensely helpful. First learning to drive a car, it's clunky and difficult to co-ordinate all the actions. Later we can change gear, accelerate or brake, negotiate the traffic, all while having a conversation with a passenger. Although automatic pilot is helpful for operating our lives, it also has a

deadening effect. Our activities become routine and dull. We miss the detail and perhaps some of the beauty of our experience.

Mindfulness brings our attention onto what is actually happening moment by moment (*sati*) as well as keeping us in contact with our larger purpose (*sampajāna*). It is like turning up the brightness level in our lives, so that we are more in contact with the immediate freshness and richness of our experience. A tree is no longer merely a tree, but a whole intricate universe of beauty.

When the Buddha went forth, he set out to find answers to existential questions. Through awakening he found complete liberation of mind. If we too wish to follow in his footsteps and find freedom, the starting point has to be awareness of our mind. This is the work of mindfulness. We need to develop a more and more subtle awareness of ourselves, so that we are able to make choices about how we work with our minds and respond to our lives.

Breath and Body

Mindfulness can be developed towards any aspect of our experience: our thoughts, our feelings and emotions, the world around us, other people, the very nature of existence (a topic we will take up in chapter 10). However, the most efficacious foundation for mindfulness in all these areas is awareness of the breath and the body.

In mindfulness meditation we bring our attention onto the sensations of the breath or the sensations more widely in the body. If we are following the breath, we try to be as interested as we can in the sensations of breathing. We may notice the breath entering the body brushing our nostrils, we might feel it filling our chest or we could feel movement in our belly. In a technological age, in which a lot of time is given over to involvement with computers, mobile devices or television, it can be

easy to lose contact with awareness of our body. Mindfulness of breath and body can act as an antidote to being too caught up in our heads and abstract realities divorced from actual sense experience.

Our minds have a tendency to roam off into anticipated futures or daydreams about the past. Body awareness brings us back into the present.

Patterns of the Mind

The basic instruction for mindfulness meditation is that we bring our awareness onto the object of the meditation, for example the breath, and whenever our mind wanders off we notice where the mind has gone to then return to the breath. In doing this we are learning three main skills. Firstly, by noting what distracts us, we begin to recognize the habitual patterns of the mind. Becoming more aware of our mental patterns we are less likely to be driven by them and have more chance of responding to them in helpful ways. Secondly, by returning to the breath we step out of the process of being caught up in whatever had taken hold of our attention. This can be a helpful way of responding to unproductive, repetitive mental patterns. Thirdly, we learn to include the breath more easily into our awareness. This can help us to stay calm, especially in moments of difficulty.

The Buddha listed five chief patterns that are minds can get caught up in: sense desire, aversion, anxiety, sleepiness and doubt. These are described below.

1. Sense desire

One of the strongest patterns of the mind is a movement towards objects or experiences that we perceive as pleasant. This natural movement of the mind fuels our desire for food, sex, gadgets, money, fame and praise. We see this pattern writ large

in corporate greed right down to the tiniest movements of our mind, such as the glance of our eyes towards someone we find attractive. I find it instructive to watch my mind on retreat.ⁱⁱ At meal times, for example, propelled by barely registered attraction, I can find it telling to notice whom I end up sitting next to at the table. Even as I am eating the first serving, I might catch the thought forming in my mind about whether there will be seconds.

2. Aversion

The opposite movement to sense desire is aversion in which we push away unwanted experiences. This too can range from mild irritation at the inclement weather to outright violence and warfare. We see it in road rage and the frustration of our computer not working. Queuing is another place to spot ill-will arising. It's as though we hold a belief that the world should be organized around us so as not to inconvenience us in any way. When it doesn't go our way, aversion arises.

3. Anxiety

This can manifest in the body as restlessness. Sometimes sitting in a collective meditation it can feel as though the final bell will never come and our body becomes more and more tense and fidgety. Anxiety shows up in the mind with worries about our health, our future, and our loved ones. It can paralyse us and prevent us from living our lives more fully.

4. Sleepiness

Sometimes when we sit to meditate we find ourselves overcome with tiredness. Our thoughts start to go woolly and dreamy, it's hard to make any effort, our posture

slumps and we might even completely fall asleep. If our lives are filled with rushing around, we may not notice that we are tired until we come to sit down. Without all the stimulation the tiredness appears and takes over our mind and body — a bit like someone pulling the plug out. In the space of a few minutes we can change from alertness to barely being able to keep upright. This sleepiness can also be a way of blotting out unwanted experience. If something difficult is starting to appear it can be the mind's way of checking out to avoid the difficulty. More simply, it can be that we are just not interested in our experience, as in the sleepiness that we might notice in a dull meeting at work after lunch.

5. Doubt

A more subtle pattern that can be hard to notice is doubt. This is not a matter of genuine questioning of something that we want to know the answer to. Instead, it is a way of avoiding making a decision or a commitment by throwing up a fog of spurious arguments. It can appear in meditation as lack of confidence in our own ability to meditate or thoughts that the practices don't work for us — without really giving them a proper try.

Debbie started going to meditation classes with a friend. It had been her friend's idea, and Debbie didn't really know what to expect, but was willing to give it a try. To her surprise, she found that she felt relaxed during the meditation, which continued for some time afterwards. During one meditation, she felt a whole new level of tranquillity descend on her, the like of which she had never experienced before. Looking forward to the next time she meditated, she was disappointed to discover that she felt tense and anxious. Over the next few

weeks, each time she sat to meditate she found her mind was busy with anxious thoughts about her work or her relationship. She was thinking of giving up meditation, but talking it through with one of the teachers, she was encouraged to notice if anything else was happening and she persisted.

As Debbie continued to meditate she noticed a sickening feeling in her stomach associated with thoughts that she could not and would never be able to meditate. She saw too that underlying her anxiety about her work were insecurities about whether she could do the work and fears of being found out as not good enough. Similar doubts were emerging in her relationship, in which she wasn't sure if she was with the right person or whether they really cared for her.

Debbie's experience is not atypical and illustrates how the mental patterns described above can show up. Coming to meditation with few preconceptions, Debbie was able to be open, and experienced an unexpected deep calmness. This phenomenon of a deep meditation experience associated with an open-minded attitude in someone new to meditation is referred to as 'beginner's mind'. Understandably, she wanted to repeat the experience, but in doing this created a mind of wanting something, which did not allow her to relax. Moreover, she started to become aware of her habitual mind states, especially of anxiety, which she carried around a lot of the time. Underneath the anxiety was doubt, expressed as a lack of confidence in herself and her choices.

This list of five mental patterns is not exhaustive, of course, and sometimes they come in combinations. As Debbie became more aware of her tendency to doubt, she could notice that often the doubt and anxiety arose together. For myself, my mind

has a default to planning, which can be a mixture of sense desire and anxiety. Sometimes there is more of the sense desire element — how can I get the goodies I hanker after. Sometimes it has a more anxious flavour — working out the best way to avoid a feared outcome.

The patterns in themselves are not necessarily a problem. Sense desire can direct us to what is supportive for our well-being, just as aversion and anxiety can be protective. Sleepiness can show us that we are tired and need a rest, and even doubt can give us a clue that there is something difficult that we need to pay attention to. However, often these patterns are unhelpful or out of proportion with the actual situation. For a while in meditation, I would keep finding myself planning what I was going to say in a job interview. Of course, some planning for an interview makes sense. In this case, however, the interview was not going to take place for another two-and-a-half years! Anxiety was clearly driving me. When we recognize a habit like this, we might want to do something about it.

Misconceptions About Meditation

When I am teaching meditation I sometimes ask people what they think meditation is about. Not infrequently people say it is about ‘emptying the mind’. This is a particularly insidious and unhelpful view of meditation. Our thoughts almost never stop, so when the mind doesn’t empty we think either we can’t meditate or that meditation doesn’t work. If we are on retreat doing a lot of meditation then sometimes we can become absorbed in, for example, the sensations of the breath and the mind becomes much quieter. Occasionally, this can happen when someone is new to meditation; a fresh openness and interest can bring a ‘beginner’s mind’ experience. Beginner’s mind can be helpful in showing the possibilities of meditation and,

understood correctly, can point to the importance of coming at our meditation in a fresh way without preconceptions. Understandably, often people try to recreate the experience. Unfortunately, however, the very attempt to force it into being creates the conditions that prevent it from happening, for such forcing is the antithesis of openness and interest, invariably leading to frustration and doubt in the practice.

We live in a world with a lot of external stimulation. When we shut our eyes and sit still in meditation our mind does not just stop. Instead, we experience the effects of all that stimulation as it reverberates through the mind — images from movies we have seen, re-running of arguments from the day, recollection of plans we intend to execute — as well as all our mental patterns forged from a lifetime of habits. Our meditation is just this: coming into relationship with all of our habits again and again as our minds jumps around like a monkey swinging from tree to tree or like so many clothes rotating in a tumble dryer. If we expect our mind to empty, we'll be in for a big disappointment, which will only get in the way of engaging with and having an effective meditation practice. If we try to force our mind to be empty, pushing away the contents of our mind, we may temporarily have a sense of calm. However, rather than a full, rich sense of tranquillity, we have something thin and tense from which, sooner or later, there will be an unpleasant rebound that can completely put us off meditation. Trying to empty the mind is like putting a piece of glass on the sea to try and smooth out the waves. Practising mindfulness is like learning to ride the waves, which sometimes may be relatively calm, but more often will be rough and even stormy, and never without at least some motion.

Mindfulness Outside of Meditation

The aim of mindfulness practice is to become as fully aware of our mind at all times. Mindfulness meditation is like a laboratory. Under conditions of little external distraction, we can give more of our attention to what is happening in our body and mind. Formal meditation like this should be balanced by practices to help us become aware in the more complex situation of going about our daily lives. In principle, we can be mindful at any time, although remembering to do so is tricky. Good ways of getting into the habit of being mindful when we are not formally meditating is to bring awareness to our body or breath when we are doing a relatively simple activity such as having a shower, washing the dishes or going for a walk. When I was on-call in a large hospital, I found it helpful to practise mindfulness after I had been called to another ward. Instead of getting caught up in worrying about what I was going to meet on the ward, I would bring my attention to the soles of my feet or if I were outside between buildings I would notice the weather and savour the air on my face. I found that this led to me arriving on the ward in a much better state to deal with the situation than if I had spent the previous few minutes just worrying about it. I would be calmer and more able to be open and responsive to what was happening.

Another approach to developing mindfulness in our daily lives is what is known as the 'breathing space'. In its simplest form, we just pause and take a few mindful breaths. In the three minute or three step version of the breathing space, we first notice how we are feeling, then we bring our attention onto the breath and then we expand our awareness to include sensations in the whole of the body. The three minutes is just a guideline; it can be shortened or lengthened depending on the situation. The great thing about the breathing space exercise is that we can do it at any time. Good opportunities are waiting in line at the supermarket checkout, being stuck

at traffic lights, or while having a cup of tea or sitting on the bus. One job I had involved hospital wards calling me on the bedside telephone at night. Being roused from deep sleep, to pick up a phone and respond coherently and kindly to the request for assistance down the line, I found testing. I started doing a mini breathing space in which I picked up the phone, held it arm's length for a breath or two, and then spoke to the person calling me. I found this helped me to be less irritable to the person on the other end of the line. The essence of the breathing space is putting in a little gap in our habitual reactions to our experience. This gives us a chance to regroup and catch automatic habits that unchecked might get us into trouble.

Practising Mindfulness Meditation

There are a number of versions of mindfulness meditation. Perhaps the simplest is the two-stage mindfulness of breath and body, which is described below. Another excellent way to practise mindfulness meditation is the mindfulness of breathing in four stages.ⁱⁱⁱ

Guided Meditation: Mindfulness of Breath and Body

Preparation

Before you begin to meditate try to spend a few minutes setting yourself up for meditation. You might like to light a candle or some incense. If you have time you could tidy your room a little or have a cup of tea and sit quietly.

Once you are ready, settle yourself onto your cushion or chair. Bring awareness to sensations in your body, especially the contact with the ground and the chair or cushion. Take time to notice what is going on the body and as best you can, allowing the body to settle like a sheet coming to rest on the ground.

Stage One

Gradually bring awareness onto the sensations of breathing. You might feel the rise and fall of the chest or the expansion of the belly. You could notice the sensations at just one point such as sensations as the breath enters and leaves the nostrils, or you could follow the full experience of the breath from first entering the body, right down into the belly and then all the way back out again. As best you can, try to be interested in the qualities of the breath. Is your breath long or short? Is it deep or shallow? Is it smooth or rough? You don't need to try to control the breath in any way or have any special sort of breathing; you just follow it as best you can moment by moment just as it is.

From time to time you will notice that your mind has wandered off. That's ok — it's just what minds do. Make a note of where your mind has gone to, then gently come back again to the breath. You are likely to need to do this again and again. It doesn't matter how many times the mind wanders off, each time that you notice you've gone off, you note what's taken up your mind and come back to the breath. At the point of noting your mind has gone off, you are being mindful once again.

Stage Two

Now expand your awareness to include any sensations in the body. You might notice the contact of your feet on the ground or the feel of your clothes against your skin or one part of the body resting against another or sensations deep within the body.

Whatever shows up you try to attend to it with interested and kindly awareness. What exactly are the sensations like? How long do they go on for? Do they change in any way?

As before, whenever you find that your mind has wandered off, take the opportunity to notice what your mind has got caught up in and then, without getting into analysing what has happened, return to sensations of the body. If you find it helpful when your mind goes off, you can note it with a simple label such as ‘anxiety’ or ‘planning’ or ‘daydreaming’ or even just ‘thinking’.

Concluding the Practice

Bring the practice to a close gently. Let go of trying to be aware of anything in particular, let go of any effort and just remain seated for a minute or so before ending the meditation.

ⁱ *The Dhammapada* v35, translated by Eknath Easwaran (Publication City: Arkana, 1987).

ⁱⁱ A Buddhist retreat is a period of more intensive practice, especially (although not exclusively) focusing on meditation practice. It is usually held in quiet rural surroundings to support the practice of meditation and reflection.

ⁱⁱⁱ You can find an explanation of the four-stage mindfulness of breathing and be led through the practice at:
http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/browse?cat=guided_introductions&t=audio