

International Conference on Mindfulness (ICM) -- Asia Pacific

Temporality as an Issue in Mindfulness

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I. Is Mindfulness Only About Focusing on the Present Moment?

- Mindfulness in a Buddhist context is a way to steady the mind from the ground up and to maintain awareness of the actual activities of one's body, feelings, mind, and related factors.
- However, it is common nowadays to hold that mindfulness exercises emphasize or are exclusively focused on the present moment.

II. Mindfulness in the Context of a Three-stratum Model of the Mind

- The following three-stratum, vertical model of the mind may be useful as a starting point for understanding how mindfulness works.
- The outer-stratum mental activities are associated with daily tasks, including.

II. Mindfulness in the Context of a Three-stratum Model of the Mind

- The inner-stratum mental activities consist of two parts. The first part includes latent personality traits and underlying capabilities. The second part consists in mental storehouse accumulated over a long period of time from continuous mental leftovers and emotional residues day after day.
- The bottom-stratum mental activities are located in the lowest layer of the mind.

III. A Simplistic Strategy of Contemporary Mindfulness Exercises in Coping with Complicated Mental Problems

- At least three main guidelines for the recourse to mindfulness exercises can be extracted.
- First, making complicated problems as simple as possible: to turn things into simple mode in order to be able to follow practical guidelines and to alleviate the problems.

III. A Simplistic Strategy of Contemporary Mindfulness Exercises in Coping with Complicated Mental Problems

- Second, making derivative problems as fundamental as possible.
- Third, making discursive problems as attentive as possible.
- The above three guidelines, i.e., keeping the mindset as simple, fundamental and attentive as possible, can be regarded as the main ingredients of mindfulness.

IV. A Reflection on Contemporary Mainstream Mindfulness Exercises

- A twofold reflection can be brought about concerning contemporary mainstream mindfulness exercises.
- First, on the effectiveness in solving complicated mental problems.
- Second, on the approach to meditative practices.
- The idea of the present moment is not to be taken for granted, as a given, as if it were something out there, waiting to be lived.

V. The Reality of the Sentient World in the Context of the Buddha's Teachings on Temporality

- Mindfulness exercises cannot stay within an extremely closed horizon of space and time to correctly understand and to effectively solve the related problems.
- The sentient world consists in the impermanent process of conditioned co-arising.

VI. Problem Solving and Goal Setting in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (The Discourse on the Ways of Attending to Mindfulness) is the most basic and most significant text on mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition.
- The thesis statement of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*'s “Introduction” touches on the major problems to be solved and the major goals to be accomplished through mindfulness as follows:

Monks, this is a one-way path for the purification of sentient beings, for passing beyond sorrow and grief, for the disappearance of entrapped suffering and discontent, for realizing the proper approach, for the direct experience of **Nibbāna**—namely the four ways of attending to mindfulness.

VI. Problem Solving and Goal Setting in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- Concerning problem solving, the major problems include sorrow, grief, entrapped suffering, and discontent. Concerning goal setting, the major goals include a one-way path for the purification of sentient beings, the proper approach, and **Nibbāna**.
- To reduce stress and to gain relaxation merely constitute the requirements in the preparatory stage, but are not regarded as goals in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. The prominent goal is **Nibbāna**, the extinguishing of the flame of defilements and liberation from **samsāra**.

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- It is worth mentioning that the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* does not say the exact words “focusing on the present moment.”
- First, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the practice of attending to mindfulness begins by way of body, and in the body, contemplating the body begins with the section about in-breathing and out-breathing, which in turn begins with the following instruction:

Just mindful, he breathes in. Just mindful, he breathes out. As he breathes in a long breath, he understands: “I am breathing in a long breath.” As he breathes out a long breath, he understands: “I am breathing out a long breath.” As he breathes in a short breath, he understands: “I am breathing in a short breath.” As he breathes out a short breath, he understands: “I am breathing out a short breath.”

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- Here the breathing provides an object for attending to mindfulness. During mindful breathing practice, the focus is placed on breath. However, this does not automatically mean that the awareness is confined exclusively to the present-moment breathing. It takes a certain amount of time to breathe. Some Breathing, including inhaling and exhaling, is longer than the other. No matter if it is longer or shorter, the practitioner is supposed to not only stay mindful along the whole process of breathing, but also contemplate and understand the length of the breathing. It is difficult to imagine how this guideline can be practically applied if the practitioner focuses only on the present moment.

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- Second, the section about in-breathing and out-breathing ends with the following instruction:

Or in the body, he dwells contemplating the way related factors arise.
Or in the body, he dwells contemplating the way related factors vanish. Or in the body, he dwells contemplating the way related factors arise and vanish.

- Here the mindful breathing practice is designed to stay mindful in contemplating the arising and vanishing of breathing-related factors.

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- It is obvious that simply focusing on the present moment will not be enough to fulfil the intended contemplation.
- The mindful breathing practice assumes a larger role than merely an attempt to reduce or relieve pressure. Staying mindful in contemplating the fluctuations during breathing becomes crucial for obtaining a correct understanding of the reality of breathing. Contemplation and understanding therein, in turn, push the mindful breathing practice to higher levels.

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- Third, concerning the body, in addition to breathing, mindful practice is also applied to ways of postures, correct understanding, attention to repulsiveness, attention to the (four material) elements, and the nine (stages of decomposition in a) charnel ground.
- As the body consists of many interrelated systems of organs, functioning in various aspects of personality and social life, and lasting for some time even after death, mindful practice includes, but is not limited to, breathing.
- Again, such a holistic approach to the body is vital for seeing the far deeper meaning in the big problems that face sentient beings.

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- Fourth, the goals in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* go beyond the level of correct understanding, even go further to realize **Nibbāna**, which is well attested both in the sutta’s “Introduction” and in the section on abiding in attending to mindfulness by way of related factors. In that section, the set of the Four Noble Truths is listed among related factors, and the third Noble Truth is indicated as follows: “He understands as it really is: ‘This is the cessation of suffering.’”

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

- When it comes to temporality, however, **Nibbāna**, or the cessation of suffering, may pose a profound challenge to conventional thinking.
- In the Buddhist scriptures, timeless **Nibbāna** is invariably characterized as the unconditioned nature of reality, devoid of the temporal sequence of changes.
- Mindfulness can also lead to a timeless dimension of reality where the conditioned process of suffering completely ends and there is no further rebirth in the cycle of existence.
- If mindful practice is regarded merely as techniques within a given temporal horizon, especially concealed within the present moment, then such a view will hinder mindfulness from approaching **Nibbāna**.

VIII. Conclusion

- First, it seems empty to say that mindfulness is about focusing on the present moment. After all, what is there in the present moment on which to focus? Unless the practice of attending to mindfulness is intentionally and specifically carried out by way of body, feelings, mind, or related factors, the present moment per se is like an empty box. The moment-to-moment experiences of everyday life, due to being random and sporadic in nature, can hardly be used for attending to mindfulness in a systematic manner or in a significant way. In order for currently occurring experiences to be more suitable for mindful practice, it is particularly important to consider and choose from a wide range of aspects that are both pertinent and conducive to cultivating mindfulness. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, body, feelings, mind, and related factors can contribute equally to the cultivation of mindfulness, and the act of breathing is only a part of the body that serves as a gateway to mindfulness. Therefore, an exclusive emphasis on the present moment seems hollow and stale, and an exclusive emphasis on breathing exercises seems partial and inadequate.

VIII. Conclusion

- Second, mindful practice, when purposeful and embedded in a meaningful context, can successfully deal with difficult issues and achieve specific goals. Owing to the lack of a temporal context, the idea of being fully in the present often propounded by contemporary mainstream mindfulness exercises will be inadequate to meet the task. Maybe some people feel content with living in the present. But mindful practice can do more than just that. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, sorrow, grief, entrapped suffering, covetousness, discontent, various mental hindrances and so on can be subdued by proper training in mindfulness. Besides, mindfulness is not just about raising and maintaining awareness, but about seeking more advanced goals on the path of meditation. Therefore, continuous contemplation and correct understanding are integrated into mindful practice to examine and solve problems and to enhance the ability to achieve goals. The effectiveness of implementing strategies in the problem-solving and goal-setting process requires thorough examination of cumulative impact problems and persistent commitment to long-term goals. This goes beyond the present moment.

VIII. Conclusion

- Third, that mindful practice can be oriented toward a timeless dimension of reality is probably the most significant message of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. Timeless dimension, in the context of this study, refers to **Nibbāna** or the cessation of suffering. **Nibbāna** is neither created, nor conditioned existence, nor subject to change, and is permanent. “Timeless” is not used to mean “everlasting temporal duration.” Rather, it is in the sense of neither being restricted to any temporal boundaries nor being affected by the passage of time that **Nibbāna** is timeless. On the one hand, mindful practice can be regarded as a temporal point process; on the other hand, mindful practice is a one-way path for the direct experience of **Nibbāna**. Therefore, an integral approach combining both temporal perspective and non-temporal perspective is required for mindful practice to work with the greater likelihood of cultivation and realization.