Mindfulness Meditation:
An Abhidhamma Perspective

Andrew Olendzki
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

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The English language is rich in many ways, particularly when explaining the features of the material world, but it is remarkably clumsy when it comes to articulating the nuanced terrain of inner experience. This is one of the reasons the current conversations about consciousness, meditation, and psychology in general can be somewhat confusing. One of the satisfactions of studying the languages and literatures of India is the exposure it offers to a richer and more precise vocabulary for speaking of internal states of mind. At the time Greek philosophers were seeking to identify the universal substances out of which all matter is constructed, their counterparts in India were exploring, empirically and directly, the textures of consciousness. By the time Socrates suggested that care of the soul was an appropriate thing for philosophers to attend to, a detailed and highly developed map of the mind and body as a system of lived experience had been delineated by the Buddha and his immediate followers.

Part of the literature containing this lore is the Abhidhamma. It is an attempt to extract some of the Buddha's core teachings about the phenomenology of experience from the narrative context of the Dhamma, and organize it into a more systematic and consistent presentation. I'd like to offer a taste of this greater precision by considering the question "What is mindfulness?" As the term grows in importance in contemporary discourse, its meaning seems to be becoming less rather than more clear. Let's see if the rich vocabulary and meditative insight of the Abhidhamma tradition can help us understand better what the word mindfulness is referring to.

According to the Abhidhamma, consciousness arises and passes away each moment as a series of episodes in a continuing process. It is not a thing that exists, but an event that occurs—again and again—to yield the subjective experience of a stream of consciousness. Consciousness itself is rather simple and austere, consisting merely of the cognizing of a sense object by means of a sense organ. This event serves as a sort of seed around which a number of other mental factors crystallize to help consciousness create meaning from the stimuli presenting so rapidly and relentlessly at the doors of the senses.

Like a king with his entourage, as the classical image has it, consciousness never arises alone. It is always attended by a number of other mental factors that help structure, shape, and direct rudimentary consciousness in various ways. The idiosyncrasies of our experience come from the unique configurations formed by all these supporting mental factors as they interact each moment with the changing data of the senses and the synthetic constructions of the mind. Altogether fifty-two of these mental factors are

enumerated in the Pali Abhidhamma. (The Sanskrit Abhidharma tradition has a somewhat different list, but we will not get in to that here.) Scholars have tended to dismiss this exhaustive catalogue of mental states as the product of scholasticism run amok, but many people with a mature practice of vipassana meditation are thrilled by the precision with which this literature describes the interior landscape. It is the child of two parents: its mother is deep empirical observation of meditative experience, while its father is a brilliant organizing intellect.

Let's go through an Abhidhamma perspective on mindfulness, and you judge for yourself if it is useful or not to your practice. I will identify each mental factor by its Pali term and its number on the list for the sake of clarity, but will not consider all the factors nor treat them in their strict canonical order.

Universal Mental Factors

Meditation starts with getting in touch with experience at the point of its inception. We literally make contact (*phasso-1*) with what is happening in the present moment. If we are daydreaming or worrying or wondering what do to next, we let go of that for the moment and get grounded at one of the sense doors. What is the actual physical sensation arising this moment at the body door as I begin to draw an inbreath? Can I get right to the cutting edge of the sound produced by that chirping bird outside the window? Dropping down from the level of "thinking about" something to "getting in touch" with what is actually occurring *right now* is referred to as making contact with the sensation just as it first arrives as one of the sense doors.

We immediately notice that this sensation is always accompanied with a feeling tone (*vedanā-2*) that can be grossly or subtly pleasant or unpleasant. There is a strand of experience that brings with it a sense of embodiment, an awareness of visceral sensitivity. Every sensation comes with its own distinct quality, with a sense of *what it feels like* to be having that experience right here and now. Even when it is not obviously pleasant or unpleasant, there is nevertheless an affect tone that strings our moments of experience into a continuous affective flow, much like the cognitive flow of the stream of consciousness, and contributes to the feeling of being a living organism. Meditation can focus on discerning the distinction between bare sensory contact and the feeling tone that colors the sensation. The stimulus is one thing, while the feeling tone that gives it depth and flavor is another.

Perception (*saññā-3*) is another mental factor occurring with every moment of consciousness. Its function is to interpret *what* it is that we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching or thinking in any particular episode of cognition. Perceptions puts together knowledge (*sam* + √*jñā*) about the presenting object based upon a wide network of associations, memories, analyses, learned perceptual categories and linguistic labels. They manifest as representations, symbols, words, icons, or other images we might form to interpret the sense data into meaningful categories of thought. This happens automatically and subliminally in every moment, but meditation can bring a heightened

attentiveness to the process such that we become more consciously aware of our perceptions, and the perceptions themselves can get more acute.

So far we have listed four of the five aggregates. Contact is the coming together of the organs and objects of sensation, both materially based, with consciousness, the mental act of knowing one by means of the other. Feeling and perception expand upon this data to fill in a richer picture of what we are experiencing. All four aggregates work together to answer questions like, "What is happening here?" "How am I to understand what is arising in my experience right now?" All the remaining fifty mental factors are part of the fifth aggregate, formations (*sankhārā*), which address the very different question, "What am I going to do about it?" or "What intentional stance do I take toward this?" Wheras consciousness, feeling, and perception are all based on words built upon the verb "to know" (*√jñā; √ved*), the word for formations is rooted in the verb "to do" (*√kr*) and covers the wide range of our emotional responses to what is happening.

The mental factor of intention (*cetanā-4*) is thus the active mode of the mind by means of which we exercise our volition or will. Meditation can be understood as an intentional action of paying attention, of being present with, or of otherwise choosing to be aware of what is arising and passing away in the field of experience. Even if one is trying not to direct the mind too much, as in the proverbial "choiceless awareness," there is nevertheless a specific intention to attend carefully to whatever arises. Intention encompasses the executive function of the mind, the faculty by means of which decisions are made and karma is produced. An important nuance of Buddhist thought is that this executive function does not necessarily require an agent exercising it—choices are made, but there is nobody who makes them—but this is a matter for another forum.

One of the key decisions made by intention is where and how to place one's attention (*manasikāro-7*), the next mental factor to consider. Surely more than anything meditation has to do with deliberately directing attention to a particular object of experience. Attending to the breath, attending to an intention of loving kindness toward all beings, attending to the vast sky against which thoughts come and go like clouds—all involve the function of pointing or steering the mind in some non-ordinary way. The definition of daydreaming seems to be allowing attention to wander wherever it will, from one association to another; meditation is a mental discipline wherein the attention is trained to be more selective. Most meditation instructions include such instructions as "Allow the attention to settle on…" or "Bring attention to bear upon…" something or other.

A particular way of doing this is by having attention focus (*ekaggatā-5*) or concentrate upon a single point. This mental factor seems essential to any conception of meditation, for by focusing the mind one increases its power significantly. If the mind skips from one object to another in time, or flits from this or that object in space, it can't possibly generate the depth or stability to see anything clearly. One-pointed (*eka+agga*) focus of mind, of consciousness, of intention, or of attention, is a way of harnessing the capacity of the mind to a particular purpose. The Buddhist tradition contains concentration meditations that specifically build upon this function, such as the *jhānas* or absorptions, but all forms of meditation seem to require some level of focus.

So, are we meditating yet? Remarkably, no. According to the Abhidhamma, all the above mental factors mentioned are present in every single mind moment, whether we are meditating or not. All six factors (there is a seventh, but it is not immediately relevant) need to—and automatically do—participate in helping to shape and direct each moment of consciousness. If any one of these factors was absent, we would not be capable of ordinary coherent experience. Indeed, some sorts of severe mental dysfunction might be attributed to the impairment of one or another of these rudimentary mental factors. Even when totally spacing out, or committing a heinous crime, some basic level of contact, feeling, perception, intention, attention and focus is operative. The presence, and even the cultivation, of these factors alone does not sufficiently account for the practice of meditation.

Occasional Factors

The Abhidhamma next considers a number of factors that are not routinely present in the mind, but may be. When these are absent, we continue to function normally, but when they are present we manifest certain additional capabilities. There are six of these so-called occasional factors, which can arise individually or in concert with one another in various combinations. They are also called ethically neutral factors, because they are not inherently either wholesome or unwholesome; they can contribute equally to beautiful or horrific states of mind.

The first of these mental factors is initial application (*vitakko-8*). This is not a particularly elegant English rendering of the term, but it suits the meaning well enough. It refers to the capability we have to consciously and deliberately place our mind on a chosen object of experience. When you work through a math problem, retell a detailed story, or when you find your mind drifting during meditation practice and (gently, of course) re-apply it to the breath, you are exercising this function of applying the mind in a particular way. All discursive thinking is based on this ability to take charge of the mind's attention, so to speak, and is responsible for our prodigious planning and problem-solving skills.

Having directed the mind to a chosen object, another factor is needed to hold it there; this is sustained application (*vicāro-9*). As you may have noticed, there are considerable forces working to distract your mind and keep its attention moving from one object to another. No doubt this promiscuity of attention has survival value in a rapidly changing environment, but there is also something to be gained by exercising the ability to hold the mind on something long enough to fully understand it and its implications. Concentration meditation, in which one attempts to hold attention steadily on the breath, for example, will be effective only if this focus can be sustained without interruption.

Both initial and sustained application work together to help train and discipline the mind around certain specific practices, such as breath awareness, guided Brahma Vihāra practice, and all forms of visualization. Additionally, they may or may not be further supported by energy (*viriyam-11*). We know what it feels like to do something with or without energy. Sometimes the mind stays easily on course and no particular effort is

needed. Other times it is recalcitrant as a mule, and needs a gook kick. Energy is a mental factor that is not naturally always present, and in common idiom we talk about putting forth energy, arousing energy, or otherwise conjuring it up when needed.

Three other factors are considered ethically variable occasionals: decision (*adhimokkho-10*); joy (*pīti-12*); and impulse (*chando-13*). Each of these three adds something else to the texture of consciousness, and manifests under different circumstances. Decision, literally "releasing toward," also means conviction or confidence, and functions when we do or think something with an attitude of decisiveness or determination. Joy is an intense mental pleasure, which can manifest, alas, in either wholesome or unwholesome contexts. And impulse, it is important to note, simply refers to an ethically neutral urge, inclination, or motivation to act, and not to the desire (greed, hatred) rooted in unwholesomeness. If the Buddha eats a meal at the appropriate time, for example, we can say he is prompted to act toward that end without being driven by desire or lust for food. In experience *chando* can be discerned as the impulse preceding even the most simple and functional actions.

Are we practicing mindfulness yet? We have already seen that if I sit with my legs crossed and back straight, get in touch with the physical sensations of the breath, and intentionally direct my attention to a single point, I am not necessarily meditating. These are all factors that will manifest spontaneously in any endeavor, and are not unique to meditation. If I further apply my mind and sustain its attention on the inbreath, put forth energy with determination, joy, and a self-less inclination for the well-being of all living creatures, I may well be meditating—but that does not necessarily mean that I am cultivating mindfulness.

Mindfulness and its Associated States

Mindfulness (*sati-29*), according to the Abhidhamma, is a wholesome mental factor that will arise only under special circumstances. In most conventional ways we use the term these days, we are likely to be referring to any number and combination of the factors already mentioned. In the classical texts, especially the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (M10), one goes to an empty place, crosses one's legs, straightens one's back and then establishes mindfulness (*sati-upatthāna*) as an immediate presence. The Abhidhamma offers a four-fold definition of mindfulness: 1) its *characteristic* is not wobbling, or keeping the mind from floating away from its object; 2) its *function* is absence of confusion, or non-forgetfulness (the term *sati* comes from a word for memory); 3) its *manifestation* is as guardianship, or the state of confronting an objective phenomenal field; and 4) its *proximate cause* is strong perception or the four foundations of mindfulness (i.e., body, feeling, consciousness, mentatl objects). These definitions all suggest an enhanced presence of mind, a heightened attentiveness to objects of experience in the present moment, a special non-ordinary quality of attention. We can learn a lot more about it by looking at the company it keeps.

To begin with, it is an axiom of the Abhidhamma system that wholesome and unwholesome mental factors cannot co-arise in the same moment of consciousness.

Mindfulness is a wholesome factor, so true mindfulness will arise only in a moment of consciousness if there are no unwholesome factors present. There are fourteen unwholesome factors, including greed (*lobho-18*), hatred (*doso-21*) and delusion (*moho-14*) and a number of other afflictive emotional states deriving from various combinations of these three roots. This means that if we are feeling envy (*issā-22*) or avarice (*macchariyam-23*), for example, these states have our consciousness firmly in grip for the moment, have hijacked our intention and all the other co-arising mental states, and are directing them to acting and creating karma in an unwholesome way. There can be no mindfulness in such a moment.

The immediately following moment, however, is a whole new beginning. Here we have the option, if we are trained and skillful in the establishment of mindfulness, of taking the envy or avarice that has just passed away as an object of the new moment, with an attitude of mindful investigation. Every moment of consciousness, we might say, has two major components: the object, and the intention with which that object is cognized. A mental object can be almost anything, including unwholesome intentions from previous mind moments; the intention with which it is held here and now will be shaped by the fifty-two mental factors. This means that we cannot be envious and mindful in the same moment, but we can be envious one moment and mindful of that fact the very next moment. Indeed much of what is called spiritual development consists of first becoming aware of what states are arising and passing away in experience (no small challenge in itself), and then of learning how to regard them with mindfulness rather than remaining lost in them or carried away by them (an even more daunting, but not impossible, task).

One of the more astonishing insights of the Abhidhamma is that mindfulness always co-arises with eighteen other wholesome mental factors. We are used to thinking of these factors as very different things, but the fact that they all arise together suggests they can be viewed as facets of the same jewel, as states that mutually define one another. By reviewing the range of wholesome factors that co-arise with it, we can get a much closer look at the phenomenology of mindfulness.

First, there is equanimity (*tatra-majjhattatā-34*). The Abhidhamma actually uses a more technical word for this, (literally "there-in-the-middle-ness"), but it is functionally equivalent to equanimity, an evenly hovering attitude toward experience that is neither attracted nor repelled by any object. It is therefore also characterized by non-greed (*alobho-32*) and non-hatred (*adoso-33*). This is the generic Abhidhamma way of referring to generosity or non-attachment on the one hand, and loving kindness on the other.

You can see how these three work together on a continuum to delineate perhaps the most salient characteristic of mindfulness. When true mindfulness arises, one feels as though somehow stepping back and observing what is happening in experience, rather than being embedded in it. This does not mean separation or detachment, but is rather a sense of not being hooked by a desirable object or not subtly pushing away a repugnant object. There in the middle, equidistant from each extreme, one actually encounters a sense of freedom that allows for a greater rather than a lesser intimacy with experience. It may seem paradoxical, but this system suggests we can take an attitude toward the objects of

experience that is at the same time both equanimous and benevolent. Loving kindness manifests as a deeply friendly intention toward another's well-being, but it is not rooted in any selfish desire for gratification. Similarly, generosity co-arising with equanimity indicates that a deep intention to give something valuable to another can manifest without a desire for reciprocal gain.

Also engaged with all these mental factors are the twin "guardians of the world," self-respect (*hiri-30*) and respect for others (*ottappam-31*). I find these translations preferable to the more common "moral shame" and "moral dread," for obvious reasons—such English words carry with them unfortunate baggage that has no place in Buddhist psychology. The first of these constitutes an indwelling conscience, by means of which we know for ourselves whether or not an action we are doing or are going to do is appropriate. The second term is more of a social or interpersonal version of conscience. As mammals I think we have adaptive instincts for empathy toward other members of the group, and reflexively understand whether we are thinking, speaking or acting within or outside the social norm. These two factors, self respect and respect for others, are called guardians because they are always operative in all wholesome states, while there opposites, lack of self respect (*ahirikam-15*) and lack of respect for others (*anottappam-16*) are present in every single unwholesome state.

Next, we have faith (*saddhā-28*) always co-arising with mindfulness. Every moment of mindfulness is also a moment of confidence or trust; it is not a shaky or tentative state of mind, and is the antithesis of unwholesome doubt (*vicikicchā-27*). There remains only to consider a group of six associated factors, each referring to two mental factors (numbers *35-46*. These terms can be taken almost as adjectives of mindfulness: tranquility, lightness, malleability, wieldiness, proficiency, and rectitude. Experientially, these qualities can serve as useful indicators to when true mindfulness is manifesting. If you are regarding an object of experience during meditation with any restlessness, for example, or with heaviness, or with rigidity, you can be sure that mindfulness is not present. By the same token, mindfulness is sure to be present when all six of these qualities arise together, each mutually supporting and defining one another. It is all at once a peaceful, buoyant, flexible, effective, capable and upright state of mind.

The Cultivation of Mindfulness

With all that has been said it may seem that mindfulness is a rare occurrence, arising only under the most exotic of conditions. In fact, however, it is something we all experience often in one context or another. The cultivation of mindfulness as a meditation practice entails coming to know it when we see it, and learning how to develop it. The Pali word for development is *bhāvanā*, which simply means "causing to be." The core meditation text *Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness* (*Satipatthāna Sutta*) offers simple instructions on how to do this:

> As mindfulness is internally present one is aware: "Mindfulness is internally present in me." As mindfulness is not internally present one is aware: "Mindfulness is not internally present in me." As the arising of

> unarisen mindfulness occurs, one is aware of that. As the arisen mindfulness is developed and brought to fulfillment, one is aware of that. (M 10:42)

In mindfulness meditation we work to create the conditions favorable to the arising of mindfulness, relaxing the body and the mind, focusing the attention carefully but gently on a particular aspect of experience, while producing sufficient energy to remain alert without losing a sense of ease and tranquility. Under such conditions, properly sustained, mindfulness will emerge as if by some grace of the natural world, as if it were a gift of clarity from our deepest psyche to the turbid shallows of our mind. When it does, we gradually learn how to hold ourselves so that it lingers, to relocate or re-enact it when it fades, and to consistently water its roots and weed its soil so that it can blossom into a lovely and sustainable habit of heart and mind.

As much as the scientific community currently enthralled with mindfulness would like to bracket the ethical component of the Buddhist tradition to focus their studies on the technology of meditation, we can see from this Abhidhamma treatment of the subject that true mindfulness is deeply and inextricably embedded in the notion of wholesomeness. Although the requisite brain science has yet to be discovered to demonstrate why, this tradition nonetheless declares, based entirely on its phenomenological investigations, that when the mind is engaged in an act of harming it is not capable of mindfulness. There can be heightened attention, concentration, and energy when a sniper takes a bead on his target, for example, but as long as the intention is situated in a context of taking life, it will always be under the sway of hatred, delusion, wrong view (*ditthi-19*), or some other of the unwholesome factors. Just as a tree removed from the forest is no longer a tree but a piece of lumber, so also the caring attentiveness of mindfulness, extracted from its matrix of wholesome co-arising factors, degenerates into mere attention.

One final question remains to be asked: As we practice the true development of mindfulness, are we also cultivating wisdom? If meditation (*samādhi*) is the bridge between integrity (*sīla*) on one hand and wisdom (*paññā*) on the other, does mindfulness lead inevitably to wisdom? The discomforting answer to this question is again, no. The Abhidhamma lists wisdom (*paññā-52*) as the last of the mental factors. Wisdom is certainly a wholesome factor, but it is not a universal wholesome factor and so does not arise automatically along with mindfulness and the rest.

Wisdom, understood as seeing things as they really are, is the crucial transformative principle in the Buddhist tradition. Just as you can practice meditation without manifesting mindfulness, so also you can practice mindfulness all you want, but if it is not conjoined with insight (another word for wisdom) it will not in itself bring about a significant change in your understanding. Real transformation comes from uprooting the deeply embedded reflex of projecting ownership upon experience (“this is me, this is mine, this is what I am”), and seeing it instead as an impermanent, impersonal, interdependent arising of phenomena. Cultivating mindfulness is a crucial condition for this to happen, but will not in itself accomplish that end. As one text puts it, mindfulness

is like grabbing a sheath of grain in one hand, while wisdom is like cutting it off with a sickle in the other.

This is hardly the last word on the subject, but I suspect the foregoing analysis raises the bar somewhat on how we use mindfulness as a technical term. Two things at least seem quite clear: there can scarcely be a more noble capability of the mind than mindfulness, and its cultivation must surely be one of the more beneficial things we can do as human beings.