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Mindfulness and Awareness

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by

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Mindfulness and Awareness

T

he Pali word for awareness is *sampajañña*. In the suttas it is frequently linked with mindfulness (*sati*) in the compound *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness and awareness.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, awareness (of bodily actions) is included in the section on mindfulness of the body, so we can perhaps conclude that, while it is not different from mindfulness, awareness is rather more specialised in meaning. Mindfulness is general recollectedness, not being scatterbrained; whereas awareness is more precisely keeping oneself under constant observation, not letting one's actions (or thoughts, or feelings etc.) pass unnoticed.

Here, to begin with, are three sutta passages to indicate the scope of the practice of awareness in the Buddha's Teaching.

(1) "And how, monks, is a monk aware? Here, monks, in walking to and fro a monk practises awareness; in looking ahead and looking aside he practises awareness; in bending and stretching ...; in using robes and bowl ...; in

eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting ...; in excreting and urinating; in walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, waking, speaking, and being silent, he practises awareness." [1]

(2) "And which, monks, is the development of concentration that, when developed and made much of, leads to mindfulness and awareness? Here, monks, feelings are known as they arise, feelings are known as they endure, feelings are known as they vanish; perceptions are known as they arise, perceptions are known as they endure, perceptions are known as they vanish; thoughts are known as they arise, thoughts are known as they endure, thoughts are known as they vanish." [2]

(3) "Here, Ānanda, a monk is mindful as he walks to, he is mindful as he walks fro, he is mindful as he stands, he is mindful as he sits, he is mindful as he lies down, he is mindful as he sets to work. This, Ānanda, is a mode of recollection that, when developed and made much of in this way, leads to mindfulness and awareness." [3]

The next thing is to sort out a verbal confusion. When our actions become habitual we tend to do them without thinking about them—they become automatic

or instinctive (scratching one's head, for example, or blinking one's eyes). We commonly call these unconscious actions, and this usage is followed by psychology and science generally. But this is a misunderstanding. There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as an unconscious action. The Buddha defines action (kamma) as intention (cetanā), and there is no intention without consciousness (viññāṇa). An unconscious action is no action at all, it is purely and simply movement as when, for example, a tree sways in the wind, or a rock is dislodged by the rain and rolls down a mountainside and derails a train (in this latter case it is quaintly called, in legal circles, "an act of God" but if there is no God, there is no act, only the movement of the rock). In the Buddha's Teaching, all consciousness is action (by mind, voice or body) and every action is conscious. But this does not mean that every action is done in awareness—indeed, what is commonly called an "unconscious action" is merely a conscious act that is done not deliberately, that is done unaware. What we commonly call a "conscious action" is, strictly speaking, a deliberate action, an action that required some thought to perform (as, for example, when we try to do something that we have not done before, or only infrequently). When we do such actions, we have to consider what we are doing (or else we shall make a mistake); and it is this

considering what we are doing that constitutes awareness. An action that we do without considering what we are doing is an action that is done without awareness.

So long as we are awake, obviously enough, there is always some degree of awareness present, since new problems, large or small, are always presenting themselves and we are obliged to consider them (even if only for a moment or two) in order to deal with them. When we dream on the other hand, awareness is in abeyance; it is this very fact that distinguishes dreams from waking experience, and why we are unable to look at our dream problems objectively. When we are awake we are always aware that "I am awake," but when we dream we are not aware that "I am dreaming" and, in fact, when we have a nightmare and struggle to wake up, all we are doing is trying to remember (or become aware) that we are dreaming, and if we succeed we wake up. But though, unlike in sleep, there is always some degree of awareness present in our waking life, it is normally only enough to enable us to deal with unexpected circumstances as they occur, for the rest we are absorbed in what we are doing—whether it be the daily task of earning a livelihood, or our personal affairs with our emotional attitudes towards other people (affection, dislike, fury, lust, boredom and so on). To maintain a detached

attitude is difficult when there is much routine work to be done in a hurry, and it robs our personal relationships with others of all emotional satisfaction. We prefer to get through our work as quickly and with as little effect as possible, and then to wallow in our emotions like a buffalo in a mud-hole. We like to keep awareness of what we are doing, which is always an effort, to the absolute minimum. But we cannot avoid awareness altogether, since, as I remarked earlier, it is necessary in order to deal with unexpected problems, however insignificant, when they arise.

But this awareness is practised merely for the purpose of overcoming the obstacles that lie in the path of our daily life—it is practised simply in order to get through the business of living as expeditiously and as efficiently as possible.

Awareness in the Buddha's Teaching, however, has a different purpose: it is practised for the purpose of attaining release from living. These two different purposes, while not directly opposed, do not in fact cooperate—they are, as it were, at right angles to each other; and since the amount of awareness that can be practised at any time is limited, there is competition between these purposes for whatever awareness is available. Thus it happens that in activities requiring much awareness simply for their successful performance (such as writing this letter), there is not

much scope for the practice of awareness leading to release (though no doubt if I got into the unlikely habit of writing this same letter twice a day over a number of years I should be able to devote more of the latter to it).

The Buddha tells us (in the Itivuttaka) that three things harm the progress of the sekha bhikkhu (one who has reached the path but who has not yet arrived at Arahantship): fondness for work (i.e. building, sewing robes, doing odd jobs, and so on), fondness for talk, and fondness for sleep. In the first two, as we can see, much awareness must be devoted to successful performance of the task in hand (making things, expounding the Dhamma), and in the third no awareness is possible. From the passages I quoted earlier, it is clear that awareness for the purpose of release is best practised on those actions that are habitual and do not require much thought to perform—walking, standing, sitting, lying down, attending to bodily needs of various kinds, and so on. The reference to “sleeping” in passage (1) means that one should go to sleep with awareness, bearing in mind the time to awaken again; it does not mean that we should practise awareness while we are actually asleep. Naturally, a bhikkhu cannot altogether avoid doing jobs of work or occasionally talking but these, too should be done mindfully and with awareness as

far as possible: "he is mindful as he sets to work, in speaking and being silent he practises awareness." The normal person, as I remarked above, does not practise awareness where he does not find it necessary, that is to say, in his habitual actions; but the bhikkhu is instructed not only to do these habitual actions with awareness but also, as far as possible confine himself to these actions. Drive and initiative in new ventures, so highly prized in the world of business and practical affairs, are impediments for one who is seeking release.

And how does one practise this awareness for the purpose of release? It is really very simple. Since, as I have said, all action is conscious, we do not have to undertake any elaborate investigation such as asking other people to find out what it is that we are doing so that we can become aware of it. All that is necessary is a slight change of attitude, a slight effort of attention. Instead of being fully absorbed by, or identified with, our action, we must continue, without ceasing to act, to observe ourselves in action. This is done quite simply by asking ourselves the question "what am I doing?" It will be found that, since the action is always conscious anyway, we already, in a certain sense, know the answer without having to think about it; and simply by asking ourselves the question we become aware of the answer, i.e. of what we are doing. Thus, if

I now ask myself “What am I doing?” I can immediately answer that I am writing, that I am sitting in my bed, that I am scratching my leg and so on almost endlessly.

If I wish to practise awareness, I must go on asking myself this question and answering it, until such time as I find that I am automatically (or habitually) answering the question without having to ask it. When this happens, the practice of awareness is being successful, and it only remains to develop this state and not to fall away from it through neglect. Similar considerations will of course apply to awareness of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts—see passage (2). Here I have to ask myself, “What am I feeling, or perceiving, or thinking?” and the answer once again will immediately present itself.

The objection is sometimes raised that it is not possible to do two things at once and that it is therefore not possible both to act and to be aware of the action at one and the same time. But this opinion is a pure prejudice based upon a certain false notion of the nature of consciousness (or of experience). It is perfectly possible to be doing a number of things at the same time (for example, I am breathing as I write this letter, and I do not interrupt the one in order to do the other). It is not possible to devote equal attention to all of them at the same time, but this is another

matter. And this is true also of acting and being aware of the action. This can be verified very simply: all that is necessary is to start walking, and while still walking to ask oneself the question "what am I doing?" It will be found that one can give oneself the answer "I am walking" without ceasing to walk. It is not necessary to come to a halt, or break into a run, or fall down, in order to answer the question.

Why should one practise awareness? I can think of three good reasons immediately, and there are doubtless others besides. In the first place, a person who is constantly aware of what he is doing will find it easier to keep his *sila*. A man who, when chasing his neighbour's wife, knows "I am chasing my neighbour's wife," will not be able to conceal from himself the fact that he is on the point of breaking the third precept, and will correct himself sooner than the man who chases his neighbour's wife without considering what he is doing. In brief, awareness leads to self-criticism and thence to self-correction.

In the second place, *awareness is cooling and is directly opposed to the passions* (either lust or hate), which are heating. This means that the man who constantly practises awareness has a powerful control over his passions; indeed, the constant practice of awareness actually inhibits the passions, and they arise less and less frequently.

In the third place, *the practice of awareness is an absolute prerequisite for the understanding of the essence of the Buddha's Teaching*. The reason for this is that the Dhamma is concerned not with any one single experience (consciousness, feeling, etc.). We do not need a Buddha to tell us how to escape from any one particular experience (whether it is a simple headache or an incurable cancer, but we do need the Buddha to tell us how to escape from all experience. Now in the normal state of being absorbed in what we are doing (that is, of non-awareness) we are concerned only with this or that particular experience or state of affairs ("she loves me; she loves me not ...") and we are in no way concerned with experience in general, ("what is the nature of the emotion of love?"). But when we become aware of what we are doing (or feeling, etc.), the case is different. Though we are still doing (or feeling), we are also observing that doing or feeling with a certain degree of detachment, and at that time the general nature of doing and feeling comes into view (the particular doing and feeling that happen to be present now merely appear as examples of doing and feeling in general); and it is only when this general nature of things comes into view that we are able, with the Buddha's guidance, to grasp the universal characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

These three reasons for practising awareness

correspond to *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* respectively.

Notes

1. Saṃyutta Nikāya, Vol. IV, p. 211. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Aṅguttara Nikāya, Vol. II, p. 45. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Aṅguttara Nikāya, Vol. III, p. 325 [\[Back\]](#)

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