

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 2: Exploring Buddhist Practice – The Five Precepts

Week 6: The Fifth Precept – Awareness, not Escapism

Positive form: With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

Negative form: I undertake to abstain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.

Pāli: Surā-meraya-majja-pamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

The importance of awareness in Buddhism

In Buddhism growth in awareness is seen as an essential part of spiritual development. The enlightened mind that Buddhists aim to develop is a more aware mind. Awareness of ourselves is what liberates us from our past patterns. Awareness of others and the world around us is what transforms our emotional life. Ultimately, awareness of reality liberates us from the delusion that is the root of all our suffering and dissatisfaction.

The meanings of mindfulness

The quality of awareness that Buddhists seek to develop is often called ‘mindfulness’. But this one English word is used for three separate Sanskrit words, which have different shades of meaning.

1. Smṛti (Pāli sati) is usually translated as mindfulness or awareness, but its primary meaning is recollection or even memory. As with the English word ‘recollection’, smṛti is normally used to mean the state of being present in our actual experience, which is the opposite of distraction or absent-mindedness
2. Samprajanya (Pāli sampajañña) literally means ‘clear knowing’. It is used to mean clearly knowing your purpose, and the relationship of what you are doing to your goal. Sangharakshita often speaks of samprajanya as ‘mindfulness of purpose.’
3. Apramāda (Pāli appamāda) means awareness in an active, ethical sense – it is sometimes translated as vigilance. It means mindfully guarding against unskillful actions of body, speech and mind. (The Buddha’s last words were said to be appamādena sampadetha (in Pāli), which is often translated as ‘with mindfulness, strive on.’) Its opposite is pramāda, which means among other things intoxication, carelessness, and laxity.

Taking these three words together we get some idea of the multi-faceted nature of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, and its crucial importance for the spiritual life. Without smṛti we will not be present to our experience, we will not be aware enough to enjoy what we are doing or the world around us, and in our distraction

we will have no hope of having either samprajanya or apramāda. Without samprajanya we will continually forget what our life is about, drifting along aimlessly at the mercy of external events, never achieving our goals or putting our decisions into effect. Without apramāda we will not be able to keep any of the other precepts, so mindfulness could be said to be the foundation of all our ethical practice. Without mindfulness we are on automatic pilot. We have no real choice, and no freedom – life is living us, rather than us living life. As we develop more and more mindfulness we develop the ability to consciously choose our responses to circumstances, other people, and the workings of our own minds.

Classifications of Awareness

Awareness has many aspects or dimensions. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), the Buddha defines the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as:

1. Mindfulness of the body
2. Mindfulness of feelings
3. Mindfulness of the mind
4. Mindfulness of reality

Sangharakshita has expanded this traditional formulation, identifying what he calls the Four Dimensions of Awareness, which are

1. Awareness of things, or the physical environment
2. Awareness of self including
 - a) Awareness of body
 - b) Awareness of feelings
 - c) Awareness of thoughts
3. Awareness of other people
4. Awareness of reality

1. Awareness of the physical environment

Many people notice that when they start meditating they become more aware of the world around them, and that this enriches their enjoyment of life enormously. The grass, the trees, the ever-changing sky, even the cityscape of buildings, engineering works and artificial light, all start to take on a new clarity, vividness, and beauty. The world we live in is very beautiful, but normally many of us are too distracted and preoccupied to pay attention to it. Learning to pay attention to the world and to take delight in it is one of the greatest favours we can do ourselves. Meditation helps, but we also need to apply our heightened awareness during the routine of our everyday lives. To some extent this is simply a matter of deciding to pay attention. We need to learn to look at the world, smell the world,

listen to the world, feel the world, and even taste the world. To do this we may need to devote some time to it – giving ourselves the space to walk rather than taking the quickest way from A to B, and so on. We may also need to restrain our tendency to distract ourselves with artificial inputs, or by indulging our inner fantasies and daydreams.

2. Awareness of the self

a) Awareness of the body

This is some of what the Buddha has to say about developing mindfulness of the body:

‘Here a monk.... sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, having established mindfulness before him. Mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out... He trains himself thinking, “I will breath in, conscious of the whole body.” He trains himself thinking, “I will breath out, conscious of the whole body...’

When walking, he knows that he is walking, when standing, he knows that he is standing, when lying down, he knows that he is lying down. In whatever way his body is disposed, he knows that is how it is.

When going forward or going back, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in looking forward or looking back, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in bending and stretching, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in carrying his robe and his bowl, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in eating, drinking, chewing and savouring, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in passing excrement or urine, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, in speaking or in staying silent, he is clearly aware of what he is doing.’

Practising in this way can have a powerful effect, which is impossible to imagine unless we have experienced it. The body becomes suffused with awareness, our mental processes become calmed, our attention is taken away from the anxious chatter of our discursive mind, and is grounded instead in an awareness of our physical being that allows us to experience a sense of grace in even the most simple actions. We also appreciate the world around us in a new way – awareness of the body and awareness of the world around us seem to go together, as both quieten our inner dialogue.

So being more mindful of the body brings many rewards in its own right, but it is also the foundation on which we build all other aspects of mindfulness. When our awareness is grounded in our actual physical experience, we have a firm anchor that lets us become more aware of our inner mental processes without getting caught up and swept along by them. But when we are not ‘in our body’ we have no firm place to stand, and we all too easily get lost in a purely mental world of fleeting thoughts, feelings, imaginations, and anxieties.

Going on a meditation retreat can help us become more aware of our bodies. We can also cultivate mindfulness of the body in our everyday life e.g. by walking and eating mindfully, rather than distracting ourselves from our physical experience by listening to music or reading at the same time. Any form of physical exercise can help, if it is done in the right frame of mind. Yoga and tai chi have developed specifically as aids to body awareness, and are particularly helpful.

b) Awareness of feelings

The word ‘feeling’ as used by the Buddha in this context does not mean emotion, it refers to what is called, in Pāli, *vedanā*. *Vedanā* means the instantaneous response of liking or disliking that we get whenever any stimulus impinges on our senses. According to whether it gives us a pleasant or unpleasant *vedanā*, we try to grab or reject different parts of our experience. Our *vedanās* arise from our past conditioning, and often they are not connected with any objective good or bad qualities inherent in the thing or experience itself – why should one person love strawberry ice cream, or rainy weather, when another hates it?

When our responses to *vedanā* rule our life we live in what someone has jokingly called ‘doggy consciousness’ – like a dog chasing smells it likes, shying away from what it dislikes, running this way then that with no fixed aim at all. Responding automatically and unconsciously to our *vedanās* is what keeps us trapped in our old reactive patterns of behaviour. The gap between *vedanā* and our response is our point of freedom, where we can escape from past patterns and free ourselves to act in new and creative ways. This only becomes possible when we are aware of our *vedanās*, without responding – hence mindfulness of feelings in this sense is a crucial part of our effort to liberate ourselves.

Sangharakshita also uses the word ‘feeling’ in a broader sense, to include emotions. Being aware of our emotions is a crucial part of becoming a conscious, self-determining human being, living from the full potency of our hearts as well as our heads. If we are not aware of our emotions they tend to rule us, without us having any conscious choice in the matter. We have all had experience of people who say that they are not angry or resentful, when everything about their body language and tone of voice clearly shows that they are. These may be extreme examples, but most of us could usefully become more aware of the underlying emotions that are driving us.

As we become more aware of our emotional life we have more choice about how we express our feelings. This may start out by us simply refusing to express harmful emotions, especially when we know that these would not be helpful. But as our practice deepens, mindfulness of feelings starts to have a deeper effect, transforming our emotions so that our experience becomes more and more positive. The very act of becoming aware of our emotions has this transformative effect – our unskilful emotions tend to be resolved, and our skilful emotions tend to become stronger and more refined.

c) Awareness of thoughts

Often our heads are full of mental chatter. We are constantly planning the future, regretting the past, worrying about what other people think, imagining what is going to happen, constructing fantasies, making assumptions about other people and their motives, and so on. This constant stream of thoughts gives us little time for peace of mind or enjoyment of the world around us. And what is worse, we often take our mental dialogue completely seriously, and identify with it, so that what starts out as a passing thought becomes a whole fantasy which we take for a reality, and which we then act out in the world.

But in fact most of our thinking is like mental weather – it comes, and it goes, in dependence on past conditions. We do not have to take it so seriously, identify with it, or pour energy into it. If instead we can maintain clear awareness of our mental weather, we have taken the first step in liberating ourselves from it. As with feelings, awareness of our thoughts has a transformative effect. As we learn to watch our thoughts from moment to moment, firstly in meditation, and then in our everyday life as well, we notice that the flow of mental chatter often slows down or stops altogether. This can be a profoundly refreshing experience, which goes along with a deep sense of peace. We also become more able to evaluate our thinking, sifting what is true and objective from what simply untrue, clouded by negative emotion, or based on mere assumptions. We become more able to consciously direct our thinking, so that we can reflect on the subject we choose in a more effective, concentrated way, rather than simply drifting from one thought to another. And we may also find that as our superficial thinking quiets down we become able to think from deeper levels, so that thinking and feeling become fused into one higher faculty, and our intuitions becomes more frequent and reliable.

3. Awareness of other people

Usually most of us are not very aware of other people in their fullness, as beings who feel and experience as intensely as we do, who have a whole inner world as we do, and who are in every way as important as we are. Apart from the few people we are close to, we often see people almost as objects, who either exist for our convenience – to drive our bus or cook our dinner – or else are of no interest at all. One way to change this lack of awareness is simply to pay attention to people, which includes looking at them – their faces, their eyes, their body language. When we really pay attention to people we begin to see them as they are, as human beings in their own right. We also need to make an effort to pay attention to people close to us, to use our senses and imagination to know what they are feeling, to empathise with them and know their needs. Unless we are aware of other people we cannot feel mettā for them, and we cannot communicate with them.

4. Awareness of reality

In traditional texts this is usually described in terms of relating our experience to Buddhist ideas like the Four Noble Truths. This can allow us to cut through our

usual interpretations of events, and see things in a truer light. For example, if we make the effort to remain mindful of the fact of transience, then we will see transience and change everywhere, and our deluded tendency to interpret the world in terms of fixed permanent ‘things’ will be eroded. We may also be liberated from some of our anxieties and negative states – when our car gets dented or we notice some grey hairs, this may not seem so awful or surprising in the context of a cosmos that is one huge process of transformation!

The negative form of the precept

In Sangharakshita’s words, mindfulness “is fundamental to spiritual practice; one cannot begin without it.” So it is not surprising that Buddhist ethical guidelines advise us not to do those things that destroy our mindfulness needlessly. The negative form of the fifth precept therefore calls for us to refrain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.

Alcohol

Some newcomers to Buddhism have a problem accepting this negative form of the precept, because for many people in Western societies drinking alcohol is an integral part of their social life. But in this respect there are several things we should think about.

Firstly, the precept is advising us not to drink to the point that our mindfulness is impaired. For some people this may not rule out some social drinking, or the occasional glass of wine with a meal. Secondly, as with all the precepts, what is important is that we are moving in the right direction, not necessarily that we immediately follow all the precepts perfectly. Thirdly, it can be unwise to jump ahead in our imagination to a point where we are further advanced in our practice than we are now, and then judge what this might be like from our present position. At the moment, a life without alcohol might seem like a joyless prospect. But by the time we are ready to give up alcohol completely things may look very different. Most practising Buddhists find that, as their normal state of mind becomes happier and their emotions warmer and more easily expressed, they lose the desire to drink alcohol. Many find the dulled awareness caused by alcohol unpleasant.

So we do not need to feel that we cannot be a practising Buddhist unless we give up alcohol. But we should recognise that our practice will lead us in that direction if we want to make serious progress. Many Buddhists in the West drink alcohol occasionally, but few serious practitioners in Triratna drink regularly, or to the point of intoxication. Many never drink at all. In particular, when we are trying to make serious progress in meditation it is advisable not to drink any alcohol, as even small amounts affect our meditation the next morning.

As with the other precepts, the advice not to drink alcohol has an other-regarding aspect, as well as protecting our own well-being. Many people are seriously damaged by alcohol, and cause a great deal of unhappiness to themselves and

those close to them. Others equate drunkenness with happiness, and spend a lot of their leisure time in a dulled, coarsened state, which must have a long term effect on their spiritual well-being. By abstaining from drink we make it easier for others to do so, making the world a happier place in the process. By not drinking we also withhold our complicity from the alcohol industry, an exploitative aspect of the consumer society, which profits from creating a great deal of unhappiness.

Other drugs

The fifth precept also advises against the use of intoxicating drugs other than alcohol. Cannabis is the most common recreational drug after alcohol in modern Western societies, and paradoxically it may have a more serious effect on spiritual practice than alcohol, precisely because it is not so obviously damaging. If we drink too much alcohol we will quickly be confronted with some stark choices. But it is possible to spend our every moment to some extent dulled by cannabis, particularly as it lasts for many days in the body. Even occasional cannabis use is bad news for mindfulness and meditation.

Lastly, what about other mind-altering drugs like LSD, psilocybin (magic mushrooms), and ecstasy? Some people are attracted to the Dharma because drugs like these revealed the possibility of other states of being, or even opened up something like a spiritual experience. But continued use of these drugs is damaging, and having found the Dharma, with its many much healthier and more sustainable ways of expanding our consciousness, why take the risks involved in the violent chemical alteration of consciousness? (Sangharakshita has described LSD for example as ‘spiritual baby food’ – and as with baby food, when we are more spiritually grown up it is unnecessary and unpleasant.)

Mindfulness in daily life

Mindfulness is difficult to maintain, and because it is so crucial to spiritual life we need to do everything we can to develop and maintain it. This could include meditation, retreats, body awareness exercises, giving ourselves the time to be aware of simple pleasures, avoiding too much rush and input overload, and making the effort to be aware of the world around us. Another important way of developing mindfulness is to keep in contact with other Buddhists, to use the conducive environment provided by the Sangha. To quote Sangharakshita:

‘If you realise the importance of ...mindfulness...you realise that if you lose it, you lose, in a sense, everything, then you are going to want to do something a little more radical than tying a knot in your handkerchief to make sure you preserve it. And one very effective way is to develop spiritual friendship.’

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Has your mindfulness increased since you started to meditate? If so, which aspects of your awareness have been most affected?

2. When are you most mindful of your body? Do you notice any relationship between mindfulness of the body and your mental state, especially anxiety?
3. What could you do to increase your mindfulness of the body?
4. What effects have retreats or periods with little activity had on your mindfulness?
5. Do you accept that it would be a good idea to avoid intoxicants? To what extent do you practice this? If you do not practice the precept perfectly, has your use of intoxicants changed since you started practising the Dharma?