

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTENSIVE MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

WE DISCUSSED BARE ATTENTION the other day. Today we shall be discussing the same thing from a different point of view, which is *mindfulness*. Mindfulness is something people find it difficult to understand. Mindfulness is a very important factor that needs to be acquired and developed in meditation. It forms not only the basis but also acts as a chief factor along the way in developing other factors such as concentration, effort and wisdom.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness means different things at different stages. *Constant awareness* is mindfulness. This is a good description. However, if we do not know what kind of awareness, of what and how, then there is still a lot to experience in order to understand it. We need more explanation, as we have not understood things. Mindfulness will be realised through practice.

Mindfulness actually means paying bare attention to an object without any preconceived notion, prejudices or valued judgment. It also means being aware of the existence of something in the here and now; and at a later stage, mindfulness is a mental state of flexible and investigative nature.

Being receptive, being flexible, not reacting but acting, being heedful, being in harmony with oneself, being actively watchful, direct experience of the present object and being at the present moment are some popular descriptions of the functions of mindfulness.

MINDFULNESS AS AN EXPLORATION

Mindfulness is a kind of exploration. You will not explore if you know something very well. When you climb the highest mountain, you will expect to discover something you have not seen. You are *not certain* of what you will find. You expect something uncertain and unfamiliar. You are prepared to face and learn from it. This is exploration.

You do not expect to see all that is calm and peaceful, settled and easy to cope with. That is not exploration. You want to see what you have not seen and what only a few people can see. That is why you venture off to places like the North Pole or South Pole. And you do see something exciting. When you explore something what you have to do is to observe. You observe what you see, what you hear. *Observation* is the first step in mindfulness practice.

Before you learned how to swim well, you would have learnt theoretically how to swim and would have tried a bit; you tried to reach the other side without an instructor _ for twenty minutes, thirty minutes or forty minutes. This involves some sort of exploration. Life is the very universe you could explore and become a wiser person. When you close your eyes and try to do intensive mindfulness practice, you set out to explore. Remember at the time you begin, that mindfulness

has not been fully established. As a result, observation may not go as far as you expect. Do not be disappointed. Simply put in some effort and try it again.

TWO KINDS OF MINDFULNESS

When we do mindfulness meditation, there are two kinds of mindfulness, *intensive* and *general mindfulness*. Today, we are doing intensive mindfulness. Tomorrow, I will be talking about general mindfulness.

MINDFULNESS AS LEARNING TO BE WITH THE UNEXPECTED

Mindfulness is also about learning to *face the unexpected*. As human beings, we possess a valuable quality, the mental capacity to think, to learn, to cope with things. But often we are taken by surprise by something we have experienced repeatedly before. Anxiety, agitation, worry, anger etc. are not unknown to us. But we are still taken aback each time they come. I remember the time when I was already a lecturer at the Sasana Mandaing Pali University, Pegu (Hamsavati). I got the news from Laikha, my hometown in the Shan State that a few days previously my father had passed away. It happened just as I was about to administer the eight precepts to my devotee, Madam Daw Yee, who supported my education and ordination in Moulmein, Mon State. I was sitting on a chair and the lady devotee and her children were sitting in front of me reciting *okasa, okasa, and okasa* in Burmese. My friend turned up immediately with a message he received from a telephone call from the University the previous night. My father had died a few days earlier and

now my mother and relatives were waiting for me to attend my father's funeral. My mind just went blank. I was shocked to receive the news. I knew that things are impermanent; life is impermanent but I did not expect that it would be my father's life. I did not expect that it would come that time. I was taken by surprise.

When I reflected upon impermanence, unconsciously I am sure I would have spared my father. So when my father died I could not take it. I did not go ahead with administering the precepts. I could not talk anymore. It was grief that became overwhelming. Grief was not something new to me. I had experienced it before and cannot even remember how many times I had gone through it. But I did not expect such grief would be connected to my father's death. I was in terrible shock. I could not even wait to take the regular ferry to catch up the train in Mottama (Martaban). I hired a boat. But from Moulmein to my hometown Laikha in central Shan State, it took five days. The transport was so inadequate. I just managed to miss the funeral by a few hours. I was experiencing grief for the whole week because I did not expect it to come; it came unexpected. I was not prepared to face the ever-present impermanence law.

This mindfulness practice is not only about expecting miserable facts of life such as death, but it is about preparation to face the unexpected in day to day life as well. When we do not expect things, it is very difficult to accept them. We are not receptive to it at all. Instead, we keep resisting. Say, we expect everything to be according to our own culture when we go to another country. As we discover different behaviour and a different way of life, we get shocked.

Sometime we even think they are impolite. We become judgmental, thinking that our culture is superior. This is because we are not receptive to their culture. You are not prepared for difference. You never expect things to be otherwise from what you have known. So when you discover things like that you feel upset because you cannot accept it as it is.

When we are mindful, not only can we observe what we are seeing, but at the same time we are also prepared to accept what we have not seen before.

The pain comes, we observe that. That looks alright at the moment. But something we do not expect follows the pain. That is the reactions to it. We keep reacting to the presence of pain because we never dealt with it mindfully before. Like anxiety, agitation, irritation, frustration are there in every body's life, it is a fact common to everybody. But we just cannot accept it as it is. And we keep reacting endlessly. We become impatient and finally just give up meditating.

With mindfulness, we learn about pain through intensive training like this. As pain comes we just pay bare attention to it and note *pain, pain, pain*. We register the bare fact without adding any value. Now if any reaction to that comes; maybe frustration or impatient simply pay bare attention to it as well, observe it. We are exploring and observing. Pain has presented itself for observation.

We may not succeed overnight; we cannot force ourselves *not* to react. In that circumstance, we are simply observing the reaction. Disappointment is one reaction,

getting upset is another reaction, getting discouraged or disheartened is another reaction. Therefore, what we are trying to do is to observe these things. When we observe, we come to see both, the expected and the unexpected. We mainly have to learn how to live with the unexpected one.

We have had twenty and thirty minute sessions of meditation for two days and we tried a forty-minute session today. I said in the morning that we were going to have a forty-minute session which is to prepare you mentally for that. You will remember that most of you reported that you felt the time was a bit short and you could have gone on longer. This is because you were mentally prepared for forty minutes. We know that if we fly to Bangkok from London, we have to sit for more than ten hours and yet because we are mentally prepared, we do not complain about it. It is easier to accept when you are mentally prepared. You are more receptive to what is to come.

This afternoon, you expected to sit for forty minutes but did not expect to sit for over an hour. As we sat more than one hour, you all reported of being restless and impatient for the alarm to ring. You were not prepared for that. Had I asked you if you were going to sit for more than one hour, all of you would have said no. This is something I know you will resist. If we simply look into our minds, we experience resistance many a time during the day for one or another reason. We could experience resentment and rejection having to sit more than we could. We have to observe resentment or restlessness as well. Your purpose is to act as an observer and an explorer, to collect facts and data for registering. Now you have registered agitation, irritation, frustration, impatience, you have got all

the data. They will reveal their nature to you at one point. They come unexpected at work, at home or while driving. This mindfulness practice is a kind of learning how to live with the unexpected. If the unexpected produces pressure, then mindfulness is the way to deal with pressure.

MINDFULNESS AS ACCEPTANCE OF FACTS OF LIFE

You observe as a traveller who explores the world. You see a lot, mostly different from what you have seen before. Many people, mostly British, tell me that it was nice to have been in India, in Brazil; although they didn't have running water everywhere, no flushing toilet, no hot water on demand, it was still nice. If things were the same, they would not have spent their money to go there and experience it. Therefore, when they come back they appreciate more the things they have got here in England. Contentment is born in their heart. They have an ability to enjoy the same thing even more. A man from the BBC world service, who is a very experienced journalist, agreed to go to Brazil with an explorer to raise some funds. Later when he returned, he reported the hard time he had had, trying to escape from wild animals, insects, etc. Worse than that, he said, was not having a toilet. When he agreed to go there, he did so because he thought there would be flushing toilets. He was prepared to face those wild animals in the Amazon. However, because he was not prepared for a situation without flushing toilets and running water, it was quite a struggle for him. This is the typical way an ordinary man deals with daily life.

We do not get everything we expect in life. We may get something we do not expect and we learn to deal with this

through meditation as well. Vipassana meditation experience is not something different from real life. It very much reflects the reality of life.

DO NOT REJECT IT

The Buddha said that his way of solving problem is opposite to what the world thinks is the way to solve problem. His way of thinking is against the mainstream. If the people said that you have to run away from a problem, the Buddha would say, *"You have to face it and accept it."* *"We can't be bothered with suffering; forget about it,"* people would say. The Buddha would, however, say, *"No, you have to be mindful of it. You have to see it. You have to understand it. You cannot run away from it."* It is a totally different way of thinking altogether. However, such acceptance is only possible through constant awareness or strong mindfulness. Otherwise, every time we see it we will keep rejecting it because we are not used to accepting it.

MINDFULNESS AS LETTING GO

Sometimes people say, *"Just let it go."* However, it is not that easy to let things go. You want to let things go, and you try to forget things, but it just does not go away. When my father died, if possible, I wanted to forget everything and tried to behave as if my father was still alive. However, things did not happen that way. Sorrow and grief kept coming. I tried to let them go but it was not possible until I experienced them mindfully.

You cannot arrange the world in such a way that you will never feel disturbed and upset. You cannot put only nice people and all wonderful things around you. Life does not start in such abstract form. Nor does the world exist in an ideal way either. The world exists the way it is, not the way we imagine it to be. We just have to take it as it is and let go of it.

Pain is there even when we do not pay attention to it. When we ignore it, we think it will go. We think this is the way to let go. This is a very normal and logical way of thinking habituated in people whose mind is not trained in mindfulness practice. Therefore, you try to forget your toothache by listening to music or trying to engage in any other activity. This will not work. But the Buddha said that the actual way of letting things go is to face it, to be mindful of it, to be aware of its existence. You confront the fact that you have a toothache. Before you accept it, you will not even think of seeing a dentist. When mindfulness is not strong, you cannot let go of pain. You are just confused about what to do with it. So the pain now creates irritation, impatience, frustration and so on, it is an endless frustration because you cannot let things go.

As the mind becomes contemplative, it gets strong. What happens is that when we observe the pain, there is no more frustration and sometimes even joyous feelings appear. This means you are now letting it go. You are freeing yourself from it. You feel no longer attached to the pain or the part of body where you feel pain. Maybe you are observing the pain objectively as a surgeon rather than as a patient or a relative of the patient. If you do not look at it objectively, you will not be able to help the patient. You will be overwhelmed and overtaken by the suffering the patient is experiencing. So to

let things go is something that is possible only through mindfulness. Letting go brings freedom and objectivity.

MINDFULNESS AS PROTECTION

Mindfulness is also like a *protection*. An example here is the cat. I think his name is Coco. When it came in the first day, you felt disturbed. You were not protected from disturbances coming from Coco. However, as you learned how to observe the cat's coming, the noises and its touch, you learn how to live with it. It does not bother you any more. When it comes you just observe the sound and its touch _ you are now in harmony with the cat Coco. You are now protected from being disturbed. You free yourself from his disturbances, not necessarily by running away from it nor getting rid of him but by accepting his presence and trying to live in harmony with him.

It can be quite miserable to have to wait for a coach for two hours. Sometimes flights are delayed for one day. You feel agitated and miserable. But when you are mindful of the fact that it is late and you accept it, you will not be feeling as much agitated. You may be quite happy doing something else and making best use of the time made available to you unexpectedly. Therefore, this is a protection. You are protected by mindfulness. You are safe only when you are mindful. You are safe from agitation and misery. Otherwise you will be reacting and those reactions are dangerous. They harm you physically and mentally. They exhaust you. The Buddha said never try to justify your being upset for whatever reason. Being upset is bad. Anger for whatever reason is bad. If someone criticizes you, you are already suffering from the

criticism. When you are angry, on top of that suffering you create yet another one. An angry man is not happy. When faced with criticism, if you can remain calm, peaceful and stable, how great that would be. That is possible only when mindfulness is present. There will be no end to our complaints if we are to make a fuss every time we see our weak points or someone else's. The world is established in imperfection. No one is perfect. We have just to live, as it were, with this imperfect world

Imperfection is not a reason for being annoyed or upset. It is something we can learn to accept through mindfulness. We can be compassionate to the other party. We can help whenever it is possible. So we do not try to justify our anger, jealousy, envy, gossip or annoyance. They are what we should learn through mindfulness. It can save us from having to complain all the time.

Britain is a prosperous nation. People are quite well off, but they never stop complaining. The same is true in Japan. People even commit suicide out of frustration. Do you think someone who is complaining is happy? Something is burning inside like a fire. Anger is like a fire. Resentment is like a fire. We should be mindful of the dangers of anger, jealousy, hatred, getting upset, frustration, irritation, agitation and we must not seek to justify them.

AMATA NIBBANA: MINDFULNESS AND THE IMMORTAL

To go a bit deeper in practice and understanding, mindfulness produces immortality (*amata nibbana*). With

sustained mindfulness alone, can such immortality be experienced here and now. Immortality we are talking about here is not about permanent life after death. This is quite difficult to understand.

So, I shall explain the immortality through the experience of mindfulness. When mindfulness gets stronger, we come to see more in this physical movement. You lift your feet, but behind that, there is the intention to do so, the intention comes before the movement. There is an intention to speak, then you speak. The intention is there behind everything. Since one cannot perceive intention consciously before any physical or verbal action, one would like to think that one just acts without any intention. This is because one's mind is not contemplative enough to see intention behind it. Intention is the least known meditation object whereas any product of it such as the feet lifting is the best known one. Intention is a mental phenomenon just as other mental reactions like agitation, unhappiness, happiness, joy and getting upset.

Yesterday the physical movements that we reflected on as we meditated on the different parts of the body are physical phenomena. And we come to see later that what really exists is something that we can call physical phenomena and something that can feel like mental phenomena. These two things are real. They exist in reality. What is not there is what we normally create "*self identity*," called "*atta*" or "*atman*".

In other words, the five aggregates are real. They are there in existence. In Pali, they are called *sakkaya* = *something that exists in reality: nama* and *rupa*, physical and

mental phenomena or mind and matter whatever you may call it. What does not exist in reality is self-identity. However, it does exist in notion or perception, a perception that is born out of physical and mental phenomena that are real. Perception is something we create in our mind, not necessarily an actual phenomenon. Depending on something that exists in reality, we create something unreal. So, wrong perception or belief in the existence of something that does not exist is called *sakkaya ditthi*. *Ditthi* means a wrong perception. Literary speaking, *sakkaya* is not wrong but *ditthi* is.

When you practice mindfulness that is getting stronger and stronger passing through the *learning stage* and the *controlling stage*, reaching the *liberating stage*, you come to see what really exists and what does not. In a Buddhist philosophical sense, mortality or death means the death of that kind of entity, the entity that we wrongly perceive to exist. The arising and falling, the coming and going of the physical and mental phenomena are not something new to us. Scientifically, every twenty-four hours, about a hundred billion cells are replaced, the old by the new ones. Therefore, death occurs every moment. It is not something new and unknown to human beings. Cells are being replaced all the time. Change or impermanence of physical phenomenon is not something we call death or mortality.

Earlier when you were meditating for more than one hour, you got frustrated. You had to meditate more than one hour because unlike in other sessions I did not set the timer, and just let the session take its own course; I am sure many of you might have been expecting the alarm to go off. But that frustrated mind is no more now. As you are listening to my

talk, there is now an attentive mind, paying attention to the Dhamma talk. The frustrated mind has gone and it has been replaced by the attentive mind. At the end of the one-hour session, your frustrated mind was immediately replaced by a relieved mind as soon as I said we would stop here. Therefore, the mind keeps changing as well. A new mind keeps coming and is being born every second. It has been proved scientifically.

It does not mean that we are not afraid of the change or the going, the passing away of this physical and mental phenomenon, which exists in reality. We are. As a result, there is fear of death, but the death of what? Actually, the deeply rooted fear is that of death of the false identity that we have created in our mind. This is what we call *the mortality of the false self-identity*. With this identity in existence, you feel hurt, you feel fearful and attached. Once you let it go you are now free from anger, fear and attachment.

In the last stage of mindfulness when you have accepted that only these two things, mind and matter, are real, there is no more falsely perceived *self*, then there is nothing to die. The cessation of these physical and mental phenomena is taking place here and now; since the time we were in the womb. Unless they keep changing, we would not be growing or getting old. So when we say *nibbana* is immortal, it means mindfulness is never broken and we are constantly aware what is there in reality. The Buddha from the age of thirty-five to the age of eighty was constantly aware of what truly exists. No false identity was created in his mind any more. Consequently, there was nothing to die, hence immortality.

THE CONDITIONING (sankhara)
&
THE CONDITIONED (sankhata)

Let us talk a bit about the conditioning and the conditioned, which we talked about in the morning.

What do we mean by *conditioning* and *conditioned*? Life is a process. It is not a single entity existing throughout for forty, fifty, seventy or eighty years. It is a dynamic process with change taking place momentarily. Just take one process from your meditation experience as an example. The pain is there. The pain arises basically because we have these physical and mental phenomena, of which we are composed. If you are composed in this way, with mind and matter, how can you run away from pain? The pain is there all the time. The question is whether you perceive it or not. When the pain arises, you normally start reacting to it. You become agitated. But you are not mindful of agitation. The agitation is there. As the pain becomes unbearable, frustration is born. First, there is impatience and then frustration. Pain, agitation, impatience, frustration and now maybe also disappointment; look at them as a part of a process, that are related to one another as cause and effect. Now you have things operating in a series. The pain has produced the agitation. Therefore, the pain is *conditioning* the agitation. Agitation has been *conditioned* by the pain. The pain is the immediate cause for the agitation and the agitation is the immediate effect of the pain. The conditioning is the cause and the conditioned is the result. The cause that is conditioning is called in Pali *sankhara*. Grammatically, it is a subjective case. The conditioned has

been created. It is the objective case. In Pali it is called *sankhata*.

When mindfulness is progressing satisfactorily, the pain no longer gives rise to agitation. The pain stops being a conditioning factor and consequently the result is not born. Momentary rebirth ceases at least temporarily.

MINDFULNESS AND SAMSARA, THE CIRCLE OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

Pain experienced in meditation itself is a good illustration of how *samsara* the circle of suffering begins and operates. Pain, impatience, frustration and agitation come in a series that makes a cycle, with the immediate predecessor factor serving as a direct cause. Something that was earlier the conditioned becomes the cause or the conditioning. Agitation is born out of frustration, and agitation is the effect, the conditioned. This is how change is taking place here and now, from effect to cause. You become a father from first being a son. It goes on and on. If you have only one, or even two factors, you do not call it a *cycle*. Something that has been produced continues to produce. That is an endless process of cause and effect. What we call *samsara* means this very cycle of cause and effect.

We have discussed that when the mind lacks constant awareness, any pain can create agitation and frustration. Contrarily, if sufficient mindfulness is present, the pain will stop producing agitation and frustration. Accordingly, there is no such thing as the *conditioned thing* simply the pain is not producing anything. Since it is not producing anything, you

cannot say any more that the pain is the *cause*. The process of cause and effect is broken in this way. Other consequences like impatience, frustration, agitation, stress, depression, low-esteem and other negative emotions will also stop from *becoming*. The process stops by itself, as there is no cause to bring it into existence. If they are not conditioned to become, they will definitely cease to be there to condition others at the same time.

This process is weakened, broken and ultimately cut off by constant awareness, constant mindfulness. That is why mindfulness practice is called one that is geared towards *asankhata* - the unconditioned. The mind still works, it does even a more wonderful job. But it is not conditioned any more. There is no disturbance to it. It can now function more effectively without being motivated by any prejudices or emotions. It is a *lotus mind*, similar to the existence of a lotus flower: while retaining its root in the muddy water, it nevertheless, has risen up above the mud and water.

This life, composed of a unit called psychophysical phenomenon has been conditioned by the past *kamma*. It is the conditioned. However, if it does not produce another effect, in other words, if this so-called the conditioned does not become the conditioning, then the process of going round the cycle is stopped. This can be achieved in this life. *Amata nibbana* can be realised only at the present moment in this way.