

Mindfulness, Wise Attention and Wisdom Training

Opening the Door
of Our Mind to Freedom



Sayalay Susīlā

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**“Whatever is subject to origination due
to cause is all subject to cessation.”**

***“Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ
sabbaṃ taṃ nirodha-dhamman’ti.”***

(SN 56.11)

About the Author



Venerable Sayalay Susilā is the founder and current Abbess of the Appāmada Vihari Meditation Center (AVMC), in Penang, Malaysia, since 2014.

Sayalay was born in 1963 in Pahang, Malaysia. Sayalay began developing her keen interest in insight meditation while at the University of Science Malaysia, where she obtained a degree in mass communications in 1987. After graduation, Sayalay worked as a high school teacher for a year and a half. Being increasingly

disenchanted with worldly matters and desiring to be dedicated to the practice more than ever, she resigned her post to take up meditation full time for three years.

In 1991, Sayalay ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun in the Burmese tradition at the age of 28, in Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang, Malaysia. Six months after her ordination in 1991, she went to Panditarama Monastery in Myanmar, where she practiced intensively for nearly three years under the guidance of the famous meditation master Venerable U Pandita Sayadaw.

In 1994, wishing to cultivate concentration meditation, Sayalay moved to Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Myanmar. She placed herself under the guidance of the renowned monk Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw, and remained in the forest for 14 years. In addition to an assiduous program of meditation, she also learned the *Abhidhamma*, ancient discourses, and the Pāli language from Pa-Auk Sayadaw. Meanwhile, she became his English-to-Chinese interpreter in Myanmar and abroad.

From 2000, Sayalay started teaching the *Abhidhamma* extensively in various renowned centers internationally, including those in US and Canada, Malaysia, Australia, Singapore, and Taiwan.

In order to deepen her own understanding of the *Dhamma*, Sayalay also practiced different meditation

methods during her stay in Myanmar, including those taught by Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, and Goenka. As a result of both her breadth of exposure and depth of practice of various meditation methods, Sayalay has become an unusually accomplished teacher—one who is able to present the subtleties of the Buddha’s teachings in a simple and direct way. In particular, she presents the most profound division of the teaching, the *Abhidhamma*, in a lucid manner grounded not in pedantic philosophy, but in actual meditation experience.

After leaving Myanmar, Sayalay studied and practiced according to the suttas, putting an emphasis on teaching and practicing the *Satipatthāna*, the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Sayalay has traveled extensively as a meditation and *Abhidhamma* teacher, presenting the *Abhidhamma* and sutta expositions in formal lectures and talks, and has conducted meditation retreats throughout the United States, Canada, Eastern Europe, Russia, Australia, India, China, Indonesia, Singapore, and in her home country of Malaysia. In 2015, Sayalay led the first International Novitiate Program with Venerable Sanghasena held in Ladakh, the region of the Himalayas of northern India.

Sayalay Susīlā has a unique gift to teach and present the Buddha's teachings with profound depth, vividness, directness, precision, and clarity. Her teaching is very much appreciated by her students globally. As an effectively bilingual speaker in both English and Chinese, Sayalay is uniquely able to expound the Dhamma and teach to a wide global audience. In addition, Sayalay is also fluent in Burmese, Hokkien, and Malay.

Sayalay is the author of many books published in both English and Chinese. Her most well-known English book is *Unravelling the Mysteries of Mind and Body through Abhidhamma* 《揭开身心之奥秘》 (second edition, both Chinese and English).

Other books she has published in English include:

1. The Path to Happiness
2. Contemplation of Feeling
3. Dhamma Essence Series
4. Inner Exploration
5. The Nine Attributes of the Buddha
6. Mindfulness of Breathing
7. Moment-to-Moment Practice

Her Chinese publications include:

1. *From this Shore to Far Shore*
《从此岸到彼岸》
2. *The Practical Manual of Abhidhamma*
《阿毗达摩实用手册》

3. *Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma*
《正法初现》
4. *The Development of the Faculties*
《根修习经》
5. *The Nine Attributes of the Buddha*
《佛陀的九种德行》
6. *Contemplation of the Mind*
《洞见心之真相: 念处经之心念处》
7. *The Path to Happiness* 《朝向快乐之道》
8. *Dhamma Essence Series* 《佛法精粹》
9. *Mettā Bhavana* 《慈爱禅》
10. *Paṭṭhāna* 《二十四缘发趣论》
11. *Mangala Sutta* 《吉祥人生》
12. *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta* 《根修习经》

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Introduction

All conditioned phenomena manifest like a dream, like a phantom, like a drop of dew, like a flash of lightning. That is the way to meditate on them, that is the way to see them.

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, sees all physical and mental phenomena of the world, composed of the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness¹—as an illusion.

Conversely, an untaught worldling sees them as pleasurable, permanent, and having an entity or essence. This is because the untrained mind is blinded by the latent defilement of ignorance, thus cannot see through to the truth of physical and mental phenomena. Because of ignorance, we develop strong craving and clinging to the five aggregates, or, in other words, our mind and body. We desire to indulge in the sensual pleasures brought by our mind and body and desperately grasp them as “I” and as “mine.”

¹ The five aggregates: consist of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Form is the material, or the body; while perception, feeling, formations, and consciousness are all constituents of the mind, including emotions, volitions, thoughts, and behaviors.

Delighting in and craving for the five aggregates paves the way for the growth of the future five aggregates, or rebirth (SN 12.1).

With the arising of a new life, a new body and mind are present. A new body ages with time, and in consequence triggers sickness and death. With the mind, one invariably experiences lamentation, sorrow, pain, and despair when facing the vicissitudes of life. Therefore, we can conclude that the whole mass of suffering is triggered by having body and mind. Unfortunately, most people do not see things this way. With distorted perception and views, and with craving, they see the world of mind and body as colorful and joyful.

Nonetheless, it is possible to eliminate craving and to end suffering. The Buddha has pointed out a path that leads us to see the true nature of the world of the five aggregates of clinging, with the three universal characteristics of existence—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and devoid of essence. By following this path, insight knowledge is developed and the darkness of ignorance is dispelled. When the light of wisdom illuminates the true nature of life, we can let go of craving and clinging to mind and body, and eventually reach liberation.

To achieve this goal, our primary task is to clearly comprehend the nature of suffering in the five aggregates of clinging. In his first discourse, known as “Setting the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion,” the Buddha taught what had never been taught before:

“The five aggregates of clinging are the Noble Truth of Suffering. The Noble Truth of Suffering must be known or comprehended.” (SN 56.11)

How do we comprehend the Noble Truth of Suffering? We must first understand what are the five aggregates and then recognize that the five aggregates are the subject of clinging. We further **apply mindfulness, wise attention, and wisdom to them continuously**. Therefore, the five aggregates of clinging become the object of insight meditation. If we repeatedly attend to them wisely, recognize their arising and cessation, and contemplate on their impermanence, the nature of unsatisfactoriness inherent in the five aggregates will be revealed gradually.

When mature wisdom is able to comprehend the nature of the five aggregates to be a heap of suffering—like a tumor, like a dart—we awaken from the delusion, and voluntarily abandon the clinging and grasping to them. Then we would live happily and free from attachment.

1. Mindfulness (*sati*)

Mindfulness is the first quality that needs to be developed. Mindfulness practice is very popular nowadays, especially in the West. The ancient wisdom of the Buddha has inspired the widespread training of mindfulness as a psychotherapeutic method, which is now being used to alleviate the mental stress caused by the fast pace and heavy competition in modern societies, and to treat some mental disorders, especially depression.

Therefore, Fortune 500 giant global enterprises such as Google, Microsoft, Sony, and Apple have all introduced mindfulness workshops to train their employees and to maintain competitive performance. The ability to live in the present moment with mindfulness, in other words, the ability to stay focused on the immediate task, is amongst the top three leadership skills most in demand. In the world of business, these companies are not training their leaders and employees out of faith toward the power of mindfulness to lead to liberation, but based on convincing scientific evidence that it increases productivity and has other mental and physical benefits.

The benefit of mindfulness training can be easily noticed and appreciated by anyone who has had personal experience. Mindfulness brings such advantages as staying calm under pressure in critical moments, and increasing

efficiency at work due to sustained focus on the job. Many problems in the mundane world can be managed and resolved more effectively when the leaders and the employees are more mindful and stay focused.

Some renowned entrepreneurs, including CEOs from Apple and Ford, are practicing mindfulness not only to perform better at work, but also to increase the level of happiness in life.

Clearly, the benefits of mindfulness to the human body and mind are being acknowledged and appreciated by the general public. The society we are living in now is filled with an overload of information and constant distraction from the electronic world. Maybe people are indeed less happy nowadays because we are always being disturbed and pressurized. From this perspective, mindfulness can be applied as an effective tool to help us handle pressure and to increase our level of happiness.

For Buddhists, however, practicing mindfulness is obviously aimed at fulfilling a deeper purpose than simply achieving mundane, worldly happiness. So, **why must a disciple of the Buddha learn mindfulness? And what is mindfulness?**

Herein, I will first explain the meaning of mindfulness, based on the suttas, and then illustrate the purpose of mindfulness training.

Mindfulness / Intenttness or Presence of Mind

In the suttas, mindfulness (*sati*) practice is detailed in the discourse on *Satipaṭṭhāna*—the “Four Foundations of Mindfulness” (MN 10).² We have all heard of the teaching of establishing “*sati*” in the body, in feeling, in the mind, and in the dhamma (mind objects). In this circumstance, a more suitable translation of the Pāli word “*sati*” could be “the intenttness of mind” rather than “mindfulness.”

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha taught *Ānāpānasati* (Mindfulness of Breathing) in the section on Mindfulness of the Body (*Kāyānupassanā*):

“Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he discerns (pajānāti), ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ ...”

The Buddha taught in the section on Mindfulness of Feeling (*Vedanānupassanā*):

“There is the case where a monk, when experiencing an unpleasant feeling, discerns (pajānāti), ‘I am experiencing an unpleasant

² The Four Foundations of Mindfulness refer to the meditation subjects of the body, feeling, the mind, and the dhamma.

feeling.’ When experiencing a pleasant feeling, he discerns, ‘I am experiencing a pleasant feeling.’...”

The Buddha taught in the section on Mindfulness of Mind (*Cittānupassanā*):

*“There is the case where a monk, when the mind has greed, discerns (*pajānāti*), ‘The mind has greed.’ When the mind has aversion, he discerns, ‘The mind has aversion.’...”*

In the sutta quoted above, when talking about establishing “*sati*”—mindfulness or the intentness of mind—of the body, feeling, and the mind, the Buddha used the word “*pajānāti*,” meaning **to discern** or **to comprehend clearly**, the phenomena such as the long breath in and out, the experience of pleasant or unpleasant feeling, the greedy or angry mind, etc.

In Pāli, “*pajānāti*” is not superficial awareness, but clear comprehension, the right knowledge. In other words, the characteristic of “*sati*” implies comprehension of the object clearly and rightly.

Mindfulness: Characteristic, Function and Manifestation

The characteristic of mindfulness

According to the commentary of the sutta, the characteristic, or the pronounced property of mindfulness, is “to sink into the object of focus,” instead of superficial awareness of it. In this context, mindfulness also conveys the meaning of intentness of mind. If you throw a fresh, well-ripened gourd into the river, the gourd sinks under the water instead of floating on top and being carried away by currents. This is the characteristic of *sati*.

There are different levels of mindfulness with intentness of mind. Take mindfulness of breathing for example. Suppose you have been paying attention to your breathing for 30 seconds. In this period of 30 seconds, you are focused on the breathing, nothing else. Your mindfulness abides on the breathing. This is shallow mindfulness with intentness of mind.

A deeper mindfulness with intentness of mind on the breathing is reached after you have been focusing on the breathing for a longer period of time, say 10 minutes. In this period of time, your mind was completely focused on breathing, without the distraction of other random thoughts. Such a concentrated state happens in daily life as well. Once, when I was in New York, I was interviewed by a journalist. During the interview, we talked about the state

of meditation. The journalist told me that once when he was running a Marathon, after he'd continuously been running for over two hours, he eventually reached a state of totally forgetting about himself. His mind was purely engaged with the action of running. It was as if nobody was running, the running person disappeared, only running was there at every single moment. He told me that this was an amazing experience for him, one he had never had before, nor had he expected such an experience would happen to him. His description is an example of deeper mindfulness with intentness of mind on the object of focus.

An even deeper mindfulness with intentness of mind can be reached with continuous right effort. With steady and powerful mindfulness, the mind can be absorbed in the breathing for more than 30 minutes without any intruding thoughts. The mind sinks in and with the breathing, and is totally oblivious of the surroundings as well as the body. In this way, the mindfulness has reached the state of access concentration (*Upacāra Samadhi*).³

The function of mindfulness

The function, or the role, of mindfulness is “not forgetting the object of focus.”

³ This is the reason why the training in concentration (*Samatha*) includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (in the Noble Eightfold Path and the Threefold Training).

Why are we forgetful every now and then? In daily life, we all have had the experience: Where is my phone? Where are my glasses? We forget where we put things. Why do we have such problems? That's because our mind was restless and not engaged at that moment when we put down the phone or the glasses. If our mind was restless and not aware of what we were doing at that moment, the action does not leave a clear imprint in the mind, therefore the memory of that event would be dim, too dim to be recalled in the future. When time lapses, no matter how hard we try to recollect where we put our glasses, we won't succeed.

Conversely, if our mind is present when we put the phone down, and does not allow thoughts to run here and there like a monkey, this moment of mindfulness would leave a vivid imprint in our mind. We would remember quickly where we put it whenever we need the phone.

Therefore, to develop deep concentration during mindfulness of breathing meditation, one has to be mindful of the in-breath and out-breath continuously so as not to lose the object of the breath; when the mind stays focused, the mind will sink into the object of in-breath and out-breath clearly.

The manifestation of mindfulness

The manifestation of mindfulness is the state of directly facing the object of focus, or observing the object face to face.

For example, when pain arises in your body, if your mind comes face to face with the pain, and directly observes it, then you are mindful. On the other hand, if your mind gets agitated by the bodily pain and reacts to it, and fails to face the object—the pain—directly, you have lost your mindfulness.

Mindfulness Comprehends the Object of Focus Clearly

It is necessary to distinguish “to be aware” of phenomena on a superficial level, and “to comprehend clearly” with mindfulness.

In daily life, when we are having a leisurely cup of coffee, we know that we are drinking coffee; similarly, when we feel upset, we know we are upset. We are obviously aware of these phenomena; however, this is only superficial knowing, not *sati*. With *sati*, the mind comprehends clearly in its entirety.

Everybody has a natural ability to be aware of the ongoing events within and around us. But for most of us, the mind only makes brief, superficial contacts with the objects—any physical and mental phenomena present—and quickly falls back to a distracted state muddled by random thoughts. We call this “monkey mind,” swinging from one branch to another without any purpose. The monkey mind is a habitual mental state untamed by the training of mindfulness, and is deeply rooted in the subconscious,

continuously nurtured by repetitive habitual reactions day after day.

Not being mindful, we never have full attention, but are only paying partial attention to things. When we are acting in this habitual mode, we find ourselves not retaining a vivid memory. One of my students, who claimed to have 30 years of practice, often switched on the fans in the meditation hall and forgot to turn the fans off when leaving, although I had reminded her again and again. This clearly demonstrates an action done without mindfulness. If one is not paying full attention to what one is doing, the result is one would completely forget what one has done.

Everybody seems to know what's happening around us—we see, we hear, we smell, we taste, we touch, we are aware of the coming and going of feelings and emotions. However, we don't fully and truly know them, and we can't remember very well. But why?

Because the untrained mind is always trapped in numerous thoughts and self-created illusions. It is compulsively attached to sweet memories, or is embroiled in painful memories, or wanders in scattered thoughts without purpose, worrying or excitedly anticipating the future.

In this way, disorganized thoughts, illusions and fantasies dominate our mind, leaving little attention available for us to be aware of the physical and mental phenomena currently arising at the moment. After repeatedly living this way day after day, the body learns to act by itself without

the mind really knowing, also known as being on “auto-pilot.”

We often experience auto-pilot mode in daily life. When we drink, when we brush our teeth, put our shoes on, open the door, have a shower, walk, or drive, is our mind completely focused on these ongoing actions? Or are we mindlessly thinking about other things? I believe the latter applies to most people. The routines we repeat every day are all habitual actions done under auto-pilot mode.

Habitual actions are those mastered very well by our body. Since our body knows better than our mind how to perform such tasks, our mind leaves the body and drifts away.

Try to have a closer look tomorrow. In the morning, when you brush your teeth, check your mind to see if it dwells on other things at this time, such as planning for breakfast, for getting dressed for work, etc. When you are actually sitting at the table having your breakfast, rather than being present for it, you probably cannot wait to finish it. You may start to think about the rush hour traffic and plan to leave as early as possible to avoid it. When you are actually in the car, your mind now flies to the office, planning the work day. In this habitual reaction mode, we only have dim awareness of the present, but cannot reach the level of concentration and clear comprehension that the mindful state can achieve.

When I first returned to Malaysia after many years in the monastery in Myanmar, I was frequently mystified by one

particular experience. Each time I gave instructions to the lay people, although the instructions were very clear to me, most of the people, especially the non-meditators, could only get less than half of the information passed, some even completely misunderstood my instructions. After quite a while, I finally came to realize why they behaved like this. It was not their intention, but because of their lack of training in mindfulness. Their mind could not concentrate on one object for a prolonged period of time, but kept wandering off. They probably had not realized that they were distracted and absent-minded. They believed they were listening, but the truth is, they could not fully understand what they heard due to lack of sufficient attention while listening. Maybe this is one of the reasons why mindfulness training is introduced to employees of global enterprises, to increase their power of attention for better productivity.

I never mastered the Burmese language in the years I lived in Myanmar. However, I never had any difficulties when communicating with my teachers and colleagues there. The main reason, I think, is the continuous practice of meditation that resulted in strong and steady mindfulness among monastics compared with lay people. The monks and nuns can understand each other more quickly due to their focused minds.

In order to comprehend the object clearly without forgetting, the mind needs to stay with the object for a sustained period of time, this is the function of mindfulness. (Thus “*sati*” may be better translated as “intentness/

presence of mind,” rather than “mindfulness.”) For example, when we listen, we should concentrate on the listening, and not allow other thoughts to steal our attention. When we feel heat in our body, we should focus our mind on the sensation of the heat, and keep sustained attention on it. It could be 15 seconds, 30 seconds, one minute, but not just a flash of a second. Momentary attention only leads to superficial awareness before the mind leaps away, chasing other thoughts.

While being mindful, our mind stays with a single object—such as the heat in the body—equanimously, although the object may not be very pleasant. If you find your mind agitated due to reactions to the heat, or lost in thoughts, you must know that mindfulness has gone and you have fallen back into habitual reactions.

In brief, mindfulness is the state of mind concentrating on the object of focus without forgetting. Such state of mind does not come naturally, but with training. I could say most of us don’t have such “intentness of mind.” On one occasion several years ago, I was teaching the Dhamma in Canada. I was very focused on the Dhamma, and so seemed the audience. Suddenly, a late-comer opened the front door and entered the lecture room. The audience from the whole room was distracted by this person and everybody was looking that way, totally forgetting about listening to the Dhamma talk. I had to stop talking because it was disrespectful to the Dhamma if I continued to talk to people who were not paying attention. I waited for the audience to bring their attention back to the listening. To be

honest, I was a bit let down on that occasion, and was surprised to realize that people's attention could be so weak and easily carried away.

On another occasion, I was teaching meditation in Malaysia. I was in the middle of explaining how to be mindful of breathing when accidentally a speaker in the upper left corner of the room started broadcasting a notice from the host. What came out of the speaker had nothing to do with the content of the Dhamma being taught at that moment; if I were the audience, I would easily ignore the broadcast, however, everyone in the room was looking at the speaker above as though something very interesting was happening. They even started exchanging whispers, completely losing their attention on the Dhamma and forgetting that their purpose in coming here was to train their ability to concentrate.

Mindfulness Observes What Is Happening at This Moment

The Buddha taught in Mindfulness of Breathing:

“Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ Breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’”

If one practices mindfulness of feeling:

***“When experiencing a pleasant feeling, he discerns,
‘I am experiencing a pleasant feeling.’”***

If one practices mindfulness of mind:

***“When the mind has anger, he discerns, ‘This is a
mind with anger.’”***

According to the above instructions, we observe what is happening at this moment. If one experiences a pleasant feeling, one observes the pleasant feeling for a period of time, without the mind straying from it; if one experiences an angry state of mind, one observes the angry mind without the mind reacting to it, nothing more. In this way, mindfulness observes what is actually happening at this moment without making any judgment or adopting any bias toward the object under observation. We truly know whether a breath is long when we breathe long, we know the presence of a pleasant feeling when a pleasant feeling arises, and we know the angry mental state when anger comes to mind, with sustained mindfulness.

Take ear-contact with sounds, for example. We must comprehend clearly that a pleasant feeling arises in the mind when the ears hear compliments and praise, without developing attachment to the compliment due to self-delusion arising from the pleasant feeling. In the same manner, we must comprehend clearly that an unpleasant feeling arises in the mind when hearing criticism, without

developing hatred or aversion. These reactions are one's personal emotions added to the liked and disliked sounds, contrary to the task of pure mindfulness, which simply observes what is truly there.

The Attitude of Mindfulness Is Being Equanimous Without Bias

When mindfulness is observing what is happening at this moment, mindfulness itself maintains an equanimous attitude towards the object of focus without any emotion involved. Mindfulness allows the phenomena that are present to be what they are, be they pleasant or unpleasant, without habitual reactions. It is our habitual reactions that make us lose mindfulness.

This equanimous attitude of mindfulness allows, accepts, and includes everything. This attitude can also be adopted in dealing with people around us. When in dispute with others, people with dominating personalities would force their own standards on others and create conflict. If we can listen with mindfulness, allow what is happening with an attitude of equanimity, which is very difficult for most people, we would have much more peace and fewer mental defilements.

Here, I would like to recommend an exercise to train one's mindfulness:

Exercise 1. Mindful of In-and-Out Breathing

As a way to have an actual experience of mindfulness on the object of focus without forgetting, you can start by paying attention to your breathing, which trains the mind how to sustain mindfulness.

Firstly, choose a comfortable sitting position, then gently close your eyes, and take three deep breaths to relax yourself. Place your attention under your nostrils, and be mindful of breathing in and breathing out naturally. Simply be aware of your breath in the present moment, take your breath as it is, and do not make any judgments. During this training, random thoughts may keep intruding: past memories, mental images, unpleasant bodily sensations, or even mental anxiety. These thoughts will try to take your attention away from watching your breath. Do not worry, simply bring your mindfulness back to your breath each time the mind wanders.

Do not react to anything that comes to mind. Gently bring your mindfulness back to breathing each time you realize that your mind has wandered away. In addition, when wholesome or unwholesome thoughts arise, do not be fearful, regretful or judgmental. Train the mind to let go of frivolous thoughts in a relaxing manner, gently bring your mindfulness back to the present moment, then pay attention to your breath again.

You can also count your breath: breathing in, breathing out, one; breathing in, breathing out, two.... Count to

eight and start all over again. The mind concentrates better when trying to remember the numbers counted. Gradually, mindfulness on the breath will be continuous. This is the way to train your concentration.

When cultivating mindfulness with this right attitude, you will not compulsively react to your emotions, thoughts, worries, physical and mental phenomena.

If you are a beginner, I suggest you spend at least 15 minutes every morning and every evening in this practice to train your concentration. In order to make life more worthwhile, we need to step out of our comfort zone to challenge ourselves. Some patience and persistent practice is required in order to achieve noticeable progress.

An experienced yogi should practice for at least 60 minutes. In the same way as you would build up your muscles by exercising your body, your mindfulness also needs intensive training to gain strength and power.

Mindfulness Restrains Compulsive Reactions

When mindfully observing, recognizing, allowing, and accepting phenomena arising in the present moment as what they are, habitual compulsive reactions are kept at bay.

For example, when unpleasant bodily sensations arise during sitting meditation, with an equanimous attitude, we accept the pain as merely a physical phenomenon. Do not try to change posture in order to ease the pain, as we would habitually do. Also, do not expect the pain to go away, for that would create a conflict between your wish and the reality—what we are experiencing now. This will stir up the underlying defilement of aversion and further irritate the mind and body—doesn't it simply make the situation worse? Therefore, do not resist unpleasant feeling.



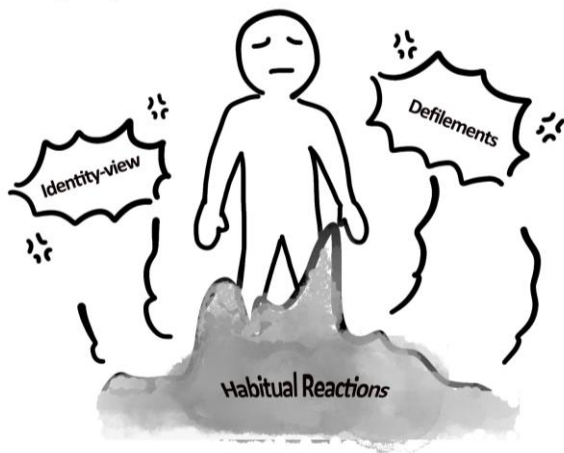
Resisting the unpleasant sensations activates the underlying tendency of aversion and irritates the mind and body.

Similarly, when anger—a mental state—is present, we recognize its presence. This is in accordance with the teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness:

“He understands mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate.” (MN 10)

However, when anger is present, most of us do not think we can contain our emotions. We lose control of the angry mind, and allow anger to burn our mind and body. The angry mind frequently leads to bad quarrels and fights. Even after the quarrels and fights pass, many of us still cannot regain control of ourselves, and allow negative emotions to linger in the mind for hours and even for days, suffering much from the torture.

With the lingering of such negative emotions in the mind continuously for weeks and even for months, such negativity becomes a tendency in one’s personality. From others’ perspective, this person looks unhappy and drags other people down all the time. What a suffering it is! And how unpleasant this person would be to others!



Obviously, we urgently need to contain our emotional reactions in order to prevent the snowball from rolling and growing. Mindfulness happens to be a powerful tool to help us do it.

When anger arises, if we call up mindfulness to observe anger from a third-party perspective, the habitual reaction can be slowed down and contained, and we would be able to refrain from striking back. Although anger conditions unpleasant feeling, mindfulness restrains the habitual reactions by observing the angry mental state objectively. Mindfulness slows down mental activity and alleviates the harmful habitual emotional agitation such as resistance and loathing. In this way, mindfulness protects the mind from reacting to the arising defilements, and protects us from the harassment of negative emotions, which may lead to unwholesome kamma.

Exercise 2. Mindful of Bodily Sensations

*Once you are familiar with the first exercise and have developed a certain level of concentration, you can move on to try the second exercise. Again, start by choosing a comfortable sitting position, gently close your eyes, and take three deep breaths to relax yourself. Then, put your attention under your nostrils, be mindful of breathing in and breathing out naturally. **Simply be aware of your breath in the present moment in a relaxed manner.** After ten minutes, you may start to notice physical sensations such as heat, itchiness, pain, stiffness of your shoulders, etc. You may bring your attention to one particular bodily sensation, such as heat. Keep your attention on it. Be mindful of heat as heat for a period of time without letting the mind feel agitated. Mindfully recognize it as merely a bodily sensation. When you are able to recognize “heat” with sustained mindfulness and equanimity, you will be surprised to see that “heat” is only “heat,” and your mind can be emancipated from it. Such an amazing experience.*

Cultivating Mindfulness in Daily Life

There are many other ways to cultivate mindful awareness of your bodily actions in daily life. Below are a few ways one should start with. For beginners, you need to slow down your actions in order to be mindful.

1. First thing in the morning, before getting up from bed, remind yourself to be mindful. Connect your mind with the movements of the body.
2. When opening the door, pay attention to the movements of the hands, as well as while brushing your teeth.
3. When preparing food, be mindful of your hand movements.
4. As you walk here and there, be mindful of the movement of your feet up and down.
5. When drinking coffee, be aware of the taste of the coffee.
6. When showering, be aware of either hot water or cold water touching the body and the action of rubbing the body.
7. When defecating and urinating, try to be mindful of it.
8. While eating, first focus on the movement of the mouth chewing the food, and then pay attention to pleasant feeling when it arises.

After practicing the exercises on mindfulness of breathing, of bodily sensations, and of movement for a period of time, mindfulness and concentration (*Samadhi*) will gradually develop. Now we will move on and learn to comprehend

our emotions, which is more difficult than mindfulness of bodily movement.

Exercise 3. Mindful of Emotions

Again, choose a comfortable sitting position first, gently close your eyes, and take three deep breaths to relax yourself. Then, put your attention under your nostrils, be mindful of breathing in and breathing out naturally. Simply be aware of your breath in the present moment. During this training, various emotions may arise in your mind, such as anxiety, expectation, fear, regret, irritation, etc. When the emotion—for example, anxiety—distracts your attention from your breath, you should pay attention to the anxiety, recognize it objectively as merely a mental phenomenon. Try to observe it face to face, with equanimity, from a third-party perspective, for a period of time. Bear in mind that anxiety is not yourself, but only an object of mindful observation. Without strong mindfulness, the mind would still be attached to the anxiety, not able to dis-identify from it, and might even get carried away. Although anxiety may cause unpleasant feeling, with strong and sustained mindfulness, the anxiety will diminish, even disappear. Then you will be freed from the anxiety, without reacting compulsively by resisting and opposing it as you may have previously. However, it takes patience and effort to keep practicing over time before noticeable progress can be achieved.

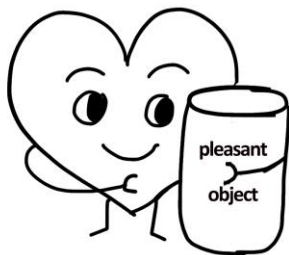
In addition, you may use the same method to observe whatever emotions arise in the mind in your daily life, such as irritation, regret, fear, attachment, etc. If you practice in this way persistently, you would not take anything personally, be it pain or joy, irritation or craving, as mindfulness keeps emotions under control without reacting to them. You feel freedom in the heart once defilements stop intruding.

In the beginning, due to lack of strength in mindfulness, and the dominating power of the auto-pilot mode still in action, you might find yourself being carried away again and again by the emotions and not able to free yourself from them. If that is the case, I advise you to bring your attention back to the in-and-out breathing. After the mind regains calmness, you can try to observe the emotions again. With continued practice and strengthened mindfulness, you will experience the detachment of the emotions from “yourself,” or be able to see the quick cycle of the arising and passing away of emotions, just like the waves on the seashore. Then you can cope with your emotions even more skillfully, without developing self-identification as you habitually have done, and eventually the realization will dawn that the emotions that have been haunting you for ages are actually short-lived. As a result, you become more confident and live more happily. Remember, however, nobody succeeds quickly; the only way to success is to cultivate the habit by practicing every day.

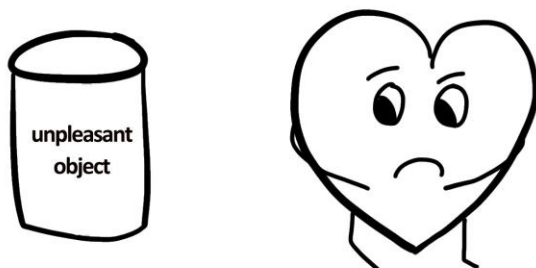
Mindfulness Protects the Mind

When mental defilements arise, without mindfulness stopping the impulse to react, the untrained mind will respond as it habitually does—with craving and attachment toward pleasant objects, with aversion and repulsion toward unpleasant ones, and with ignorance toward neutral ones. Such habitual reactions, driven by greed, anger, and ignorance, agitate the body and mind like burning flames, putting us in a state of restlessness and affliction. If we further grasp these reactions as “I,” not only do the defilements worsen, the identity-view would be further strengthened as well. As a consequence, more unwholesome kammic actions will be done by body, speech, and mind, bringing woe to ourselves and others.

The untrained mind will respond as it always has—



With craving toward pleasant objects



With aversion toward unpleasant objects

I was once irritated by the stubbornness and arrogance of a student. Even after she left, I was still talking to her and arguing with her in my mind (such is the case with habitual reactions). Failing to recognize the arising of defilements, I did not call up mindfulness for protection. As a result, both the body and the mind were suffering under the duress of defilement. After a few minutes, I realized what had happened in me. At that moment, I immediately called up mindfulness to directly face the “irritation.” I can still vividly remember the swift disappearance of irritation once it was recognized by mindfulness, like a thief running away from the house he had broken into after being discovered by the host. The arising and passing away of irritation showed me the amazing power of mindfulness.

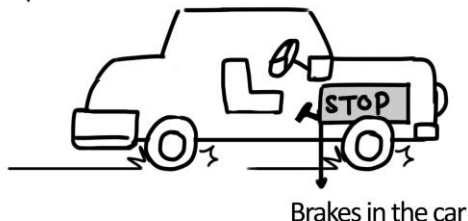
The above example demonstrates the potential power of mindfulness to evaporate defilements, as the Buddha taught:

“Suppose a man let two or three drops of water fall onto an iron plate heated for a whole day. Slow might be the falling of the water drops, but then they would quickly vaporize and vanish. So too, when a bhikkhu is conducting himself and dwelling in such a way ... slow might be the arising of his mindfulness, but then he quickly abandons them [the unwholesome mind states], dispels them, puts an end to them, obliterates them.” (SN 35.244)

What is challenging for all of us is having a swift and keen mindfulness. We are always slow in setting up mindfulness!

Mindfulness can also be compared to the brakes in a car. Imagine a car without brakes arrives at a crossroad when the traffic light turns red. Driving with no ability to stop, we will certainly meet with an accident.

Mindfulness is compared to...



Below are a few exercises that can help you be more mindful of your mental states:

1. When drinking coffee or tea, be aware of your desire for it.
2. When seeing delicious food, be aware of the surge of craving.
3. When a good taste touches the tongue, be aware of the pleasant feeling that arises.
4. When abusive words contact your ear, be aware of the impulse to fight back.
5. When getting angry, take the anger as object, and be aware of it.
6. When fear arises, do not take fear as your personal property, just be aware of it as a mental state.

We need to be alert when defilements creep into the mind, and make special effort to establish mindfulness to protect the mind. I must remind you here that mindfulness does not arise automatically, just as a car does not stop by itself but needs us to apply the brakes. It takes effort to call up

mindfulness. Continuous effort needs to be aroused so that alert mindfulness can recognize the phenomena that are arising at all times. Only through continuous practice can mindfulness keep us protected from the burning of defilements.

Mindfulness Slows Down Mental Activity and Paves the Way for Wisdom

As mindfulness comes face to face with the object without reacting to it, random thoughts are kept out of the mind. Without the intrusion of random thoughts, mental activity slows down, allowing the mind to gradually become clear and transparent, like a still, clear pond. From the clear surface of the pond, we can see through to the bottom, with all the fish swimming in it. In the same manner, wisdom arises and directly sees the transient nature of phenomena.

The Benefits of Cultivating Mindfulness for Lay Buddhists

There are several benefits a lay practitioner can enjoy by cultivating mindfulness.

1. **Live a happier life.** Happiness is experienced in the present, here and now. With clear comprehension of what is happening right now and with concentration supported by mindfulness, the mind would not wander away to the past or to the future, neither regretting what has passed,

nor being fearful of what is yet to happen. Such distractions and illusions only make us unhappy.

In 2010, a research group from Harvard University recruited more than 5000 participants from over 80 countries. The surprising discovery of their research was that on average, our mind is wandering 47% of the time, instead of paying attention to what is happening right now. More importantly, they found that people are usually less happy when their minds are wandering, but happier when they are focused. So, if your goal is to pursue happiness, you should be concentrating on the present moment.

2. Enhance self-awareness. Mindfulness recognizes the physical and mental phenomena occurring in the present moment, and leads to better awareness of what's happening inside our body and mind, such as our natural desires, our way of thinking, and all sorts of emotions.

3. Mindfulness alleviates mental stress. Mindfulness workshops are in fashion in western culture nowadays. As previously discussed, mindfulness training is recommended to employees by global tech giants such as Google. Mindfulness can potentially help us to cope with stress and sleep disorders, and can offer a holistic approach to improve our careers and our lives overall. Much scientific evidence has been accumulated to show that mindfulness can effectively decrease anxiety, alleviate stress, relax the body and the mind, and avoid psychological issues such as fear of loss.

How does mindfulness alleviate stress? We better find out where the stress comes from first. As stated in the Buddhist suttas, the mind delights in unwholesome thoughts. Modern psychology also points out that the human mind tends to have “negative bias,” meaning a tendency to be prone to the impact of negative signals rather than positive ones. This tendency may be a result of the survival instinct, which lies in our subconscious mind. In order to survive in the world, we tend to develop negative thoughts such as fear and anxiety, to worry or to plan for a future of uncertainty. It’s difficult for the mind to be at peace, and by staying in a prolonged negative thinking mode, stress accumulates.

If we can turn our mind to in-and-out breathing each time negative emotions arise, the mind would not fall into the trap of the “negativity bias.” Alternatively, mindfully facing the negative emotions also helps to slow down the compulsive reactions, resulting in a decrease in the stress level.

4. Mindfulness empowers the mind. The mind becomes weak when filled with agitation, distraction, fear, worry, fantasizing, etc. Continuous practice of mindfulness of breathing increases the concentration of the mind. A concentrated mind is still, peaceful, stable, and powerful. When the mind becomes strong and powerful, we can handle the challenges and dramatic changes in life and in our career with ease.

5. Mindfulness brings creativity and insight. A wandering mind can hardly be creative, let alone have the ability to gain insight to penetrate the true nature of the world of formations. Creativity and insight can only be reached by the concentrated mind. When we turn the mind to breathing in and breathing out, the mind gradually becomes stable and still. This allows the mind to reflect in peace.

This is also in accordance with ancient Asian wisdom:

“One can't have lofty aspirations without a peaceful state of mind.” (Zhu-Ge Liang, Chinese politician and philosopher, 181-234 CE)

A peaceful, concentrated mind has the power to penetrate the universal characteristics of all conditioned phenomena. If one turns such a mind toward the body, the truth of the body would be revealed—as being impermanent and without an essence or an identity. If one turns the mind to contemplate feeling, one would see the feeling arising and passing away incessantly at a quick speed like water bubbles. Such is the characteristic of suffering—being impermanent and unsatisfactory. In this way, we can easily understand the true nature of the body and mind. This is the ultimate goal for a disciple of the Buddha in cultivating mindfulness.

2. Wise Attention (*yoniso-manasikāra*)

Mindfulness alone is not enough to see things as they really are, which is the goal of all true practitioners. Another quality is needed in order for wisdom to penetrate the truth, and that is *wise attention*. What is wise attention (*yoniso-manasikāra*)? In Pāli, “*yoniso*” means “down to its origin, nature or root.” “*Manasikāra*” refers to the attention or inclination of the mind.

All conditionally arisen formations have the universal marks of being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without essence, this is their nature. To pay wise attention means to pay attention to these universal characteristics—to clearly see impermanence as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness as unsatisfactoriness, and devoid of essence as devoid of essence—within all formations.

On the other hand, if we pay attention to the permanence of the body, we go against the truth of the body as constantly changing and unsatisfactory. This is paying unwise attention to the body, which leads to the wrong thought that the body is a source of pleasure. The same applies to emotions that are arising and passing away based on causes

and conditions. If we regard such changing phenomena as “our self” or “belonging to us,” this is also unwise attention.

Wise attention is the proximate cause for wisdom to arise. Therefore, we must train our mind to comply with the universal truth in order to cultivate wisdom.

There are two effective ways to pay wise attention.

1. Dis-identify

There are many types of latent defilements buried in the mental stream of an untaught worldling—greed, hatred, ignorance, jealousy, identity-view, conceit, sloth and torpor, etc.

Identity-view (*sakkaya ditthi*)—the belief that all experience is “mine,” or there is an “experiencer” who is “I”—is a latent defilement that leads us to the wrong thought that there is an identity or “self” that plays the role of an experiencer of all physical and mental phenomena. For example, when we see someone we love, this pleasant object impinges our eye faculty, giving rise to eye-consciousness that sees the object. However, identity-view always leaps forward, making us believe that it is “I,” instead of the eye-consciousness, that sees.

Similarly, when a sound impinges our ear faculty, ear-consciousness is conditioned to arise and “hears” the sound. Again, identity-view jumps out and claims “I” to be the hearer. The real hearer is actually the ear-consciousness.

When the tasty fruit durian impinges our tongue faculty, the conditioned pleasant feeling livens us up. Again, identity-view takes the pleasant feeling as “I,” thus we utter: “Oh! What a sweet taste! I love the taste of durian!”

When there is anger in the mind, identity-view also takes anger—a mental state—as “I” and says “I am angry.” In all the scenarios listed above, we can see that the identity-view is constantly fooling us, making us believe there is “I” or “self” behind all physical and mental actions.

Identity-view is rooted in delusion, one of the Three Poisons (lust, hate, and delusion). Delusion is blindness of the mind—not comprehending the truth as it really is. Furthermore, delusion turns reality to illusion, and sees conditioned phenomena as “I.”

In our long journey in *saṃsāra*, under the influence of identity-view, we constantly identified whatever we experienced through body and mind as “self,” in life after life. Every repeated notion of self in our perception in turn strengthened the view of self, making identity-view deep-rooted.

In this case, how can we free ourselves from such deep-rooted identity-view? Paying wise attention to all physical and mental phenomena as “not self” serves as an effective method to battle against identity-view. It is a training to direct the mind to dis-identify all conditioned phenomena, helping the mind to separate the identity of “self” out of phenomena. At the level of ultimate truth, the identity, or

the essence of “self,” does not exist, only the five aggregates arise and pass away due to conditions.

You may ask, How can I actually practice this in my everyday life? For example, in our daily life, very often we come across situations that cause anxiety to arise in the mind. At that time, we must try not to react to the anxiety as we habitually do. Instead, learn to call up mindfulness first, to recognize and accept the anxious mind at this moment. Be alert not to identify the anxious mind as “myself,” for this reaction will worsen the anxiety and trap you in mental stress.

When mindfulness has been established in this way, we further apply wise attention to the anxious mind: “The anxiety is not me, not myself; the anxiety is not me, not myself.”

By directing our mind to dis-identify anxiety from ourselves, we not only can reduce the intensity of anxiety, but can break through the habitual reaction mode that leads to further stress. If we keep seeing anxiety in this way, anxiety will gradually lose its control over our mind, and our mind will gradually be free from the panic, agitation, and restlessness caused by anxiety.

Once a student of mine in a meditation retreat received an emergency call from her family on the fifth night of the retreat, telling her that her child was having a high fever. She got very anxious, and out of habit went into the compulsive reaction mode as a result of the anxiety. She

became agitated, restless and felt utterly lost. At that time, she suddenly remembered my teaching: do not take the arising emotions as “I” or as “mine.” She immediately focused on the anxious mind as the meditation object, and kept contemplating by mentally noting, “The anxiety is not me, it is not myself.”

As she was repeatedly noting and contemplating in this way, to her surprise, her mind calmed down very quickly, freed from the harassment of the panic from the bad news about her child. She had a peaceful sleep that night. The next morning, she came to see me full of gratitude. She told me, if it were not for the method the teacher had taught, she would be sleepless all night and devoured by anxiety. This is a real case telling you the power of wise attention. You just need to remember to dis-identify the arising emotions whenever you are struck by them.

Another one of my students suffered greatly from the intense hatred and pain after being betrayed by her lover. Not knowing how to apply wise attention, she tenaciously grasped the hatred as “I” and “mine,” to the extent she almost wanted to kill him. She was badly tortured by hatred toward him. She said: “For two years, the hatred hurt me like a thorn buried in my flesh; each time I think of him, the thorn is stirred, and both my body and mind get agitated and painful.” She continued: “The fire of anger has given me many sleepless nights. Long is the night for one who cannot sleep!”

After two years' suffering from anger and hatred, she became extremely frail. When she met me, out of compassion for her, I taught her to see the cause and effect relationship. The betrayal was just an effect of past unwholesome kamma, sooner or later the effect was going to take place, and ultimately has nothing to do with "that person." She was shocked to hear "no one" undergoes the process of causal relationship. What caused so much pain in her was precisely the thought that "someone" had inflicted pain on her. When she understood there is no "other" and no "oneself," all her hatred and pain vanished in an instant in her heart, leaving no trace.

Why did she have to suffer for so long? Simply because she did not know how to pay wise attention to what is happening to her. Fooled by identity-view, she constantly and tenaciously grasped the anger as "I" and "mine." As a result, the anger got buried deeply inside her mind and became "permanent," leaving a dent that could not be erased. It remained real and deep for what felt like almost forever to her. Not until she paid wise attention, "There is nobody, merely cause and effect." Her anger now found no foothold on which to stand!

In reality, the arising and passing of hatred is momentary, as are all other conditioned phenomena. This is based on the law of nature, just like the blooming and fading of seasonal flowers, and the coming and going of tides from the sea. But if we grasp the hatred and hold fast to it, wrongly taking it as "I" and "mine," the truth of its momentary birth and decay is concealed by grasping, and

anger becomes long-lasting and real. This is also a very unwise act, to sacrifice our peace of mind to the tyranny of identity-view. This wrong view in turn feeds the anger in the mind, and traps it deep inside. This is how we get entangled with our own emotions and cannot be set free from them.

Bear in mind, all mental and physical phenomena are conditionally produced from moment to moment, and disappear from moment to moment. They undergo the phases of birth, abiding, aging, and death, and therefore are impermanent and beyond one's control. To regard them otherwise is a wrong way of perceiving things, giving rise to the defilements of craving and view, bringing only pain to us.

Exercise 4. Dis-identify/Depersonalize Bodily Pain

Pay attention to your breathing in a relaxed manner. After you start to feel unbearable pain from your legs, you may start investigating the unpleasant feeling conditioned by this pain. Firstly, try to observe the unpleasant feeling as merely an unpleasant feeling conditioned from the pain, and see it as detached from the observing mind. In the beginning, the pain may be too intense to bear, and the mind would keep resisting it. You may even start to imagine that your legs may break. All these thoughts would worsen the pain.

At this point, try to relax and let go of the grasping and the resistance in your mind. You can ask yourself a few questions: Who is experiencing the pain? Is it me or the feeling itself? Is it the feeling per se that is experiencing the feeling?

With continuous practice, some yogis may experience the complete separation of the unpleasant feeling from “I,” as if the unpleasant feeling no longer belongs to “me,” although the unpleasant feeling is still in existence.

After we stop identifying the pain as “mine,” we can simply be aware of the arising of all types of feelings without grasping them. This would be an amazing accomplishment. You may never have experienced anything like this, nor have thought anything like this would be possible.

In order to keep practicing dis-identification or depersonalization of all physical and mental phenomena, see whatever arises as foreign, as a third party, as empty—which is to say, devoid of self. In this way, we can free ourselves from entanglement. From a psychological point of view, this way of looking at things allows us to step back. We separate emotionally and are thereby relieved of the worry and fear that, in truth, do not belong to us.

Be open-minded and try to adopt a new way of thinking that is in accordance with the universal truth.

Exercise 5. Depersonalize Emotions

Depersonalizing emotions from the sense of self is not an easy task, but practice makes perfect. First of all, choose a comfortable sitting position, gently close your eyes, and take three deep breaths to relax yourself. Then, put your attention under your nostrils, and be mindful of breathing in and breathing out naturally. Simply be aware of your breath in the present moment. During this training, various emotions may arise in your mind, such as anxiety, fear, regret, irritation, etc. When these emotions distract your attention from your breath, mindfulness should be kept alert and focused on one of the emotions.

Now you may divert your attention to the emotion in mind, such as anxiety. Focus on the bare fact that there is merely a mental formation. Observe it with a neutral attitude, from a third-party perspective, and accept it with an open heart. Remember not to take the anxiety as “I.” You can do this by paying wise attention to anxiety as “not myself.” Although the anxiety remains unpleasant, with mindfulness and wise attention, you will soon come to realize that you are not your anxiety; instead you will begin to experience the anxiety diminishing, or even disappearing, as my student experienced in the above example. Eventually, you will no longer react compulsively in the habitual way by resisting, opposing, and hating it.

You may move on to contemplate any arising emotion with this method, including irritation, regret, fear, attachment, etc.

Initially, lack of mindfulness will result in being carried away by the emotion, or reacting in the habitual way that is deeply rooted in the mind. Don't be discouraged by the failures in the beginning. With right effort and persistence, you will succeed eventually.

2. Pay Attention to Impermanence

What is impermanence (*anicca*)?

According to the commentary to the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, “The Simile of the Snake” (MN 22), all conditioned formations are impermanent in nature because they cease to exist shortly after arising.

The law of nature reveals that everything in the universe, be it physical or mental, human or non-human, exists only momentarily and is in a continuous cycle of rebirth. Nothing is permanent. More precisely, everything in the universe is subject to momentary arising and passing away. This is the universal truth.

Our body and mind—the five aggregates—are also undergoing constant change, or impermanence. They arise due to their conditioning factors, and they pass away when the conditioning factors come to cessation. This happens in an unbroken continuity beyond our ability to penetrate deeply. The whole process is a continuous arising and passing away. This is the universal truth of impermanence.

Take the phenomena within ourselves—our bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc.: They change from moment to moment, existing only temporarily, and lacking any lasting quality. We may feel unhappy now, but soon we find ourselves giggling loud like a fool. Countless lovers swear to be together till death separates them, but they want divorce badly after only a couple of years of marriage.

Many of us misunderstand the meaning of impermanence as a negative idea that sounds dreadful and insecure. This precisely shows the inner desire of humans for permanence or eternity. Not paying wise attention to the impermanent nature of all phenomena, we will grasp whatever we like, thinking it is permanent and belonging to a self. Doesn't it bring us more mental stress when what we grasp alters or changes? How, then, should we live free from mental stress?

How to pay wise attention to impermanence

First of all, we have to constantly bear in mind what the Buddha said:

“All formations are impermanent.”

This is the truth by itself, not because the Buddha said so. Internally, we see the sensations of our body change swiftly; pleasant feeling and unpleasant feeling alternate quickly; thoughts roam here and there every second; emotions change from happiness to sadness and back to happiness again. Externally, we see flowers in blossom, followed by withering; the moon waxing and waning; and the hot

summer following the warm spring. Aren't all these telling us, "Impermanence!" Now, we just need to adopt a new way of looking at things as impermanent rather than permanent.

In our daily lives, very often we have to associate with people we do not like. Let's say your boss is always picking on you and makes you feel inferior and agitated all the time. In this case, how can you deal with your negative emotions?

First, mindfully recognize and focus on this emotion of agitation. Then, pay wise attention to the agitation in mind by mentally noting: it is not me, it is not mine. This is to direct your mind not to identify agitation as yourself.

Next, pay wise attention to the universal truth of impermanence of agitation. Every phenomenon undergoes stages of arising, abiding and vanishing. The arising and abiding stages are the stable aspect of it. One should avoid paying attention to the stable aspect of the object, as it appears permanent; instead, direct the mind to see its vanishing stage, when the force of the object becomes weakened. Otherwise, your noting of vanishing conflicts with reality. Bear with the vanishing stage of agitation and mentally note, "vanishing, vanishing" or "passing away, passing away." At this point, do not focus too strongly on the agitation itself, just look at the moments passing by with a relaxed manner. After a while, check your mind to see if the agitation has diminished or disappeared. If agitation remains, continue to direct your mind to see the impermanent nature of agitation. This method sounds

fairly easy, and it actually works quite effectively if your mind is open enough.

One of my students benefited a lot after learning to pay wise attention to impermanence. She wrote a letter to thank me:

This is my first retreat under the guidance of Sayalay Susilā. Sayalay taught us: All physical and mental phenomena are arising and passing away due to the conditioning factors, thus all exist temporarily, with momentary birth and decay. Therefore, when emotions arise, you can apply wise attention on them by mentally noting, “cessation, cessation.” Gradually, the truth of the cessation of phenomena will manifest itself in your mind.

I remembered this concise and straightforward teaching by Sayalay Susilā and soon had the real life experience about it. In daily life, whenever I feel discontented or indignant, and anger is about to arise in me, I would immediately pay wise attention to the emotion in mind and note, “cessation, cessation, gone, gone.” To my great surprise, the emotions of discontent and anger actually disappeared! I am so happy to see that I’m no longer at the mercy of negative emotions. I am able to live in the present moment peacefully by staying mindful and by paying wise attention.

As I keep mindfully recognizing the negative emotions and contemplating their cessation, the unpleasant feeling from sinking into the unhappy memories also disappeared. Now I know that I will not be controlled by the past memories again, because I have seen the disappearance of the negative

emotions brought by the memories, as predicted by the universal truth. I know they will never take control of me again, because I have seen the truth in them, being of the nature to constantly arise and pass away, not me, and not mine.

This method can also be applied in contemplation of bodily sensations such as pain, heat, itchiness, stiffness, numbness, etc., as well as in contemplation of pleasant and unpleasant feelings. However, bear in mind that noticeable progress can only be achieved after continuous practice.

One of my students from the USA struggled to contemplate and to note impermanence, but she eventually made a breakthrough and realized the nature of impermanence—the arising and cessation. She sent the following description to me:

I had heard your teaching on noting impermanence more than once over the years. I always agreed that it seemed like a good thing to do, but every time I tried to do it, it not only felt mechanical, but it was uncomfortable. So I would do it for a little while, then it would taper off.

I started thinking about what I was focusing on whenever an object arose. I realized that I was looking at the stable aspects of objects and noting “impermanent”—but because the stable aspect seemed permanent, my noting and my experience were not matching. That’s what was causing the discomfort.

Although I tried very hard looking for the impermanent aspect of objects, still I couldn’t see it. I felt frustrated. I

asked myself, “Why can’t I see the impermanent aspect of these objects?” I looked more closely at the objects—there were so many—one after another, impinging on my senses. Then I discovered that I was seeing the arising of the objects, and the arising was the stable aspect that gives rise to the perception of permanence.

Then I realized I was too tense. I was spending too much energy directing my attention at the objects—grasping at them, trying to see. So, I said to myself, “Don’t look at the objects, just look at the moments passing by.” My mind relaxed and suddenly it was like a rushing river of countless moments passing by. Like a fire hose—uncontrolled, unrecognizable, a whole torrent of moments passing. Everything is passing!

Since then, in daily life and meditation, I can still see the passing away of moments. Whenever I can see the passing of things instead of the arising, there is a sense of relief. Particularly with unpleasant sensations—I can see them passing, and they are not bothersome. When I note “impermanent, impermanent” it is comfortable now and matches what I am experiencing.

The purpose of paying wise attention to impermanence

To harmonize the mind with reality. Paying wise attention to the cessation of the object is an important step in our practice, and is the step to cultivate wisdom. Without paying attention to the impermanent nature of the object of focus, its universal characteristic of being constantly

changing would not manifest. On the contrary, the object would appear to be very stable. Once we direct our mind to observe the fading away of the object of focus, it would be easier to see its cessation. As impermanence is the reality, by noting the impermanent as impermanent, we can **harmonize our minds with reality, allowing the truth to manifest clearly**. Only when we tune the radio to the right frequency can we receive the signal broadcast from the right channel. If we remain totally inexperienced with the truth of impermanence, we lose a channel to stay in tune with the Dhamma.

Paying wise attention to impermanence gives us a chance to develop the wisdom to see the reality—the cessation of phenomena. Both the arising and the passing away will manifest vividly, and at great speed. All phenomena are short-lived, like dewdrops or lightening, and are as illusory as dreams.

One tip for you here: Do not put too much effort into trying to grasp the object when contemplating its impermanence, for this would stabilize the object and make it appear to be permanent. On the contrary, hold steadfast to the faith in the doctrine of impermanence of all formations, direct your mind toward the fading phase of the object, and stay with it till the moment it disappears.

Exercise 6. Paying Wise Attention to Vanishing

In daily life, you should keep checking with yourself: What mental state am I in at this moment? Wandering mind, delusive mind, angry mind, slothful mind, greedy mind, agitated mind, jealous mind, fearful mind, worried mind, etc. First of all, learn to skillfully distinguish the mental state with mindfulness whenever defilement comes into contact with the mind.

Take the greedy mind as an example. While surfing the Internet, when there is a good value buying opportunity, greed arises in your mind, making you desire to buy things. Now, you should be mindful and recognize the greedy mind and stay with it. Recognize the greedy mind as simply a mental state, but not you, nor belonging to you. It is merely a state of mind due to the eye contact with visible objects.

Contemplate the greedy mind by noting it as “A greedy mind is merely a greedy mind, a greedy mind is merely a greedy mind....” At this point, the impulse to buy may come to an end. If the greed still lingers in the mind, direct your attention to see its vanishing phase as instructed above. Greed may disappear from your mind when you tune your attention to the reality of its impermanence.

The benefits of contemplating impermanence

There are two extraordinary benefits from contemplating impermanence.

1. To resolve the distorted perception of permanence (*nicca sañña*) embedded in the mind. The Dhamma reveals the nature of impermanence in all conditioned formations. However, the deeply rooted perception of permanence stops the mind from seeing phenomena as they actually are. We hold tightly to the wrong view of permanence as the reality, and we love the idea of eternal existence, for this idea brings us a sense of security.

However, whether we like it or not, the truth of impermanence reveals itself everywhere in our day-to-day life. Take the constant fluctuation in our feelings: from pleasant to unpleasant, and then from unpleasant to pleasant again. Our emotions also change constantly due to circumstances, without any warning. We seem to be oblivious to such manifestations of impermanence, or we allow the truth to touch our mind only superficially, leaving only a dim impression.

As we continuously contemplate the arising emotions by noting the nature of impermanence in them, then regardless of whether the emotions disappear or not, such attention leaves a mark of “impermanence” in our mind. Pay wise attention to impermanence once, one mark is left in the mind; pay wise attention to impermanence a thousand times, a thousand marks are left in the mind.

Eventually, the perception of impermanence (*anicca sañña*) becomes embedded in our “perception aggregate,” and our thinking becomes consistent with reality.

As the perception of impermanence becomes steady and strong, it gains the power to influence the mind. We would no longer crave and grasp people or material objects we love, due to the wisdom of knowing that all will eventually be gone. In the same manner, we would no longer hate or fear those we dislike, knowing those, too, will soon pass. Thus our mind becomes boundless and free.

“Don’t be disturbed by fortune or misfortune.
Be relaxed no matter how flowers bloom and wilt.
To be or not to be needs no hard decision.
Whether the clouds are passing high or low, let nature
take its course.” (Ancient Chinese poem)

2. To train the mind to abandon craving, thus leading us to the cessation of suffering. Without contemplating impermanence, we regard whatever is delightful and pleasurable in what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, feel, perceive, and think as permanent. As the Buddha pointed out, this thought nurtures craving and brings obsession with the object. With the craving and obsession in mind, we are not free from dukkha.

“Bhikkhus, whatever ascetics and brahmins in the past...in the future...at present regard that in the world with a pleasant and agreeable nature as permanent, as happiness, as self, as healthy, as

secure: they are nurturing craving. In nurturing craving...they nurture suffering; they are not freed from suffering, I say.” (SN 12.66)

Craving is the source of suffering. Dependent on craving, clinging and grasping arise; clinging and grasping then force us to take action in order to obtain the desired objects. Taking action by body, speech, and mind to obtain the desired objects is the performance of kamma, either skillfully or unskillfully.

Whatever kammic action is performed leaves behind kammic energy in one’s life stream for rebirth in a future life (the future five aggregates) in due time. A new life brings a new body and mind, and in consequence triggers aging, sickness, death, lamentation, sorrow, pain, and despair, thus the whole mass of suffering. This is the cycle of rebirth driven by desire and craving. **How, then, can we cut off desire and craving?** The Buddha taught:

“Bhikkhus, whatever ascetics and brahmins in the past regarded that in the world with a pleasant and agreeable nature as impermanent, as suffering, as not-self, as a disease, as fearful: they abandoned craving. In abandoning craving, they abandoned grasping. In abandoning grasping they abandoned suffering.” (SN 12.66)

If we follow the Buddha’s teaching above and pay wise attention to the pleasurable, agreeable, and delightful objects—including the body and various emotions such as

pleasurable feeling and delight—as impermanent, as suffering, as not-self, we will be able to abandon the craving and grasping to them. To abandon craving and grasping from moment to moment is to abandon suffering from moment to moment.

3. Wisdom (*pañña*)

The last step we should cultivate is wisdom training. Here, wisdom does not refer to the intelligence or wit of the mundane world. It refers to the insight knowledge that can only be obtained by continuous practice of mindfulness, wise attention, and concentration meditation. Such wisdom, or knowledge, leads to enlightenment to the universal truth of phenomena.

The Characteristic, Function and Manifestation of Wisdom

The characteristic of wisdom is to see the true nature of phenomena—as impermanent, suffering, and not-self. Without the light of wisdom, this truth is concealed in the darkness of ignorance.

The function of wisdom is to enlighten. When wisdom springs up in the heart, it dispels the darkness of ignorance, it causes the radiance of knowledge to arise, it makes the light of insight shine forth, and it makes the Noble Truths plain. Wisdom reveals the three universal marks or characteristics of existence in all conditioned phenomena—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (suffering), and the absence of any soul or self. Wisdom is like a lamp, when a person brings a lamp into a dark room, the light from the

lamp dispels the darkness and enlightens every object in the room.

Another function of wisdom is to cut off. Wisdom is like a sharp sword, able to cut off the defilements in the mind.

The manifestation of wisdom in mind is a crystal clear state without any delusion.

Ignorance Conceals the Truth of Reality— Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, and Not-self.

Now it is generally accepted among ordinary people to perceive the body and mind as permanent, happiness, and able to satisfy or fulfill us, when in reality the body is a disease, a tumor, and a calamity. Such a distorted view is caused by ignorance, not seeing clearly. Based on the distorted view, we are fascinated and delighted by the body and the mind—the five aggregates in ultimate truth—and compulsively grasp them as permanent and delightful.



The darkness of ignorance conceals the three universal marks of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the impersonal nature of phenomena.

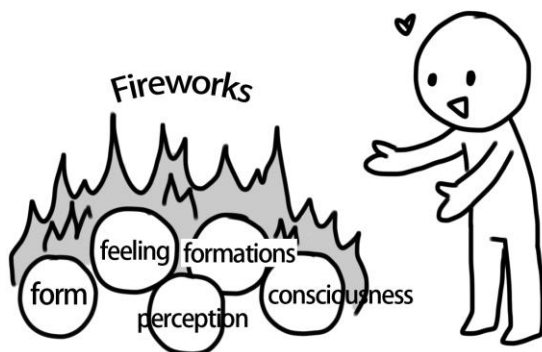
In MN 75, the Buddha narrated a vivid story (paraphrased below) about how ignorance blinds us:

Suppose there was a man born blind who could not see dark and light forms, who could not see blue, yellow, red or pink forms...who might hear a man with good eyesight praising a white, spotless and clean cloth. Enchanted by the white cloth, he went in search of a white cloth. Then a man cheated him with a dirty soiled garment by telling him it was a white and clean garment. Delighted, the blind man put it on and went around showing off his so-called white shirt. People laughed at him and told him that the shirt was black and torn. Clinging to his own view and strongly desiring a white shirt, he turned

a deaf ear to others. Suppose that, unable to stand her son's foolishness, his mother brought him to see an eye surgeon, and the surgeon cured his blindness. Together with the arising of his vision, he would become disillusioned and realize that the shirt he had worn was in fact torn and unattractive. His desire and liking for that dirty soiled garment would be abandoned.

The dirty soiled garment is our five aggregates affected by clinging. That man is likened to our deluded mind. We have long been tricked, cheated, and defrauded by this mind. Not seeing correctly, we have been clinging to material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness. With clinging as condition, becoming [comes to be]; with becoming as condition, birth [comes to be]; with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

Together with the arising of wisdom that dispels delusion, our lust and desire for the five aggregates affected by clinging would be abandoned.



The danger inherent in clinging to the Five Aggregates

In a similar way, only after gaining the wisdom that penetrates the nature of the five aggregates—as impermanent, as unsatisfactory, as Mara’s bait, as dangerous, as a cancer, as void and not-self—can we dispel the delusion in our mind and voluntarily abandon the craving and grasping to the five aggregates affected by clinging.

Wisdom Investigates the Conditioning Factors

Apart from mindfulness and wise attention to impermanence, another way to cultivate wisdom is through investigation of cause and condition in order to realize non-self (i.e., without a controller).

We have discussed depersonalization/dis-identification—paying wise attention by mentally noting “not me, not mine.” Now, if the physical or mental phenomenon under contemplation is not “I,” then we can make an inquiry: “If that phenomenon is neither me nor mine, what is it, then, and where does it come from?” There are two approaches to investigation: to investigate the proximate cause and to investigate the root cause for the arising of phenomena.

Take the anxious mother mentioned previously: what caused her anxiety and panic after she heard her child was having a high fever? The proximate cause was the hearing of the news that her child was sick. This piece of information took the form of sounds impinging her ear faculty (contact), which immediately aroused anxiety (unpleasant feeling). Thus, dependent on ear-contact and sound, unpleasant feeling arose. The arising of the unpleasant feeling was the result of ear-contact with unpleasant sounds. Ear-contact was the proximate cause and the unpleasant feeling was the effect. They are simply cause and effect based on the conditioning factors. Neither the cause nor the effect is a “being.”

The root cause of her anxiety was her intense craving and clinging to her own child. If the sick child were not hers, would she still be worried? Surely not, since she wouldn’t have the same clinging to the children of others.

Thus, by investigating the cause of the arising of the suffering, one arrives at the root cause of it, which is craving and clinging. It is possible to abandon suffering if

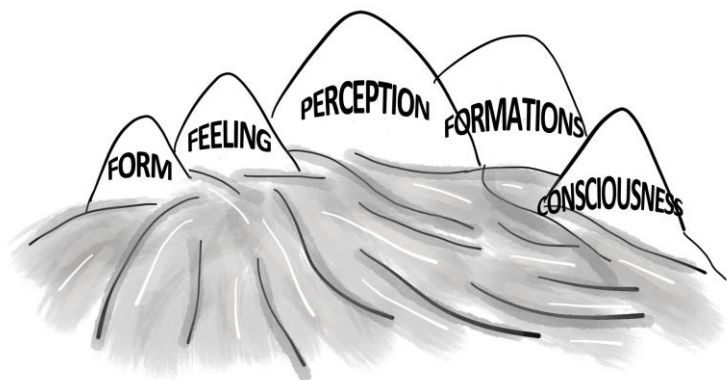
one works to abandon the root cause of it. All physical and mental phenomena link together in a cause and effect relationship. They are conditioned formations, governed by causality without the controlling “self” behind. This understanding is part of wisdom.

Wisdom Experiences the Truth of “Impermanence Is Suffering and Not- self”

As mindfulness becomes stronger and the mind is accustomed to contemplation of impermanence, the insight speeds up, and the arising and ceasing of phenomena becomes faster. The object under observation is no longer apparent. Instead, what manifests in the mind is the process of arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing, repeatedly occurring in a rapid manner.

Then we can be awakened to the fact that this state of being continuously oppressed by arising and ceasing—in other words, by momentary birth and death—is the characteristic of “*dukkha*,” or unsatisfactoriness. We further develop the insight that what is impermanent and suffering cannot be regarded as a self—because there is no way we can exercise power over it. Also, there is no so-called creator or God behind experience.

What is impermanent and suffering cannot be regarded as a permanent self—because there is no way we can exercise power over it.



When the light of wisdom thus shines, the five aggregates are no longer seen as permanent, as happiness, and as having an abiding self. Instead we see them as dangerous, painful, not to be grasped, but to be let go of. Thus, wisdom makes shine the Noble Truth of Suffering (*dukkha sacca*) and the Origin of the Truth of Suffering (*samudaya sacca*). With the understanding that craving is the origin of the truth of suffering, we are ready to let go of intense craving for the five aggregates. When wisdom matures, it cuts off defilements permanently.

The Ultimate Goal of Seeing Impermanence

Seeing “impermanence,” we also see “suffering,” which leads to the wisdom that penetrates the “not-self” nature of all phenomena. Full understanding of the three universal characteristics of existence takes the ardent practitioner to the ultimate goal—*Nibbāna*, freedom from suffering.

The Buddha taught:

“The perception of impermanence, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit, of great benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless, has the Deathless as its final end.” (AN 7.46)

“The formations are indeed impermanent, their nature is arising and ceasing. Having arisen, they cease, their cessation is bliss.” (DN 16)

Summary

The Difference Between Mindfulness, Wise Attention, and Wisdom

I would like to summarize the difference between mindfulness, wise attention, and wisdom:

Mindfulness is clearly aware of the mental and physical phenomena at the moment without reacting to them.

Wise attention pays attention to phenomena based on their true nature—impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. It is the proximate cause for wisdom to arise.

Wisdom sees truly and penetrates the momentary birth and death of phenomena (*anicca*), sees the oppression of constant rising and falling (*dukkha*), and the absence of a controller (*anatta*). Wisdom also cuts off defilement that is not shed by mindfulness and wise attention.

Through continuous practice of mindfulness and wise attention, we develop wisdom. Endowed with these three qualities, the mind becomes more and more powerful due to the resonance with the Dhamma. Only then are we able

to withstand the vicissitudes of life, with the mind undisturbed inwardly.

“Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so this Dhamma-and-Discipline has but one taste, the taste of Freedom.” (AN 8.19)

Mindfulness

Wise attention

Wisdom



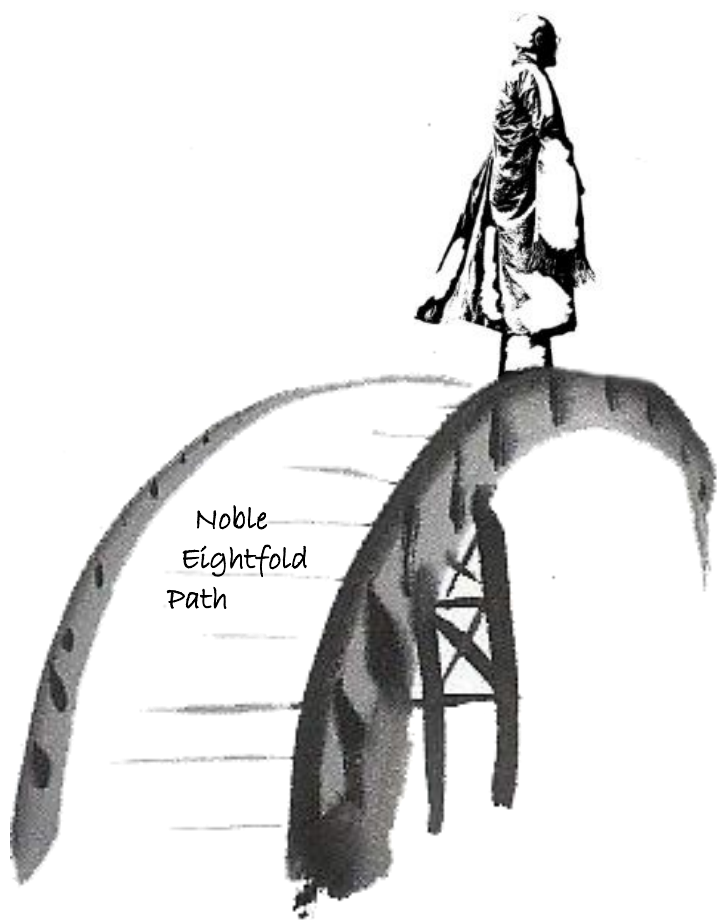
Sayalay Susīlā

October 10, 2022



*Ciraṃ Tiṭṭhatu Saddhammo!
Sādhū! Sādhū! Sādhū!*

May the True Dhamma Endure
for A Long Time!



Sharing of Merits

*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti sabbarasaṃ dhammaraso
jināti; Sabbaratiṃ dhammarati jināti, taṇhakkhayo
sabbadukkhaṃ jināti.
(Dhp. 354)*

A gift of Dhamma conquers all gifts; the taste of
Dhamma conquers all tastes;
a delight in Dhamma conquers all delights;
the ending of craving conquers all suffering & stress.
(Dhp.354)

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