

## Mindfulness vs. Mindfulness Practice

### Study Guide to MN 10,118,119

*Those for whom you have compassion and who think you should be heeded – whether friends or colleagues, relatives or kinsmen – these you should exhort, settle, and establish in the development of the four applications of mindfulness.*

SN V 47.49

*Sati*, usually translated as ‘mindfulness,’ is a key element in the liberation practices taught in the early Buddhist discourses. It appears prominently in the most important lists of practices and mental qualities to be cultivated along the path. In addition to being central in the four applications of mindfulness, *sati* is one of the five faculties, the five powers, the seven wings of awakening, and the eightfold path factors.

When we try to understand what *sati* means in the discourses we find that it is used in two broad overlapping ways. First it refers to the mental capacity or faculty of mindfulness. Second it refers to the practices of mindfulness, e.g. the four applications of mindfulness.

#### **Mindfulness:**

As a cognate to the verb *sarati*, meaning to remember, *sati* is associated with memory. The closest the suttas come to defining *sati* as a mental capacity is in describing the faculty (*indriya*) of mindfulness as the mental ability that allows one to remember what happened long ago (SN V 48.9). The next sutta in the *Samyutta Nikaya* defines *sati indriya* as both remembering the past and the practice of the four applications of mindfulness (SN V 48.10). Here we see how quickly the suttas can switch between discussing *sati* as a form of mental functioning to *sati* being a way of practicing. Even so, the most common practices involving *sati*, i.e. *satipathāna kayagatā-sati* and *ānāpāna-sati* are mindfulness practices of aspects of present experience, not about the distant past.

*Sati* is also used in describing the practice of reflecting on death (*marana-sati*). The related term *anussati* (*anu* [toward/again] + *sati*) refers to practices that involve recollecting or contemplating such things as the six recollections, i.e., the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, and the devas. Another is remembering peace (*upasama-anussati*).

What remembering, mindfulness, reflecting and recollecting have in common is the mental activity of bringing something to awareness and holding it there. In mindfulness practice this involves remembering to attend to particular aspects of the present moment. For example, in *marana-sati* it is maintaining a reflection of death. In the case of *pubbe-nivās’ anussati* is the “recollection of [one’s] former lives.”

The Theravada commentaries provide definitions of *sati* that build on how the term is used in the suttas. For example, Buddhaghosa defines it as:

*Sati* has

‘not floating away’ as its characteristic,  
non-forgetfulness as its function,  
guarding, or the state of facing the object, as its manifestation,

firm perception (*saññā*), or application in mindfulness as regards the body, etc,  
as proximate cause...

*Sati* should be regarded as a door-post from being firmly established in the object,  
and as a door-keeper from guarding the door of the senses.

*Atthasālinī*

### **Mindfulness Practice:**

While the suttas don't say much about what the faculty of **mindfulness** is, they do have rich descriptions of various **mindfulness practices**. The significance of this distinction can be illustrated with an analogy. If someone only says he or she is running, we don't know the context to the running – it might be, for example, running after the bus, running away from danger or running for the joy of running. If, on the other hand, we say someone is engaged in a running practice we will probably think that the running is closely connected to a variety of activities, such as regular training, making effort to develop endurance and speed, and self-monitoring. In the same way, the practice of mindfulness entails more than just mindfulness. So, for example, the most common definition of Right Mindfulness is in terms of the stock passage describing the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness:

What, friends, is right mindfulness? Here a monk abides contemplating the body as body, **ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful,<sup>1</sup> having put away covetousness and grief for the world;** he abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world; he abides contemplating mind states as mind states, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world; abides contemplating *dhammas* as *dhammas*, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

(MN 141.30)

While mindfulness practice certainly involves mindfulness, this passage indicates it entails more than just mindfulness. First, it involves applying mindfulness to four particular areas of experience, *i.e.*, the body, feelings, mind states and *dhammas*. Second, it is practiced together with ardency and clear comprehension. Third, it requires having “put away covetousness and grief for the world.”

The *Satipatthāna Sutta* (MN 10) opens with this same stock passage and then describes 21 different ways of practicing mindfulness. It adds, at the end of these descriptions, a further explanation that the practice of each of the four foundations of mindfulness is fulfilled through attaining particular insights and abandoning clinging.

There are a few suttas in the *Middle Length Discourses* wherein mindfulness practice is described from perspectives or approaches other than how it is in the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. In studying these, it is useful to notice what practices and mental qualities are associated with mindfulness. MN 117.9, for example, has an alternative definition of Right Mindfulness:

Mindfully, one **abandons** wrong view, mindfully one **enters** upon and abides in right view: this is one's right mindfulness.

Here, mindfulness is combined with abandoning wrong view and substituting it with right view.

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<sup>1</sup> *ātāpī sampajāno satimā*

MN 10, MN 118 and MN 119 are the three *Middle Length Discourses* that contain the word mindfulness in their titles. While each of these suttas presents mindfulness practice as a complete practice leading to Awakening, each does so in different ways. In reading these three it is useful to compare and contrast the practices, mental qualities and insights that they associate with mindfulness. For example, MN 10 and 119 both describe the same 14 practices associated with mindfulness of the body. They differ, however, in the refrain that follows the descriptions.

MN 119 has:

By staying vigilant, ardent, and resolute<sup>2</sup> he **gives up** recollections and intentions dependent on household life. Having given them up his mind becomes composed, settled, one-pointed and concentrated. This, monk is how a monk develops mindfulness directed to the body.

In contrast, MN 10 has:

In this way he abides focused internally on the body in itself, or he abides focused externally on the body in itself, or he abides focused both internally and externally on the body in itself.

Or he abides focused on things arising in reference to the body, on things going away in reference to the body, or on things arising and going away in reference to the body.

Or else mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is established to the extent necessary only for knowledge and remembrance. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a monk abides focused on the body in itself.

### Reflections:

1. A common explanation of mindfulness practice in modern western Vipassana teachings describes it as the practice of maintaining non-reactive attention to what is happening in the present. Words like allowing, accepting and letting be are often used to describe this approach. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes mindfulness as keeping the mind deliberately

at the level of *bare attention*, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. ... All judgments and interpretations have to be suspended... The task is simply to note whatever comes up just as it is occurring, riding the changes of events in the way a surfer rides the waves of the sea..  
(The Noble Eightfold Path, pp 73-74)

Do these descriptions resemble the ways mindfulness practice is described in the suttas?

2. Please reread MN 39. Which of the eight practices listed there might best resemble the practice of non-reactive awareness?

3. Which of the 21 practices in MN 10 and which of the 16 stages of breath meditation in MN 118 can best be described as some form of non-reactive, non-evaluative, accepting mindfulness? Which involve some evaluation and attempts at changing one’s experience?

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<sup>2</sup> *Appamattassa aatāpino pahittattassa*