

## Mindfulness (*sati*) and Bare Attention

The practice of 'mindfulness' has been secularized in the west. Its entry point was health care ( MBSR programme of Jon Kabat Zinn) and slowly it seeped into education, sports, corporate sector, prison reform, police and even military. It is a welcome assimilation of the core practice of Buddha's meditation instructions. But there is a catch. Mindfulness has become synonymous with 'bare attention' - carefully observing whatever is happening, without any judgement or reaction. The famous *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* is often cited as the reference. Ajahn Brahm, in his own inimitable way, constructed a story to demonstrate the perils of this interpretation:

For example, suppose you were a wealthy person with a gatekeeper guarding your mansion. One evening, before going to the Buddhist Temple to practise meditation, you tell the gatekeeper to be mindful of burglars. When you return home, your loving kindness suddenly vanishes when you find your house has been burgled. "Didn't I tell you to be mindful?", you scream at the gatekeeper. "But I was mindful", pleads the gatekeeper. "I gave attention to the burglars as they broke in, and I was clearly attentive as they walked out with your digital T.V. and state-of-the-art C.D. system. I mindfully watched them go in several times, and my mind did not wander as I observed them going out with all your antique furniture and priceless jewellery💎"

Would you be happy with such a gatekeeper's explanation of mindfulness? A wise gatekeeper knows that mindfulness is more than bare attention. A wise gatekeeper has to remember the instructions and perform them with diligence. If he sees a thief trying to break in then he must stop the burglar, or else call in the police.

The point he makes is that there are other aspects of the teachings of the Buddha which cannot be overlooked. Thus in the noble eight fold path mindfulness (*sammā sati*) is preceded by right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), which essentially implies 'resisting evil' – not allowing unwholesome states of mind to enter from outside, working to remove those unwholesome states that arise from within and nurturing wholesome states. If one keeps this in mind, "mindfulness" cannot be used in the service of mammon, or as a tool to increase the killing potential of soldiers; but its pared version of bare attention places no such restrictions.

There is a clear distinction made between the two in *Pāli* canon- in *Abhidhamma*. Bare attention is *manasikāra*. It is a 'universal' mental factor which is always present in every *citta*. It is ethically variable – so it adopts the hues of the *citta* in which it is present. Thus it is unwholesome in unwholesome *citta* and wholesome in wholesome [ *abhidhamma* prefers the word beautiful] *citta*. Mindfulness is *sati*, which is a universal beautiful mental factor. It can be present **only** in beautiful *citta*. And it doesn't arise in isolation. It arises along with other eighteen beautiful factors in all beautiful *cittas*. These eighteen mental factors include faith [*saddhā*], moral shame and dread [ *hiri , ottappam*], non-greed [*alobho*], non-hatred [ *adoso*], equanimity [ *tatramajjhataṭṭā*], uprightness [ *cittujjukatā* ], and various kinds of flexibility and tranquillity of the mind and body.

Thus during our meditation practice mindfulness is present only when all other eighteen factors are there, otherwise we are just being attentive, only *manasikāra* is present. By definition, mindfulness is not present when we practice with a hidden agenda to increase profits, or to increase our capacity to harm the 'enemies'.

A prerequisite to 'successful' practice of mindfulness is a strong ethical base. Bare attention has no such pre-requisite. When we study the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* carefully, we note that besides mindful observation, it suggests many

**'trainings'** : *'Sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī'ti sikkhati , 'sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī'ti sikkhati. 'Passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī'ti sikkhati, 'passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī'ti sikkhati ;*

**'reflections'** : *imameva kāyaṃ uddhaṃ pādatalā adho kesamatthakā tacapariyantaṃ pūraṃ nānappakārassa asucino paccavekkhati ; imameva kāyaṃ yathāṭṭhitāṃ yathāpaṇihitaṃ dhātuso paccavekkhati ;*

and **'investigations'** : *yathā ca anuppannassa kāmacchandassa uppādo hoti tañca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa kāmacchandassa pahānaṃ hoti tañca pajānāti, yathā ca pahīnassa kāmacchandassa āyatim anuppādo hoti tañca pajānāti; yathā ca anuppannassa saṃyojanassa uppādo hoti tañca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa saṃyojanassa pahānaṃ hoti tañca pajānāti, yathā ca pahīnassa saṃyojanassa āyatim anuppādo hoti tañca pajānāti.*

And the last, and the longest, section of the sutta [ *saccapabbam* ] suggests comprehensive analysis of the experiences in the light of the noble eight fold path.

Thus cultivation of mindfulness is not synonymous with the practice of 'bare attention'. To put it in mathematical jargon, non-reactive attention is a necessary condition for mindfulness, but not sufficient.