The Four Applications of Mindfulness

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Lesson 1:
An Introduction to the
Four Applications of Mindfulness

Reading:
*Tibetan Buddhism from the Ground Up*
“Four Applications of Mindfulness,” pages 125-137
TIBETAN BUDDHISM
FROM THE GROUND UP

A Practical Approach
for Modern Life

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with STEVEN WILHELM
The Role of Insight

To uproot ignorance, the fundamental affliction of the mind, one needs insight into the nature of reality. In Sanskrit this is called *vipaśyanā*. Its basis is a stable mind, and the basis of that is moral discipline.

There are many forms of *vipaśyanā*, or insight meditation. Here we will explore a discipline known as the close application of mindfulness (known as *satipaṭṭhāna* in the Pali language). One can fruitfully engage in this practice without having attained meditative quiescence, but in order for this practice to be fully effective, one does need to have a stable mind. Without a stable mind one may gain some flashes of insight from one’s *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, but these will not have the full transformative effect that occurs with meditative quiescence.

If we are to overcome the ignorance that lies at the root of other mental distortions, we need to enter into the experience of insight again and again, saturating the mind. As we become more experienced with insight into the true nature of reality, our ignorance will be swept away just as darkness is swept away by light.

Mindfulness of the Body

The path of *satipaṭṭhāna*, or close application of mindfulness, is one of the great paths to enlightenment. But unhappily, some adherents of this path believe it is the only way, and present it as if it were so. But in fact, that is not what the Buddha said. The word he used to describe this mindfulness training is *ekayāna*; eka means “one,” yāna
means “way.” Consequently, ekayāna means “one way,” not that it is “the only way.”

This question is discussed in early Theravāda commentaries to the Buddha’s discourse on the close application of mindfulness. Various interpretations of the word ekayāna are given. One interpretation is that it goes “only to nirvāṇa.” Another interpretation is that it is a “solitary path” that must be trodden by oneself, not by anyone else. Neither the Buddha, nor these authoritative commentaries, indicate it is the “sole way” to liberation.²⁰

The four applications of mindfulness concern mindfulness directed to four types of phenomena: the body, feelings, the mind, and other events, both mental and physical. Like most Buddhist practices, mindfulness training starts with the grossest, easiest object of practice, and then progresses to the most subtle, which is also the most difficult. In this case among the four objects we are going to consider—the body, the feelings, the mind, and other events—the body is the grossest. It makes good sense to start out with practices that are more basic, and objects of meditation that are relatively gross, for when we begin practice our minds are at their grossest. As we progress our minds become more refined, more subtle, and we are in a position to attend to objects that are more subtle.

The major theme in all four mindfulness practices is to distinguish more and more clearly between our conceptual projections upon reality, and what reality itself presents to us. This turns out to be a very formidable project. As we start, we find the role of our conceptual projection is deeply ingrained, much of it occurring either unconsciously or only semiconsciously.

Because conceptualization is largely semiconscious, we usually are not aware that this compulsive and semiconscious interpretation is taking place. Instead, we tend to assume we are not projecting anything on reality at all, and that our basic sense of things is valid. There can be a lot of delusion in that. The application of mindfulness takes a mental scalpel created by quieting the mind,
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and uses this scalpel to slice through conceptual projections. In doing so we penetrate into the essential reality that is present in the absence of conceptual projections.

As the Buddha taught this practice, he said to first sit down and simply follow the breath. One first gets into a comfortable position, brings one’s awareness into the present, and stabilizes it by following the in-breath and the out-breath. The emphasis here, as it often is in Buddhism, is on developing a fine tool. Just as in science one must develop finely honed tools to make reliable, precise measurements, so in contemplative practice one must hone the tool of one’s awareness to understand the nature of reality.

The practice starts quite simply, with posture. The Buddha spoke of four simple postures we already engage in: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. The point of applying mindfulness to these is to engage our awareness and direct it toward our posture. It is often the case that whatever we are doing, be it sitting, walking, standing, or lying, the mind is frequently disengaged from the immediate reality and is instead absorbed in compulsive conceptualization about the future or past. While we are walking, we think about arriving, and when we arrive, we think about leaving. When we are eating, we think about the dishes, and as we do the dishes, we think about watching television.

This is a weird way to run a mind. We are not connected with the present situation, but we are always thinking about something else. Too often we are consumed with anxiety and cravings, regrets about the past and anticipation for the future, completely missing the crisp simplicity of the moment.

A very important mindfulness practice is based on one of the most fundamental human activities: walking. We are accustomed to walking along busily, thinking ahead to where we are going and forgetting where we are. Our eyes wander everywhere, and our minds are like eggs being scrambled, flipping from one thing to another. But another possibility is to pull our awareness out of this mesh of
compulsive, exhausting ideation, and instead bring it to the soles of our feet. This allows us to be aware of the feet rising and falling, to be aware of the contact with the earth.

It can help to slow the walking down. In this practice one walks very slowly and deliberately, paying close attention to each moment. First the foot is rising, rising, rising; then, ever so slowly, it is placing, placing, placing. One is aware of the tactile sensations of the body, and the sensations of the soles of the feet on the ground. It grounds one, literally and metaphorically. It brings one’s awareness into the present.

This may sound boring, but that is only because we are so used to not being in the present. If we start doing this well, if we really start calming the mind and bringing it into the body, we find it turns out to be fascinating.

Imagine you are sitting totally motionless, and then, when you are firmly in the present, you do something that is quite extraordinary—you raise your hand! As you learn to do this mindfully, you find this simple activity has many parts. There is an intention, a mental event, and somehow this results in the hand moving, a physical event. How do they connect? How did this happen? It becomes an absorbing process.

One central aspect of this practice is mindfulness, which in this context means maintaining a continuity of awareness of one’s chosen object. Another is vigilance, which refers here to a keen and intelligent examination of events.

The Nature of the Self

Now let us consider how this finely honed tool, this mindfulness, can generate insight into the essential question of the spiritual path: What is the nature of the self?

A famous commentary by Buddhaghosa sheds light on this. Speaking of physical motion, he says:
A living being goes, a living being stands...but truly, there is no living being going or standing. This talk of a living being going and standing is similar to speech in the following way: A cart goes, a cart stands.  

The point he is raising here is exactly what makes the cart go or not go, the living being go or not go. What is the source of their motion, or, looked at on a deeper level, what is the source of the volition that makes them move? What is this self from which motion apparently comes?

It is evidently true that the cart is moved by something, perhaps a bull, a harness attaching the bull to the cart, maybe a driver to direct the bull. On a subtler level, the event of a living being standing and going also has causes and conditions. In fact, movement takes place as a result of complex interactions of external and internal events. Nowhere does one find an autonomous self that takes charge and says, “I am going to move the hand,” and then it moves. This, of course, is counter to our gut sense of things, our inherent sense that each of us is a self-sufficient “I” who is in charge of our behavior. However, through mindfulness practice we can develop great insight into the nature of selflessness or the noninherent existence of the “I.”

To do this, we simply start to investigate. Starting from the gross and moving to the subtle, we focus the finely tuned tool of awareness on the components of action, and analyze them. Gazing upon the physical and mental causes of motion, we find that nowhere is there any evidence of an inherent “my-ness,” or of an essential self, anywhere in the body, the flesh, the bones, or the marrow.

Mindfulness of Feelings

The feelings are the second object for the application of mindfulness. A step more subtle than identification with the body, identification with feelings can take us on a roller coaster of feeling good and feeling bad that can be very difficult to penetrate.
While the word “feelings” is used in many ways in English, referring to emotions as well as tactile sensations, in Buddhism it has a more restricted meaning, captured in the Sanskrit word *vedanā*. This word refers simply to the feelings of pleasure, pain, and indifference, with which we can so easily identify ourselves. This is a very powerful point, because if we identify with our body, certainly it is equally true we identify with our feelings.

When unhappiness arises, we respond with the thoughts, “I am unhappy, I am depressed, I am so discouraged.” And when happiness arises it is much the same: “I am happy! I’m feeling great!” The key is that none of these feelings are in fact “I.” Like the movements of the body they arise from causes and conditions, and these are ever-changing.

The feelings we identify with are rooted in propensities unique to ourselves. If someone praises me in a way that fits my propensities I will feel happy, while someone else’s praise might cause me to react indifferently. On the negative side, the same goes for blame and feelings of sadness. In either case, the feelings are simply one instant within a causal matrix of events.

The problem with feelings is that we identify with them so strongly. We almost never cut through the conceptual overlay that causes us to regard certain feelings as inherently “our feelings.” In fact, feelings are inherently no one’s. All that is taking place is the arising and passing of feelings, brought about by causes and conditions.

The Buddha spoke of several qualities of feelings, one of the most important being their impermanence. Despair, for example, which can seem so leaden, is in fact an emotion that is in constant flux. Even the heaviest feelings are constantly changing, but this is very difficult to recognize. Identification with depression obscures the fluctuations that are taking place from one moment to the next, replacing them instead with a sense of a homogeneous continuity.

Sometimes things go well, we feel great, and we think, “Now my troubles are over, that was the last hurdle.” Our conceptual mind plays another trick on us, and we think, “As it is now, so it must be
forever.” The same applies to the downside, of course. Sorrow sets in, and the mind becomes negative: “I am really a failure, I will be a failure next year, in fact my whole life is a failure.” Again, these feelings are arising in the moment, and the mind is fixing on that moment in a deluded way.

The problem with attachment to feelings, especially if they are hinged upon pleasurable external stimuli, is that everything around us is constantly changing, most of it out of our control. We try to manipulate and control our immediate environment, but even our own body is to a significant degree beyond our control. Our mind, too, is often out of our control.

Grasping onto pleasurable feelings is not bad in the sense of being evil, but rather in the sense that it is not effective. As the well-known Burmese Buddhist teacher Goenka once said, “Grasping at things can yield only one of two results: either the thing you are grasping at disappears, or you yourself disappear. It is only a matter of which occurs first.”

**Mindfulness of the Mind**

Mindfulness of the mind is quite different from the practice of meditative quiescence focused on the mind, which was described in chapter 9. That practice is a penetrating and focused look at pure awareness, but this mindfulness practice is instead a meditation on the ways in which the mind works.

Mindfulness of the mind is not a practice to develop stability, but is instead an insight practice. The object of meditation here is the mental states rather than awareness itself.

An important part of this practice is investigating the mind dominated by the three poisons we discussed: ignorance, hatred, and attachment. In this practice the meditator notes and investigates these mind states, with special emphasis on the “tone” of the mind as these states arise.
In normal life, we tend to do quite the opposite. When the mind manifests anger, for instance, we immediately identify with it. I spill a glass of water on my trousers, and without thinking I focus out there on an object, either the glass itself or the person who bumped my elbow and made me spill it, and I become angry. I am identifying with the anger. And if someone should ask me how I am doing, I will say, “I am angry.” I have identified with a mental event that is not I.

Mental events like anger arise out of our own propensities for anger, which are activated by external events. On that level we have no choice, because if we have those propensities and the necessary conditions arise, we will experience anger. We may forget everything we have heard about mindfulness, and the next time anger arises we will simply identify with it. We focus on the object of anger, we think about it, and we act upon it. Everything is predictable and mechanical.

By introducing mindfulness, however, the possibility of choice is presented. We do not identify with the event, but we attend to it mindfully. Considering anger again, we are now faced with a meaningful choice. Being aware, “Aha, the event of anger has arisen again,” we can choose between identifying with the event or being mindful. Do we want to act upon the anger, or do we simply want to observe it? If we have mindfulness we are presented with the choice. We have an option.

Recall Śāntideva’s suggestion that when our minds are dominated by the mental distortions, such as jealousy, contempt, resentment, and sarcasm, we should remain as a block of wood. This does not mean that we should unintelligently suppress or repress those negative feelings. This will only make us sick; it is bad for the heart, for the digestion, for the blood pressure.

The Buddhist alternative is mindfulness. By exercising mindfulness, we may become clearly aware in the presence of harmful mental events taking place. And by being mindful of them, we are not perpetuating them. Anger and other negativities must be “fed” to survive.
Let us say I am angry at Harry, and I want to feed that anger, so I think of all the nasty things he has done. And if this is not enough, I can think of all the nasty things he would do if he had a chance. This keeps the anger going; it can feed the anger for decades.

When Śāntideva suggested we remain as a block of wood when afflictions arise, what he meant was not to feed the anger. Rather than feeding it, we may direct our awareness to the anger itself and be mindful of it so that we do not allow it to dominate our speech or physical behavior.

When the mind is swayed by a mental distortion it is dysfunctional, like a sprained wrist. When the mind is dysfunctional, we can let it heal a bit, and then act. This can prevent a lot of problems, and can solve others that need not have arisen in the first place.

Mindfulness of Events

The most subtle of these practices, mindfulness of events, encompasses all we have discussed above. We have proceeded here from the gross to the subtle, from mindfulness of the body, to mindfulness of feelings, to mindfulness of mind states. In each of these practices the emphasis has been on close inspection, a direct application of attention on the theme we started out with.

That theme, you may recall, is whether or not there is a substantial self, or ego, to be found within the body, feelings, or mind states. We start with the body, trying to see if there is a substantial ego, a self, hidden in there somewhere. Then we move on to the feelings, because we do tend to identify with them at least as strongly. As we inspect the feelings moment by moment, the questions are much the same: Is there an “I” in there? Is there an agent? Is there an entity that feels, apart from the feelings themselves? We investigate and we investigate, and all we see are mere events, arising and passing.

Close inspection of the third stage, the mind, yields a similar result. By directing the awareness to the nature of the mind itself, the
mental events, and the mind with its mental distortions, we find the same thing; that is, mental events arising and passing. Even awareness itself is arising and passing, without any personal identity. Awareness has no intrinsic identity. It is just awareness. And mental distortions have no identity either; they are just mental distortions.

At this point a critical observer may protest, saying, “If you want to find the self, investigate who is doing the looking. It is futile to look for a flashlight in a pitch-black room with that same flashlight, and in the same way, the fact that you cannot find the self in the body, feelings, or mind does not mean it is not there. There is a self and that self is doing the looking and the meditating.”

Buddhism responds to this by asserting that while we are born with a natural, unlearned sense of intrinsic self, that does not mean such a self actually exists. We think, “I will, therefore I am. I intend, therefore I am. I meditate, therefore I am.” This sense that things flow from me, that thoughts flow from me, is associated with this inborn sense of personal identity.

We look at someone who is repugnant, and we somehow feel it is the person himself gushing forth repugnance. We feel there is a source for all the qualities we identify a person with, and that the source is the person behind the scene, the self, the “I” that is in charge.

We have an inborn sense there is an autonomous self in control. This self, we believe, is the one making things coherent, making any one of us a human being. And without this self, one might think, everything would fall apart and there would be no person at all.

This can be checked, not by looking for the self, but by observing the interactions of the body, feelings, mental states, and other events. It is like a company where the workers are told the factory would shut down if there were no outside owner overseeing them. As a worker one might believe that, until one starts analyzing the individual connections. And then one can see that the interrelationships among the workers continue to function without the
owner, and the company continues to operate. The workers, acting together, manage themselves.

When the mind is stabilized, it is possible to withdraw the sense of an ego controlling the body and mind, and simply enter a witnessing mode of awareness. And in that state we find that mental and physical behavior occurs only in relation to other events; it does not need a controlling ego. All the elements of the body-mind system interact as coherent dependently related events and, in fact, there is no room for an autonomous ego at all.

Mindfulness covers a wide range of events, generating insight about how all of them interrelate. The events we investigate include all the physical events of the body and things external to the body; all the feelings and mental formations, and finally, awareness itself. And the revelation from all of this is that there is no autonomous self coordinating these events, but rather a complex set of interrelationships that operate on their own, without a single, external manager.

Again and again the Buddha said, when discussing this, that we should check this out with our own experience. We should gain insight, and then apply this in our experience with others. Sometimes we can do this perceptually, by observing other people’s behavior. But when we are considering mind states this is not normally possible, and so we must inferentially extrapolate from our own experience. This is done by reflecting, “As this arises in my experience, so it likely occurs in the experience of others.” The process is similar to the one we explored in the practice of loving kindness, where we started by generating loving kindness toward ourselves, then extended that to other beings.

Three Themes

There are three themes the Buddha emphasized strongly for these insight practices: impermanence, dissatisfaction (suffering), and identitylessness.
Impermanence is understood only when we saturate our minds with the fluctuating, transient nature of all conditioned phenomena. Why is this so important? It is crucial because so much of what we do and think in life is founded on quite the opposite premise: that things are static, and can be made to stay the way we want them to be.

A key problem in life is that we tend to reify things, making them seem permanent and stable when in fact they are not. We enter into relationships, we acquire things, and we say, “Ah, here lies my happiness.” In doing this, we suppress the transient nature of the experienced world. It is one thing to know this intellectually, but quite another to experience it moment by moment, and to adapt our way of life accordingly. By recognizing our attachments to these events, to these people, we can cut through this false sense of permanence and replace it with a deeper insight into reality.

Dissatisfaction (suffering) is the second theme, also called duḥkha. The emphasis here, as discussed previously, is to recognize the reality of our lives. A common mistake is to hinge our entire well-being on pleasant stimuli from the outside—on a house, a family, a spouse, a child—all situations that are subject to change at every moment. We grasp at these things urgently as if they will support us, but they will not. Instead they will inevitably change, and if we invest our well-being in them with attachment, we will experience nothing but anxiety as those changes affect us. That is suffering, not because the situation is wrong, but because we seek an enduring basis for well-being in events that do not endure.

The last is identitylessness, the lack of an intrinsic self. This is crucial because the opposite, grasping at an intrinsic self, is the confusion posited as the fundamental mental distortion, the root from which all other afflictions arise.

All of the above are fundamental Buddhist teachings. Their major emphasis is on healing the individual, on bringing about greater sanity for the individual. Let us now explore in the following
chapters the Mahāyāna practices that develop these themes, opening deeper dimensions for insight through the integration of wisdom and compassion.