

Mindfulness and its Correlation to Awakening (Nibbana)

Radhika Abeysekera

Mindfulness is almost a household word among health care professionals and educators in the West. In the twenty first century, meditation centres that teach “mindfulness meditation” can be found in both the East and the West. For instance, research performed by Jon Kabat-Zinn has resulted in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programs (MBSR) being successfully integrated in many major health care systems in the West¹. Studies done by Kabat-Zinn on Tibetan meditating monks and large population based research studies by various others have determined that the practice of mindfulness resulted in considerable benefit to general wellbeing and health². Presently, mindfulness based practices are being used to reduce depression, anxiety, stress, and in the treatment of addictions³.

The Lord Buddha was concerned about two main realities of human existence. They are the comfortable, happy, harmonious present life and the life after death (re-birth). The Buddha was concerned with re-birth which he referred to as re-becoming because of the resulting suffering. Therefore, he investigated and realised how re-becoming takes place and how to cease its occurrence.

Even if there wasn't a Buddha, people in the world could still have lived a reasonably comfortable life in peace and harmony. But there would not have been a way to escape from the suffering of birth and the suffering resulting from birth. As such, the Buddha's principal mission was teaching the path that would completely eliminate the suffering of birth and the suffering resulting from birth. Therefore, we should not limit ourselves by focusing solely on the therapeutic, wellness and stress reduction benefits derived from the practice of his teachings. We should acknowledge, applaud and appreciate the research of Western academics and physicians that has resulted in the application of the Buddha's teachings in the health care systems and Western society. Their dedication and work have benefited countless persons of all faiths and religions and opened the doors to the Buddha's teaching of mindfulness in the West. We should, however, enhance this experience by introducing the relationship of mindfulness to the Buddha's principal mission of Awakening. This article introduces the practitioner to Mindfulness and its correlation to Awakening (*Nibbana*)

The dictionary defines mindfulness as the process of bringing one's attention or awareness to the experience of the present moment, and that it is usually developed with the help of meditation. The term mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word **Sati** which is an essential and integral component of the Buddha's Teachings (*Dhamma*). The term meditation is a translation of the Pali word **Bhavana**. The literal translation of **Bhavana** is “developing of the mind”. In Buddhist practices three steps are required to develop the mind.

¹ An interview with Jon Kabat-Zinn by Barbara Graham Buddhist Publication – Tricycle.

² Branstrom R, Duncan LG, Moskowitz JT (March 2011) The Association between dispositional mindfulness, psychological wellbeing and perceived health in a Swedish population based sample.

³ Querstret D, Cropley M, (2013) Assessing treatments used to reduce rumination and or worry: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*: Chiesa A. Are mindfulness based interventions effective for substance use disorders? A systematic review of the evidence.

The Buddhist Definition of the Process that leads to Developing the Mind (*Bhavana*)

1. To observe the mind and its contents (mind objects) so as to know the present moment nature of the mind.
2. To purify the mind from unskilful or unwholesome mind objects that lead to pain and suffering and develop skilful or wholesome mind object that lead to happiness, for oneself and others.
3. To release the mind from all stress/suffering (Awakening)

The Buddhist Definition of the Process that leads to Mindfulness (*Sati*)

1. To observe the mind and bring it back to the object of meditation or the present moment experience in daily life each time the mind moves away.
2. To be aware (with appropriate attention) of the true nature and experience of the mind when it has moved away from the object of meditation or the present moment experience in daily life.

The purpose of the first is to develop a tranquil and calm mind that is bright, sharp, focused and clear. The mind should be like the water in a still clear pond. One can see far into the depth of the pond. Similarly one should be able to see and experience far and deep into the depth of the mind. The required results are realised through the practice of Tranquility Meditation. Meditation on the Awareness of Breath, Loving Kindness/Compassion and Qualities of the Buddha are some of the commonly used practices of Tranquility Meditation.

The purpose of the second is to develop and experience insight to 'see things as they are'. The required results are realised through the practice of Insight Meditation. Together they lead to Awakening or Unbinding (*Nibbana*). To realize the desired results of Awakening, and the successful practice of mindfulness meditation one requires a strong foundation of virtue.

Most practitioners are familiar with Tranquility Meditation. Therefore, this article will focus on the process of observing the mind to experience its true nature, its arising, passing away and its movements so that one has the background knowledge required for the appropriate practice of Insight Meditation⁴.

Defining the Mind (*Citta*)

Let's begin by defining the term mind as per the teachings of the Buddha. We will begin by using six functions that are common to all human beings. Then we will add three more for a comprehensive understanding of the mind.

The first six that we will select for examination are the six internal sense bases/organs and their functions of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling of tactile/tangible sensations of the body and remembering. These six functions are how a human being acquires knowledge from the external world. We will begin by examining these six to ascertain the true nature, arising, passing away and movements of the mind from

⁴ As per the Satipattana Sutta

one object to another. Then we will examine three additional functions that all human beings can perform. They are thinking (constructing of thoughts), verbalizing (words) and doing (deeds /bodily actions). These nine examples of an arisen mind will help us to know, purify and release our mind from all stress and suffering.

To understand the mind and how it arises one has to understand the concept of cause and effect that is integral to the teachings of the Buddha. When the causes required for the mind to arise are all present together, the mind arises.

This living being that we refer to as “I”, is made up of two components - mind and body. The body on its own is an inanimate object. Consciousness operationalizes or activates the body resulting in the arising of the mind.

Whenever an external object, the appropriate internal sense organ, and consciousness come together, mind comes into being. The consciousness activates and operationalizes the sense organ. The coming together of the three is referred to as contact. The result or effect of the three coming together through contact is the arising of a mind.

We will examine this phenomenon with the sense base of the body as it is the easiest to understand. When the sense base of the body, a tangible object, and consciousness come together (contact) body feeling arises. The arisen mind is known as tactile sensations or body feeling. This feeling can be likable, dislikable or neutral.

We will now expand this phenomenon to all six of the sense organs. The feeling or sensing that occurs on contact is referred to as seeing, hearing, smelling, ... etc. based on the appropriate sense organ.

Sense Organ	External Object	Consciousness(<i>Viññāna</i>)	Arisen Mind (<i>Citta</i>)
Eye	Image/Colour	Consciousness acting in eye referred to as eye consciousness (<i>Chakku Viññāna</i>)	Feeling in the Eye (Seeing)
Ear	Sound	Consciousness acting in ear referred to as ear consciousness (<i>Sotha Viññāna</i>)	Feeling in the Ear (Hearing)
Nose	Smell	Consciousness acting in nose referred to as nose consciousness (<i>Ghāna Viññāna</i>)	Feeling in the Nose (Smelling)
Tongue	Taste	Consciousness acting in tongue referred to as tongue consciousness (<i>Jivha Viññāna</i>)	Feeling in the Tongue (Tasting)
Body	Tangible Objects	Consciousness acting in body referred to as body consciousness (<i>Kāya Viññāna</i>)	Feeling in the Body (Tactile sensation)
Brain	Thoughts (<i>cittaja rupa</i>)	Consciousness acting in brain referred to as brain consciousness (<i>Mano Viññāna</i>)	Feeling in the Brain (Remembering)

Most practicing Buddhists are aware that the five sense organs (internal objects) gather information from the external objects of the world resulting in seeing, hearing, smelling etc. At this point, you need to understand how the brain gathers thoughts from the outside. As per the teachings of the Buddha, when each of the five sensing organs (other than brain) is functioning, it creates a thought within the respective organ. This thought then becomes the outside or external thought for the brain. These thoughts are referred to as ***cittaja rupa*** in Pali⁵. It is referred to as external thought as it is external to the brain, just as sound is external to the ear, and odor is external to the nose. This thought together with the brain and the consciousness recalls similar or relevant material from the brain resulting in remembering.

In addition to remembering, the brain has the special ability to construct thoughts within the brain. The initial thought or ***cittaja rupa*** that occurs when remembering takes place together with consciousness and the sense organ of the brain also has the ability to construct thoughts within the brain. These thoughts or mind actions of the brain are referred to as thinking or constructed thoughts.

The Pure Mind (*Prabhāsvara Citta*) and the Five Aggregates as Mind (*Pancaskanda*)

The very first mind (***citta***) formed in each of the six sense organs when contact occurs is known as the pure mind or ***Prabhāsvara Citta***⁶. It is exceedingly pure and very clear. The ***Prabhāsvara Citta*** is not corrupted by, delusion, anger, desire, sloth, doubt, restlessness or any other defilement. All the unwholesome formations occur subsequently in the brain. Whenever a ***Prabhāsvara Citta*** is created in a sense organ, it is an effect of a previous kamma. Therefore, it doesn't contain any defilements or impurities. The corruption of the mind occurs subsequently, when thinking or constructed thoughts together with past memories and conditioning arise in the brain.

Even with a tranquil, clear, focused and bright mind we are not able to observe this first feeling or ***Prabhāsvara citta*** that arises in any of the sense organs. The speed of the arising and passing away of the ***Prabhāsvara citta*** is just one thought moment or ***cittakshana***⁷. This is said to be faster than the speed of light. It is only after many rounds of minds have arisen and passed away that feeling is strong enough for us to experience and observe. The Buddha aggregated or grouped together and referred to the components of the aggregated mind that could be observed and experienced as the five aggregates (***pancaskanda***). The feeling or experience is corrupted by constructed thoughts (***sankhāra***) and perception (***sanna***). The feeling or sensing that occurs, gives rise to pleasant, unpleasant or neutral experiences.

We will now consider the birth of a mind when thinking, verbalizing and when an action is performed by the body (doing). These three actions are referred to as ***mano or citta sankhāra, vaci sankhāra*** and ***kaya sankhāra*** in Pali.

⁵ Higher Teachings (Abhidhamma)

⁶ Samyutta Nikaya, Majjima Nikaya

⁷ Higher Teachings (Abhidhamma)

Organ	External Object	Consciousness(<i>Viññāna</i>)	Arisen Mind (<i>Citta</i>)
Brain	Thought (<i>cittaja rupa</i>)	Consciousness acting in brain referred to as brain consciousness (<i>Mano Viññāna</i>)	Thinking or constructed thoughts
Throat/ Mouth	Thought (<i>cittaja rupa</i>) <i>Vaci Viññānta</i>	Consciousness acting in throat/mouth referred to as body consciousness (<i>Kāya Viññāna</i>)	Verbalizing of Sound
Body	Thought (<i>cittaja rupa</i>) <i>Kaya Viññānta</i>	Consciousness acting in body referred to as body consciousness (<i>Kāya Viññāna</i>)	Movement of the body.

By observing the mind with appropriate attention during every movement of the mind, we can observe the process of cause and effect that lead to a birth of a mind. We can observe and experience the birth of the mind in the present moment when the causes are all present together and the destruction or dissolution of the mind when any of the required causes cease to exist. With practice one can experience the impermanence of the mind (*Anicca*), its emptiness or lack of substance (*Dukka*), and the inability to control or change the process, referred to as not-self (*Anatta*).

Observing the Process of Cause and Effect that Leads to Stress/Suffering

With the coming together of the internal sense organ, appropriate external object and consciousness (as cause) contact arises (effect).

With contact (as cause) the feeling of pleasant unpleasant or neutral arises (effect).

With feeling (as cause) craving or strong desire to hold on to pleasant sensations, change neutral sensations and avert unpleasant sensations arises (effect).

With craving (as cause) grasping or clinging arises (effect).

With grasping or clinging (as cause) habitual tendencies arise (effect).

With habitual tendencies (as cause) birth of a mind arises (effect)

With birth (as cause) decay and death of the mind, together with sorrow, lamentation and physical/mental suffering arises (effect).

Conclusion

Before one practices Mindfulness Meditation with the goal of Awakening, one must have the theoretical knowledge as to the method, and confidence that the chosen method will lead to the desired results. One must examine, research, question and experiment to see if this is the method most suitable to one's own nature and temperament. When one has confidence that this is the right method for oneself, then one must practice with effort and diligence.

This is a twofold method of meditation that can be practiced consecutively or in tandem. One begins the practice of meditation on a strong foundation of virtue that results in a mind suffused with harmlessness and goodwill to all beings. Then one must calm the mind until it is bright, still and clear like the waters of a still pond. Finally one must observe the mind and its movements to experience the birth and dissolution or extinction in the present moment. One can observe the birth (*uppāda*) and the extinction (*bhanga*) of the Five Aggregates and the operation of Cause and Effect in the present moment, each time a mind arises and passes away. With appropriate attention and this observation, one will, over a long period of time, experience the truth of impermanence, emptiness and not self of the five aggregates and the mind. This experience will gradually lead to the purification of the mind and the release of the mind from stress and suffering (Awakening)⁸.

The process of understanding is gradual; however, the realization, which happens in four stages, is instantaneous. The understanding and experience will differ for each individual based on their past skilful deeds, nature, and inner strengths. This is just an example of the gradual progress of understanding:

1. Foundation of virtue.
2. Calming the scattered or agitated mind with the appropriate Tranquility Meditation.
3. Observing the mind with choiceless awareness and non-reactive observation.
4. Calm and collected mind.
5. Intellectual understanding of cause and effort.
6. Awareness of the birth and extinction of the mind as and when the mind moves from one object to another.
7. Glimpse of Impermanence, Emptiness and Not-self (of the form⁹ followed by mind).
8. Falling away of the attachment to form.
9. A deeper understanding of cause and effort including dependent origination and the birth of a mind resulting in stress/suffering.
10. Glimpse of Impermanence, Stress/Suffering and Not-self (of the mind corrupted by clinging).
11. Realisation that the mind moves from present moment due to desire/craving/clinging and the experience of the resulting falling away of sensual desire.
12. Experiencing the Four Noble Truths in each arising and passing away of the mind.
13. Release of the mind from stress and suffering.

⁸ This article focuses only on introducing the relationship between mindfulness and Awakening. This teaching is deep, complex and to be experienced. The teachings related to the impermanence of the body and meditations based on the nature of the individual have not been addressed in this article.

⁹ It is assumed that one has knowledge and practiced meditation on the four great elements (*Satara Maha Datu*) or the eight pure primary properties (*Suddastaka*).