

## The Buddha's Teachings on Mindfulness

By Gil Fronsdal

What should be done for his disciples out of compassion by a Teacher who seeks their welfare and has compassion for them, that I have done for you, Ānanda. There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate, Ānānda, do not delay, or else you will regret it later. This is my instruction to you. (MN 152.18)

The image that most universally represents Buddhism is that of the Buddha meditating. Without the Buddha's awakening, there would be no Buddhism, and without meditation, there would be no awakening. Even as an awakened being, the Buddha is often depicted as spending a good portion of his days in meditation, i.e., doing the "day's abiding" (e.g. MN 119.2). Eleven discourses report that his monastic disciples also spent the day meditating, waiting until the evening to visit the Buddha or other monks (e.g. MN 62).

The *Middle Length Discourses* seems to have a greater focus on meditation than any of the other four primary *nikāyas* (collections of suttas). The collection contains some of the most important and complete meditation instructions in the Pāli canon. Among the best known and most influential are the "Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness" (MN 10) and the "Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing" (MN 118).

One of the words most words closely connected to the Buddha's meditation is *sati*, which is usually translated as "mindfulness." But it may not be the best choice; the modern Western meanings of "mindfulness" may not be a good match for how *sati* is used in the suttas. In the following discussion, I will begin by avoiding using "mindfulness" and instead relying on the Pali word *sati* so we can better look at its meaning in a fresh way.

In the *Middle Length Discourses* the concept of *sati* is used in two broad, overlapping ways: the mental faculty of *sati*, and the practice of *sati*. The distinct role in the course of meditation of these two aspects of *sati* is often obscured because it is easy to conflate them.

## The Mental Faculty of *Sati*

As a mental faculty, *sati* is one of the five mental faculties, or *indriyas*. Literally meaning “belonging to Indra,” the ruler of the Vedic gods, *indriya* is used in the *Middle Length Discourses* to refer to various human capacities that, like Indra, have some power over their sphere of influence. The five mental faculties are faith, energy, *sati*, concentration, and wisdom (MN 26.15).<sup>1</sup>

To begin to understand the faculty of *sati*, it is useful to know that as a cognate of the verb *sarati*, meaning ‘to remember’, *sati* is associated with memory. What remembering and mindfulness have in common is the mental activity of holding something in awareness. This is most explicit in such passages as:

[One] possesses the highest *sati* and skill; [one] recalls and recollects what was done long ago and spoken long ago (MN 53.16).<sup>2</sup>

In the note to this passage Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi explain the relationship between mindfulness and memory by stating that “keen attentiveness to the present forms the basis for an accurate memory of the past” (n. 560). This is illustrated in the Buddha’s recollection (*anu-[s]-sati*) of his past lives while in a meditative state (MN 4.27) where *sati* involves ‘bringing to mind’ what happened long ago.

As is true with many terms, the discourses do not provide a detailed definition or explanation for the faculty of *sati*. Therefore to understand what this faculty is we have to rely on how the word is used in the suttas.

Overall the discourses give the impression that *sati* is an important faculty that a person possesses but not a mental activity a person intentionally engages in. the word *sati*, by itself, is rarely used with verbs that describe an intentional mental activity. Rather, *sati* is described as a state or faculty that one has or that is present in some way:

- One ‘**possesses**’ (*samannāgata*) *sati* (MN 27.17)
- One is ‘**endowed**’ with *sati* (*satīmata*; MN 56.29)

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<sup>1</sup> The *Middle Length Discourses* contains a list of faculties which could be referred to as ‘sensing faculties’, i.e.

<sup>2</sup> See also, MN 104.16 where Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi translate *sati* as ‘memory’.

- One has '**purity**' (*pārisuddhi*) of *sati* (MN 59.10)
- One is '**established**' (*upaṭṭhita*) in *sati* (MN 4.17)
- One '**abides**' (*viharati*) in *sati* (MN 38.30)

In the first three of these statements *sati* is something one has. In the last two it is a state within which one is. Nowhere in the text does the Buddha specifically instruct others to actively apply or do *sati*. However, there is a passage where the Buddha says he “arouses *sati*” in his monastic disciples (MN 21.7). While this may mean he instructs them to do *sati*, it could also mean that he evokes a state of *sati* in them.

Overall the discourses give the impression that *sati* is an important faculty that a person possesses but is not a mental activity a person intentionally engages in. In this sense the faculty of *sati* may be similar to the faculty of faith: while one can have faith and one can develop faith, faith is not something one does. The words *sati* and *saddhā* (faith) are both nouns referring to faculties one possesses or can be established in, not an activity one actively practices.

So when the Buddha instructs monastics to make effort to develop *sati* or to evaluate whether it is developed in them (MN 151.12), he is not telling them to engage in the activity of *sati*, rather he is telling them to engage in activities that strengthen the faculty of *sati*. This is why the Buddha explains the development of *sati* through activities other than *sati* itself. In other words *sati* is a result of other practices. This is most clearly evident in those passages where the Buddha first provides a list of practices to do and then explains that those practices are conducive to having *sati* (MN 107.3-11).

Given that the most common usage of the word *sati* is in the descriptions of the third and fourth *jhāna*, advanced states of meditative absorption, to understand what *sati* might be we also need to understand it in this context. In neither of these two meditative states is a person actively doing or applying mindfulness. Instead, *sati* is simply present.

Because of this, a better translation for *sati* than “mindfulness” might be “awareness”—a

word I associate with a state of receptive attentiveness not requiring self-conscious effort. In this sense, “awareness” generally fits the various ways *sati* is used in the suttas better than does “mindfulness.” This also means that traditionally *sati* had a different meaning than how mindfulness is usually taught today, when it is used more as an active practice of directed attention; for example, when one chooses to be mindful of something or when one actively recognizes that which one is aware.

The overall impression from the suttas is that the faculty of *sati* as a capacity for being aware is an important mental state that is evoked or developed through particular practices. Because they set up or establish awareness, these practices can be called “practices of *sati*,” “awareness practices,” or “practices for establishing awareness.”

### The Practice of *Sati*

If we look at the teachings of the Buddha, we see that the practice of *sati* involves more than the particular faculty of *sati*; it includes a combination of practices and faculties.

The distinction between the faculty of *sati* and practice of *sati* can be illustrated with an analogy. Someone who has the ability to walk may walk in many different ways. One way might be to train to go for a long hike, in which case the person’s practice of walking develops his or her faculty of walking: one’s ability to walk improves. The person’s walking practice may vary in frequency and intensity; it may involve walking fast and far enough to build stamina and strength. It may involve choosing to alternate between walking in hills and walking on flat land. In a similar way we have the ability to be aware. Particular forms of practice that involve more than simply being aware can strengthen this ability. This can include frequent and ardent attentional exercises, actively letting go of thoughts that obscure present moment awareness, and choosing helpful areas of life to focus attention.

The practice of Right Sati, the seventh factor in the Eightfold Path, is described accordingly:

What, friends, is right mindfulness? Here a monk abides contemplating the body as body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides

contemplating mind states as mind states, ardent fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 141.30)

Here *sati* practice involves contemplating four particular areas of experience, the body, feelings, mind states, and mind-objects. Second, it includes being ardent, fully aware and mindful. Third, it requires having “put away covetousness and grief for the world.”

In this quote, which is my translation, the word “awareness” serves as the translation of *sati*. Most English translations of this passage render *sati* as “mindfulness.” Regardless of how it is translated, the word is used to characterize how to practice observing. In other words, *sati* is not a practice; rather it is a manner of how to practice.

Other descriptions of the practice of Right *Sati* also explain it in terms other than mindfulness. In MN 117.9, for example, Right Sati is described as: “Mindfully one abandons wrong view, mindfully one enters upon and abides in right view: this is one’s right *sati*.” Here the activity associated with Right *Sati* is abandoning and entering. As an adverb, ‘mindfully’ characterizes abandoning and entering, it is not an activity itself. In this example, the practice of Right *Sati* is combined with the specific and active practices of abandoning wrong view and substituting it with right view. Here and elsewhere Right Sati is described by a set of activities or practices other than intentionally utilizing the faculty of mindfulness.

The “Discourse on Mindfulness of the Body” (MN 119) describes *sati* with the following passage:

As he abides thus vigilant, ardent, and resolute, his memories and intentions based on the household life are abandoned; with their abandoning his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. This is how a bhikkhu develops *sati* of the body. (MN 119.4)

Here too *sati* is described as involving a set of other qualities and practices. It does not say that having these qualities and practices are the same as *sati* of the body, rather it says they are the way that *sati* of the body is developed. Again, *sati* is a result of particular activities.

The Buddha's most important teachings on *sati* are found in a text popularly called the "Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness" (MN 10). The text contains no instructions to actively practice mindfulness or to direct mindfulness. In fact, given that *sati* is in the title of the text, the word *sati* is, surprisingly, mostly absent in the discourse. Instead of providing instructions in "doing" mindfulness, the text instructs us to do such intentional activities as observe, understand, relax, clearly comprehend, and review.

This gets more interesting when we consider the phrase commonly translated as "foundations of mindfulness": *satipaṭṭhāna*. While *sati* can mean "awareness," it is not clear what *paṭṭhāna* means. One of the primary choices is "establishing." *Satipaṭṭhāna* thereby would be "establishing awareness," and the full title of the text could be the "Discourse on Establishing Awareness." The instruction given in the text is how to establish a heightened attentiveness or wakefulness through a variety of different practices, all of which should be practiced with ardency, clear comprehension, and awareness.

If *sati* is best translated as "awareness," then *sampajañña*, the Pali word for "clear comprehension," is a better fit for the English word "mindfulness." This is because in contemporary mindfulness teaching "mindfulness" often involves clearly knowing what one is aware of. That is, when one is mindful, one clearly comprehends whatever is the focus of attention. In other words, in modern teachings, "mindfulness" often corresponds to the Buddhist concept of *sampajañña*, not *sati*.

When this clear comprehension / mindfulness (*sampajañña*), is combined with ardency, awareness (*sati*), and the observation of body, feeling tones, mind states, and mind objects, this set of practices can still be known as "mindfulness practice." However, the designation comes from my proposed translation of *sampajañña*, not that of *sati*.

Regardless of how we translate the ancient Buddhist words, the purpose of mindfulness practice is to establish a strong degree of awareness. This, in turn, can lead to a state that

the “Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness” (MN 10) describes as “abiding independent, not clinging to anything in the world.” When awareness becomes strong and stable one can enter and abide in it in such a way that one can find freedom from what is known. The “Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness” ends by stating:

This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for overcoming sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of distress and grief, for the attainment of the practice, for the realization of *Nibbāna*— namely, the four ways of establishing awareness.