

Third Foundation: Mindfulness of Mind

Here is the first part of the instructions for being mindful of the mind:

“Here one knows a lustful mind to be ‘lustful,’ and a mind without lust to be ‘without lust.’ One knows an angry mind to be ‘angry,’ and a mind without anger to be ‘without anger.’ One knows a deluded mind to be ‘deluded,’ and a mind without delusion to be ‘without delusion’; one knows a contracted mind to be ‘contracted,’ and a distracted mind to be ‘distracted.’”

Notice that what the Buddha asks us to do is very specific. This Satipaṭṭhāna instruction starts out asking us to be aware of either the presence or absence in the mind of what are called “the three unwholesome roots” of greed, hatred, and delusion, known as a group in Pali as the *kilesas*. They are also referred to as the three defilements, three poisons, or the three afflictions. The instruction is to just be aware of their presence or absence. This can be hard in a Western culture where we tend to want to fix something or add on something extra to our commentary, for example: “This is anger, and I shouldn’t be feeling anger”, which of course is aversion of aversion. We end up in an unhelpful cycle of self-judgment.

These obscurations of the natural purity of awareness can be obvious or quite subtle. In Joseph Goldstein's book, Mindfulness, a Practical Guide to Awakening, he suggests that some questions can be very helpful.

The first question might be **“What’s the attitude in the mind right now?”** This can put us in touch with the presence or absence of the three unwholesome roots. (By the way, they are called unwholesome because when acted upon, they can lead to harmful speech or action, or to confusion.) Joseph says, “Often just in asking the question, we can feel the mind relax from a clinging or aversion we hadn’t even realized was there”.

It can be more difficult to notice the absence of an unwholesome root in the mind. Our built-in negativity bias keeps on the lookout for what’s not right. But by noticing the absence or the impermanent nature of these mind states, the Buddha points out that they are visiting states of mind, they are not who we are.

“Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements. The uninstructed worldling does not understand this as it really is; therefore I say that for the uninstructed worldling there is no development of the mind. “Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, and it is freed from adventitious defilements. The instructed noble disciple

understands this as it really is; therefore, I say that for the instructed noble disciple there is development of the mind.”

The next instructions have to do with whether there is enough energy in the mind for it to connect and be present with our experience, or if low energy is making the mind withdraw and contract. The opposite of this is a mind where the energy is unsettled, easily distracted, and restless.

one knows a contracted mind to be 'contracted', and a distracted mind to be 'distracted';

When you look at these states so far, altogether, they align with the list of 'hindrances'. Sensual desire (lust), Anger (ill-will or aversion), contracted mind (sloth/torpor), distracted mind (restlessness and worry), and deluded mind (doubt). The next practice question, which is particularly helpful when we don't know why we are struggling, is: **“What is happening?”** We may find that one of these states is present but not acknowledged. Again, these hindrances may only exist as a subtle background mood throughout our day. Even then, recognizing there is an aversion to 'not knowing' why I feel blah or uninspired, can relieve some of the struggle, in this case, of aversion.

The next set of qualities listed in the sutta have to do with concentration and the qualities of awareness.

One knows a great mind to be 'great', and a narrow mind to be 'narrow'; one knows a surpassable mind to be 'surpassable', and an unsurpassable mind to be 'unsurpassable'; one knows a concentrated mind to be 'concentrated', and an unconcentrated mind to be 'unconcentrated';

About this, Joseph says:

Great and narrow refer to how far the concentration pervades. For example, in the brahmavihāra practices of love and compassion, they refer to whether we are radiating these feelings toward all beings or just one person. Surpassable and unsurpassable refer to the level of absorption and whether the higher levels are attainable or not. ... The third pair, concentrated and unconcentrated, emphasizes being mindful of whether stable one-pointedness in both samatha (concentration) and vipassanā (insight) meditation is present or not.

The last part of the instruction in this third Satipaṭṭhāna is:

One knows a liberated mind to be 'liberated', and an unliberated mind to be 'unliberated.'

While this could refer to complete liberation, a full awakening, the more practical aspect of this instruction is to notice the small moments of ease when we are not being bound by desire, or the aversions of fear or irritation.

Practices:

- Practice checking in, throughout the day, or during formal practice using one of the two practice questions: **What is my attitude right now?** Or **What is happening right now?**
- When there is a strong aversion or a strong desire that rises up in the mind, see if you can stay with it for its duration. Can you see it start to fade? Can you feel what the mind and body are like after it has passed? Try working with a desire where you take no action to satisfy the urge. For example, you felt like taking a nap, but you didn't do it. This is called "urge surfing". If it feels too hard to stay with it the whole time, set a reminder to check in later. What does the cessation of that desire feel like?
- Review the part that occurs after each section in the sutta that Anālayo calls "The Refrain". What does it mean when we apply it to the Satipaṭṭhāna of the mind? What does "One abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in regard to the mind" mean? What does it mean to establish bare attention in the mind? And to abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world?