

The First Factors of Awakening - Sati: Mindfulness

By Bhante Anuttara

In last month's article, I discussed the seven factors of Awakening, including mindfulness, investigation of Dhamma, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Due to the significance of all these seven factors, I would like to delve deeper into each factors.

Let's begin with Sati: Mindfulness.

Among the seven enlightenment factors, Sati is the most fundamental and should be ever-present alongside all other factors. It serves as the catalyst for all other factors and plays a fundamental role in our entire practice of Buddhism. Just as artists or athletes repeatedly practice basic techniques before mastering more complex skills, Buddhist practitioners should continuously and diligently cultivate Sati throughout their spiritual journey. It is the alpha and omega of Buddhist practice.

The most comprehensive manual for Sati practice provided by the Buddha is the discourse called the "Four Foundations of Mindfulness." This methodology offers a systematic and detailed approach to mindfulness practice, which covers four aspects: the body, feelings, the mind, and Dhamma (every phenomenon and the Buddha's teachings).

The body is more visible, tangible, and stable than feelings and the mind, making it more suitable for beginners and the initial stages of meditation practice. Common bodily objects include the breath, walking, posture, and actions. Feelings and mind states are subtler and more complex. However, as our practice progresses, all four frames of mindfulness are essential and should be practiced harmoniously according to the situation and timing. Any dominant and obvious phenomenon within and without at that very moment could be chosen as your meditation object. More precisely, when a dominant phenomenon occurs, you take it as an object.

Sometimes, a certain bodily posture or action might be obvious to you, and that can be your object for mindfulness meditation at that time. Other times, it might be a pleasant or

unpleasant feelings, or a particular state of mind (e.g., defiled or undefiled, contracted or distracted, opened or closed, etc.). You should be flexible and skilful with all of these various objects. However, it's widely acknowledged and recommended to begin with the breath as your initial and basic object.

How should we deal with the chosen object? In short, we apply our bare attention to the object. In other words, we apply choice-less awareness. For example, when an unpleasant feeling arises, instead of being caught or overwhelmed by it, simply bring bare attention and recognise that, 'there is an unpleasant feeling arising in me.' The point here is objective observation with bare attention, without clinging or aversion.

Mindfulness should be sustained throughout the other processes of the seven enlightenment factors, from the investigation of Dhamma to the deep state of Samadhi and equanimity. Sati should be applied on various levels and aspects to serve the purpose of each task accordingly.

Here's an analogy: Generating mindfulness is like turning on a flashlight. Imagine that the switch has a dimmer function. As you turn the switch, the light becomes brighter, allowing you to see things more clearly. If you continue turning the light up, it becomes extremely bright, and you no longer see individual objects, only brightness. This maximised brightness represents the state of Samadhi, where you and all distinctions disappear into oneness and unification.

According to the Buddha, both clear seeing and unification are necessary, and Vipassana (insight) and Samatha (calm) go hand in hand, delivering the message of Nibbana, the ultimate liberation, (Kimsuka Sutta - SN35:204). Sati is the essential key for opening the door to liberation.

Use Sati skilfully, sometimes in a moderate way and sometimes maximally. In the early morning and evening, when you are alone and conditions are suitable, maximise your Sati straightforwardly. Eventually, the chosen object will disappear, and you yourself will slowly fade into the super-intensified state of Sati without an object, which is Samadhi—a state of unification and calm, your true reality, the ultimate calm with bliss.

During the daytime, apply Sati to all kinds of objects and phenomena: your body, feelings, mind-states, and more. Sustained, moment-to-moment mindfulness with all kinds of objects will lead to a deeper understanding of the characteristics of existence: impermanence, no self, and Dukkha. Without Sati, these three characteristics are merely theoretical, but with Sati, they become a real experience and insight.

In this way, we practice Sati, the mindfulness.

With metta,

Bhante Anuttara