

Deep Dive Into Seven Factors | 1. Mindfulness | Part One

THE FOUR ATTENDINGS WITH MINDFULNESS

- Ajahn Tiradhammo

The first of the Seven Factors of Awakening is mindfulness. The topic of mindfulness is outlined in detail in two scriptures on the 'Attendings with Mindfulness.'¹ In these scriptures the Buddha is quoted as saying that this practice is the 'direct path' to awakening, and as adding that awakening could happen within as little as seven days! Of course, it is stated that one should practise deeply and directly, contemplating with persevering diligence, clearly knowing and mindful, free of worldly desires and discontent. This is not usually the kind of mindfulness with which most of us are familiar.

One author coined the phrase that the practice of mindfulness is the 'Heart of Buddhist Meditation'. Generally, mindfulness practice and concentration are the two main pillars of Buddhist meditation. Some of the scriptures describe exercises for developing concentration, but the two scriptures referred to above give a very detailed presentation of the practice of developing mindfulness, which has become very much emphasized in meditation practice, especially insight meditation or vipassanā.

The four areas of our experience for developing mindfulness are the body, feeling tones, conditions of mind and dhammas, or specific mental phenomena. In practice we could take any one of these four areas, such as developing body awareness, and that could lead us to awakening. All four are not actually necessary. However, we may have to make a general study of all of them in order to discover the theme with which we are most comfortable; and even if we do attain some 'success' with developing mindfulness on one particular theme, it can still be helpful to have a more complete overview and practise in a broader

context by developing awareness of all four themes. And even if we do have some success with one theme, it may only take us so far. It is implied in the scriptures that only development of mindfulness on all four themes leads to higher realization.² At the very least, the developing of mindfulness on all four themes provides a good, rounded balance in our life, as well as in our spiritual practice.

In my view it's not so difficult to have some sort of insight, even quite penetrating insights, into, say, the body or conditions of mind, but unless these insights are developed in the broader context of our whole life experience, they don't last very long or are not very complete, authentic or substantial. Having a broader repertoire of meditation practices or exercises helps us to integrate these insights and allows them to penetrate wider areas of our life. For example, one of the primary insights is into impermanence. Someone can have quite deep insight into impermanence, into the changing body or changing conditions of mind, for example. However, the insight often stays related only to that limited experience – I know my mind is changing, or I know my body is changing, but this insight does not extend much deeper into my whole life. It is only a memory or abstract reflection for that time, that place, that experience.

I remember meeting a monk in Thailand who had been on a meditation retreat and had a truly deep insight into the changing of the body, which had really inspired him. He held up his hand and said, 'I've really got to understand this before I die.' He had had a moment of insight, but wanted to deepen it, I suppose to full awakening, before he died. I was quite impressed with that at first, but then I began to reflect on it and realized that while he had indeed had an insight, he was now chasing that insight rather than putting energy into cultivating the practice. He wanted to see

the body really clearly as he had done before, but my experience over the years has been that this type of event never happens again in the same way. We have an insight, and there is clarity of mind and some wisdom develops, but this is just like seeing in one direction, and it will never happen like that again because the mind is changing. We have had that initial insight, but our practice really needs deepening or broadening. If we are still looking to replicate the insight, is that really impermanence? Even that insight is impermanent.

I think the real point of this development of mindfulness is putting our energy back into the whole process of developing clearer seeing and more awareness in general, rather than just achieving a specific insight. I prefer to use the word 'awareness' rather than 'mindfulness', which was first used in this sense in the Victorian era. It was a useful word then and maybe it is still useful even today, because it is not too ordinary and it explains the whole process quite well in one word – keeping in mind or heedfulness. But I personally prefer the word 'awareness', because it is one with which we're all familiar – we're aware of the word 'awareness'! We can also appreciate that there are different degrees of awareness.

AWARENESS OF BODY

So in this training, this development of awareness, if we have practised the meditation given at the beginning of this chapter, we have already developed some awareness of the body. I know my knee is getting sore or the cushion is getting hard. We are aware to a certain degree of the bodily sensations, but we can also put energy into developing that awareness of the body in a more sensitive and refined way. Not only is this an exercise in variety and refinement, noticing more sensations and more subtle sensations, but it also involves noticing what is common to all these sensations.

When we just refer to the body, we usually think of a concept: my body. I can close my eyes and think, 'It looks like this, it's short', and so on. But going into the experience of sensation is something different,

sometimes very different. I remember that once, after sitting for a ceremony for a couple of hours, my back began to ache. But I couldn't get up and walk away, I couldn't escape because I was front-stage, so I just had to be with that backache. I could recognize this kind of backache as familiar, but it was different too, especially because I was just trying to be present with it, rather than resist it or become angry with it. Just being with it was actually very peaceful. It wasn't pleasant, but it was peaceful just to be with that sensation.

We can carry out this exercise formally by developing awareness of bodily sensations. The body is the general topic, but we know the body by sensation, by the sense of touch. We experience it by tactile sensation, hot and cold: for example – I went outside and it was cold, I came in here and it was hot. When we first sit down the cushion is soft, but after an hour or so it gets hard. This is the direct experience of the body. And there are a great variety of sensations. As I mentioned earlier, we can be aware not only of general bodily sensations, but perhaps also of some specific sensations. My back is all right, but my neck may be a bit sore. Some parts of the body may be reasonably comfortable and some not so comfortable. Being able to develop this exercise gives us the ability to go into the direct experience in all its dimensions. We all have our familiar habitual experiences. If I were to ask how you experience the body, you would probably bring to mind a familiar sensation. My familiar sensation is my knee – 'Oh yes, it must be Ajahn Tiradhammo because it's that same knee problem.' But who had that experience of backache? I didn't know that guy. That was not the same familiar sensation of body to which I relate to as being myself. On the one hand this can be quite liberating. When we begin to experience different dimensions of the body, we don't have to hang on to its same old habits. Sometimes, though, we just take on new habitual patterns of body. But the whole point is to be able to see the body as it really is. That's the ultimate point of mindfulness practice.

So although we may know the body to a certain degree, we may not really understand it as it actually is. For example, a common experience in meditation is that while most people are very familiar with

their comfortable body, when it starts to become uncomfortable they have resistance rising. They don't want to know that body; they want to know the comfortable body, not the uncomfortable one. But we are only able to develop awareness of the body fully through being aware of its changing aspects and facets, not just when it's comfortable. The uncomfortable aspects are perhaps the ones that need the most investigation and exploring, because those are the ones we're resisting. I didn't want to sense my aching back. My first choice would have been to get up, stretch my back and lie down somewhere, but I couldn't, so I had to sit there with the unpleasant back. And although it wasn't pleasant, it was peaceful because I could open up to it, be with it.

There are various exercises with regard to this body awareness. The very first exercise in the scriptures about developing the attendings with mindfulness is breathing meditation. One brings awareness to the breathing process. One is aware when the breath is long or short, deep or shallow. Quite a significant amount of the scriptural explanation is devoted to breathing. Something as simple as breathing, which we do all the time, could be a very important source of insight. It's actually breathing which keeps us alive, it's the most immediate nutriment of our life. We can go without food or water for a while, but we can't go without breath for five minutes.

There are also other exercises on the awareness of body, for example, awareness of how it moves – walking, standing, sitting, lying down, dressing, eating, drinking, going to the toilet, falling asleep, waking up, talking, etc. Here the body is being displayed or expressed in different ways. Then there are more detailed or specialized exercises in developing awareness of the body. The first such exercise is about what are traditionally called the thirty-two parts of the body. Its purpose is to develop more awareness of the body in a different context, by allowing it to be seen more clearly. Normally we have our own particular preferences when we look at a body. I guess most people look at faces, and maybe

that's our main reference for the body, but of course there's a lot more to the body than that. This exercise of examining the thirty-two parts of the body, although not very popular in the West, is one of the main meditation themes in southeast Asia. Of course, to be able to develop it one needs to study these thirty-two different parts, learn about them and be able to remember them. Some of them are internal organs, others are the external parts of the body; some are the fluids in the body, which relates to the next topic of the four elemental qualities. The purpose of the exercise is the development of awareness, providing a much broader overview of what we take to be the body.

If thirty-two parts are too much, some people just use the first five – hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. At first this can seem a bit abstract, but the point is to use our conceptual faculties to bring up these aspects of body, and then go more deeply into them, experience them more directly. If we have an image of, say, teeth, and we're not looking in a mirror, we have to think, 'teeth are like this'. But by meditating on them or contemplating them at a deeper level, we have a different experience of them. When I was in Switzerland I used to do my 'teeth-brushing meditation' in my room after breakfast. It was a very good opportunity, because here was a situation where I could collect myself on this simple everyday act. I knew about these thirty-two parts of the body and that teeth were one of the parts, but I'd never really developed the exercise. But here was an opportunity early in the morning while brushing my teeth. It's a simple act which we do several times every day, so it's a good opportunity for meditation. It only took five or ten minutes, not a real knee-cruncher of a meditation, but it was sometimes very insightful to be aware of this theme of teeth. We may not usually notice them very often (until we have to go to the dentist, and then there may be rather too much emphasis on them!) Through becoming more aware of teeth, I sometimes had some quite interesting insights. One was maybe more of a fantasy: I used to think that many years later, when people thought of Ajahn Tiradhammo, all that would be left would be teeth. Everything else would be gone, my hair and my skin and the rest of the thirty-two parts – just teeth would be left. It's interesting to reflect like

that, because we naturally assume that we're going to persist, to just keep going.

There's a story of an early disciple of Ajahn Mun, the grandfather of the contemporary forest tradition in Thailand. This disciple was following the usual vocation of monks at that time as a schoolteacher, but he was also a very good meditator. Because this development of the thirty-two parts is a common meditation theme in southeast Asia, he was contemplating at least some of these parts of the body. One day he was teaching the children in the class, and he looked up from his desk to see a classroom full of skeletons there, just skeletons! Normally we see a skin-enclosed human being with clothes and so on, but because of his deep contemplation he saw skeletons instead; he saw beyond the normal superficial appearances of the body. After that he realized that he had to quit his job – obviously he was more interested in developing his meditation than in being a schoolteacher.

This sort of visualization is a very positive sign in meditation. It's called a nimitta, a vision. First of all we think about these parts, the skeleton, for example, or bones, and we have some kind of image of them. But when the image comes up as a strong vision, much more than just a fantasy or hallucination, this real and powerful vision comes from a deeper, clearer level of seeing, a deep concentration. And when that happens, it's not frightening, because it's not a fantasy. It is real, as real as seeing people as they appear normally. For example, when I was brushing my teeth, sometimes it was more like teeth-being-brushed rather than 'me' brushing my teeth. Sometimes it was just teeth and nobody brushing. But because it was very natural and a development of meditation, it wasn't frightening. This is not like seeing a horror-movie frightening image – because this image had come from development of awareness, it was very peaceful. It wasn't a normal perception, but it was very peaceful because it was reality, seeing reality much more deeply and clearly. With it a certain dispassion arose too. It's hard to get excited about teeth when we truly see them. When we don't see them so clearly, we think, 'I have really good teeth' or 'I have bad teeth', and we get caught up in the

stories about them. But if we just perceive teeth as they are, there are no more stories about them – it's just like seeing the truth, we don't argue about it.

The next formal exercise in developing body awareness is contemplating the four elemental qualities which comprise materiality – earth, fire, water, and air. At a monastery where I stayed in England there was an annual ten-day retreat, and usually the same people attended every year. I thought that rather than just give the same instructions, I'd do something else, so I chose a few different topics, and during the exercises in body awareness I suggested developing awareness of the four elemental qualities: earth, fire, water, air. This takes a bit of study at first – what are these elemental qualities? What is earth? It's not so much that we're made of dirt; rather, the earth element is hardness – the bones, the teeth, something solid, stable, substantial. The water element is fluidity, liquidity, expressing itself through the blood, saliva, tears and so on. The air element is distension: it fills things out as the breath does, but it's also what helps to move the limbs. It's the air element that allows us to walk and be mobile. And fire is the heat or cold in the body, and it's also the heat which causes aging and makes digestion take place, like a furnace.

By using these four elemental qualities as a template of the body, we can see it differently. Instead of me lifting my arm, there is the air element causing movement of 'earth' bones, 'water' blood and 'fire' aging. My teeth are clacking – that's earth. If I'm swallowing, that's water. We have a different definition of the body as just these four elements here and now: earth, fire, water, air. Some people find this very useful because it gives a new perspective on physicality, rather than always referring back to 'my body' which is aching now, or is comfortable or hungry or cold. If it's cold, it's just the heat element. If it's hungry, it's the heat element as digestion. If there's an ache somewhere, it's the air element, so instead of my body feeling painful, it's just the air element out of order.

Being able to look in this new way gives a different perspective, and maybe enables us to see not only change or impermanence, but another characteristic of the body – impersonality. It's not a personal entity,

not controlled by a person. It's just cause and effect, energies and forces going on. When we look at the body in terms of these four elemental qualities, just earth, water, fire or air moving, where is the person? Where is the entity, where is the soul, where is the self? There are just these four elements moving. This can be quite liberating, in the sense that we don't have to worry about our teeth because they're just the earth element and eventually they go back to the earth (maybe someone will dig them up in ten thousand years!) Air goes back to the air, water to water, heat to heat.

So I can be less personalized and less obsessed with regard to my body, because it's really just these universal elements. The air which allows my arm to move is the air that also blows through the trees. The earth element in this body is the same as the rocks in the stream down there. So we join nature. That's where we came from through eating and drinking, and that's where we'll end up. Looking at it in this way enables us to be a bit more receptive to the truth of this body. Rather than its being my particular situation which I try to control, or my personal problem, the body is just nature which subsists here for maybe seventy years. And then it'll return to nature again, but as elements it will still be there in some form or another.

Another practice with regard to the body which is mentioned in the scriptures but rarely used in the West is known as 'cemetery contemplations', i.e. contemplating the body in various states of decay and dissolution. This body is going to pass away, but we always focus on its 'livingness'. However, we very rarely look at the body when it's decaying, and especially when it's dead.

A less dramatic but more practical way to develop this exercise is to become aware of the aging nature of the body. We can observe the increased wrinkles on the hands and face, the decaying teeth or the creeping decrepitude of the body. This is a much more direct, immediate experience, which does not require any imagination, but just clearer seeing of what is already there.

Another effect of contemplating that this body is eventually going to fade away, decay and dissolve is that it actually gives us more appreciation of life. I think we just assume that we're going to live until one day we're not alive any more. But if we have a much clearer awareness that this body's definitely going to decay, every day that we're alive becomes quite a miracle, especially if we know a bit about anatomy. We get up in the morning and think, 'How can all this stuff keep working?' Cars break down in ten or twenty years, but this thing keeps going for sixty or eighty years. It gets rather worn out sometimes, but actually it's quite a miracle that it keeps going at all. So this contemplation changes our perception, giving us an appreciation of life rather than just plugging along day after day. But how do we use this opportunity for maximum benefit, rather than just thinking, 'Ho hum, another day'? Another day for what? Will we appreciate this day, live it in a beneficial way, or will we just put up with it?