MINDFULNESS

A Practical Guide to Awakening

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THE FOUR QUALITIES OF MIND
FOLLOWING THE DECLARATION THAT THE four ways of establishing mindfulness are the direct path to liberation, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta continues with a concise definition of the path, highlighting its essential characteristics. The Buddha first points out the four fields, or pastures, for establishing mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and dhammas (categories of experience). When we establish mindfulness in them, or of them, then we abide safely. When we’re not mindful, not aware, then we often get lost in unwholesome reactions, creating suffering for ourselves and others.

What are the four? Here, bhikkhus, in regard to the body a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to dhammas he abides contemplating dhammas, ardent, clearly knowing,
and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.¹

In this definition, the Buddha also introduces the mental qualities necessary for walking the path: one needs to be ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. Ardent implies a balanced and sustained application of effort. But ardent also suggests warmth of feeling, a passionate and strong enthusiasm or devotion because we realize the value and importance of something. When the Buddha says that a bhikkhu (all of us on the path) abides ardent, he is urging us to take great care, with continuity and perseverance, in what we do.

The great Chinese Ch’an master Hsu Yun attained enlightenment at age fifty-six, and then taught for the next sixty-four years. He died at the age of one hundred and twenty. He called this quality of ardent “the long-enduring mind.” It is what sustains and nourishes us through all the many ups and downs of practice.

Spiritual ardency is the wellspring of a courageous heart. It gives us the strength to continue through all the difficulties of the journey. The question for us is how to practice and cultivate ardency, so that it becomes a powerful and onward-leading force in our lives.

REFLECT ON THE PRECIOUSNESS OF THE DHARMA
One way to cultivate ardency is to reflect on the purpose of our practice, realizing that the Dharma is a jewel of priceless value. When properly understood, the Dharma is the source of every happiness. Ajahn Mun, one of the most renowned meditation masters in the Thai Forest tradition, reminds us that understanding the mind is the same as understanding the Dharma, and that realizing the deepest truths of the mind is the attainment of awakening.

Another way of arousing ardency in our lives is to reflect on how rare it is in this life to connect with teachings that liberate the heart and mind. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the great Tibetan Dzogchen masters of the last century, reminded us of this:

Ask yourself how many of the billions of inhabitants of this planet have any idea of how rare it is to have been born as a human being. How many of those who understand the rarity
of human birth ever think of using that chance to practice the Dharma? How many of those who think of practice actually do? How many of those who start continue? . . . But once you see the unique opportunity that human life can bring, you will definitely direct all your energy into reaping its true worth by putting the Dharma into practice.2

These reflections generate in us tremendous respect for the Dharma, for our fellow practitioners, and for ourselves. This respect then leads us to greater caring and ardency for each moment.

REFLECT ON IMPERMANENCE

We can also strengthen the quality of ardor by reflecting on the transiency of all phenomena. Look at all the things we become attached to, whether they are people or possessions or feelings or conditions of the body. Nothing we have, no one in our lives, no state of mind is exempt from change. Nothing at all can prevent the universal process of birth, growth, decay, and death.

When we don’t deeply understand the truth of impermanence, we devote ourselves, our lives, and even our meditation practice to seeking and wanting other people, possessions, experiences. We get caught up in all the appearances of samsāra, the rounds of birth and death, and solidify our sense of self in the process. There is no peace.

The following is an excerpt from The Life of Shabkar, a book of teachings by an eighteenth-century wandering Tibetan yogi, and is a powerful testament to the truth of change:

Another day, I went for some fresh air to a meadow covered with flowers. . . . While singing and remaining in a state of awareness of the absolute view, I noticed among the profusion of flowers spread out before me one particular flower waving gently on its long stem and giving out a sweet fragrance. As it swayed from side to side, I heard this song in the rustling of its petals. . . .

Listen to me, mountain dweller: . . .
I don't want to hurt your feelings,
But, in fact, you even lack awareness
Of impermanence and death,
Let alone any realization of emptiness.

For those with such awareness,
Outer phenomena all teach impermanence and death.
I, the flower, will now give you, the yogi,
A bit of helpful advice
On death and impermanence.

A flower born in a meadow,
I enjoy perfect happiness
With my brightly colored petals in full bloom.
Surrounded by an eager cloud of bees,
I dance gaily, swaying gently with the wind.
When a fine rain falls, my petals warp around me;
When the sun shines I open like a smile.

Right now I look well enough,
But I won’t last long.
Not at all.

Unwelcome frost will dull the vivid colors,
Till turning brown I wither.
Thinking of this, I am disturbed.
Later still, winds—
violet and merciless—
will tear me apart until I turn to dust. . . .

You, hermit, . . .
Are of the same nature.

Surrounded by a host of disciples,
You enjoy a fine complexion,
Your body of flesh and blood is full of life.
When others praise you,
you dance with joy; . . .
Right now, you look well enough.
But you won't last long.
Not at all.

Unhealthy ageing will steal away
Your healthy vigor;
Your hair will whiten
And your back will grow bent. . . .

When touched by the merciless hands
Of illness and death
You will leave this world
For the next life. . . .

Since you, mountain-roaming hermit,
And I, a mountain-born flower,
Are mountain friends,
I have offered you
These words of good advice.
Then the flower fell silent and remained still. In reply, I sang:
O brilliant, exquisite flower,
Your discourse on impermanence
Is wonderful indeed.
But what shall the two of us do?
Is there nothing that can be done? . . .
The flower replied:
. . . Among all the activities of sāṃsara,
There is not one that is lasting.

Whatever is born will die;
Whatever is joined will come apart;
Whatever is gathered will disperse;
Whatever is high will fall.

Having considered this,
I resolve not to be attached
To these lush meadows,
Even now, in the full glory of my display,
Even as my petals unfold in splendor . . .

You too, while strong and fit,
Should abandon your clinging. . . .
Seek the pure field of freedom,
The great serenity.³

**REFLECT ON KARMA**

The third reflection that arouses ardor in our practice is the understanding of the law of karma. This is the fundamental and essential understanding that all of our volitional actions—of body, speech, and mind—bear fruit depending on the motivation associated with them. Actions rooted in greed, hatred, or ignorance bring unpleasant results. Actions rooted in nongreed, nonhatred, and nondelusion bring many different kinds of happiness and wellbeing.

According to the law of karma, the only things that can be said to truly belong to us are our actions and their results; the results of our actions follow us like a shadow, or, to use an ancient image, like the wheel of the oxcart following the foot of the ox. This principle is so fundamental and far-reaching that it was emphasized again and again by the Buddha and by the great enlightened beings up until the present. The very first lines of the Dhammapada highlight this understanding:

Mind is the forerunner of all things. Speak or act with an impure mind, suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

Mind is the forerunner of all things. Speak or act with peaceful mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves.⁴

There is the famous statement of Padmasambhava, the great Indian adept who brought Buddhism to Tibet: “Though my view is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour.” The Dalai Lama has said that if he had to choose whether to emphasize emptiness or karma in his teaching, as important as the
understanding of emptiness is, he would emphasize the teachings of karma. And finally, the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim summed up the integration of emptiness and karma with this quintessential Zen statement: “There is no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong.”

But it is not enough to simply have this understanding of karma; we need to practice applying it in our lives. As we’re about to act, or when thoughts or emotions are predominant, do we remember to investigate and reflect on our motivation? Do we ask ourselves, “Is this act or mind state skillful or unskillful? Is this something to cultivate or abandon? Where is this motivation leading? Do I want to go there?”
Clearly Knowing

*Cultivating Clear Comprehension*

*SAMPAJAÑÑA IS THE PALI TERM* for the second quality of mind the Buddha emphasized in the opening paragraphs of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It is usually translated as “clearly knowing,” “clear comprehension,” or “fully aware.” It is the ability to clearly comprehend what is taking place, and it comprises the investigation and wisdom aspects associated with mindfulness. We will take a closer and more detailed look at this quality of clear knowing in chapter 9: Mindfulness of Activities.

Cultivating clear comprehension, knowing what we’re doing and why, is a profound and transforming practice. It highlights the understanding that mindfulness is more than simply being present. With clear comprehension, we know the purpose and appropriateness of what we’re doing; we understand the motivations behind our actions. So often we find ourselves in the middle of an action before we quite know how we got there. Have you ever found your hand in the refrigerator without having been clearly aware of the desire, the decision, or the appropriateness of the act? When we act in full awareness, of even small things, it’s possible to notice the motivation and then to consider: is this motivation, this action, skillful or not, useful or not? In the time of the Buddha, there were a few monks
living together in a forest grove. The Buddha went to them and asked if they were all living harmoniously. Anuruddha, one of the great disciples of the Buddha, replied, “Why should I not set aside what I wish to do, and do what these venerable ones wish to do?” And each of the other monks replied in just the same way. Clearly knowing what we’re doing allows us the opportunity to be living lovingkindness, rather than just practicing it on the meditation cushion.

Awareness of motivation plays a central role in the path of liberation. And as we settle into a growing awareness of ourselves, we begin to realize that our practice is not for ourselves alone, but can be for the benefit and happiness of all beings. How does our practice benefit others? How does feeling our breath or taking a mindful step help anyone else? It happens in several ways. The more we understand our own minds, the more we understand everyone else. We increasingly feel the commonality of our human condition, of what creates suffering and how we can be free.

Our practice also benefits others through the transformation of how we are in the world. If we’re more accepting, more peaceful, less judgmental, less selfish, then the whole world is that much more loving and peaceful, that much less judgmental and selfish. Our mind-body is a vibrating, resonating energy system. Of necessity, how we are affects everyone around us. On a boat in the middle of a great storm, one wise, calm person can bring everyone to safety. The world is like that boat, tossed by the storms of greed and hatred and fear. Can we be one of those people who help to keep it safe? The Buddha gave this charge to his first sixty enlightened disciples:

“Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and happiness of gods and men. Let not two go by one way. Preach, O Bhikkhus, the Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. . . . Proclaim the Holy Life, altogether perfect and pure.”

We can follow, to some extent, in their footsteps.