

Mindfulness: Timeless Inner Technology for a Full-fledged Life

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Brief History of Mindfulness

The history of mindfulness (*sati* in Pali, *smṛiti* in Sanskrit) and awareness in Buddhism is deeply rooted in ancient Indian contemplative traditions, profoundly reshaped and systematised by the Buddha.

When the Buddha formulated *sati* (mindfulness) as part of his Eightfold Noble Path, he drew on these existing meditative and contemplative practices and gave them unique ethical and psychological depth — focusing on being aware of the present moment, letting go of attachments, and understanding the impermanence of all things. The Buddha reinterpreted and systematised these into the structured mindfulness practices we associate with Buddhism today.

After years of exploring these traditions, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) reframed existing contemplative practices in several crucial ways, in which Mindfulness (*sati/smṛti*) became central, not as a passive state of awareness, but as active, discerning attention deeply grounded in ethical awareness.

The Buddha taught that there is no permanent self (*anattā* or *anātma*) and liberation comes through insight into impermanence, suffering and non-self (*śūnyatā*), emphasising direct experience of these as focal points of mindful observation.

The Buddha taught mindfulness as part of the Eightfold Noble Path, especially under Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), highlighting four foundations: Body (e.g., breath, postures), Feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), Mind (states like distraction or concentration) and Mental objects (like the Five Hindrances, Four Noble Truths).

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In early Buddhism (Nikāya schools²), mindfulness remained a core meditative and ethical discipline. The Theravāda tradition, as preserved in the Pāli Canon, emphasised Vipassana or insight meditation, where mindfulness plays a key role in observing phenomena as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.

The Satipatthāna Sutta became a seminal text for mindfulness meditation in this tradition. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, mindfulness was integrated with bodhisattva ethics and emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

Mindfulness was not only for personal liberation but also for cultivating compassionate awareness for all beings. It combined mindfulness with analytical meditation, visualisation, and awareness of mind's luminous nature, from which the term *zhiney lhakthong* — Calm-abiding — and Vipassana meditation came into practice.

Primary Human Seeking--Fulfilment

Almost all ancient traditions, particularly Buddhism and the Sanatana Dharma tradition of India, teach that ignorance is the root cause of human suffering.

It is a natural human inclination to seek happiness, success and wellbeing. Everything we do, whether grand or mundane, from striving for professional achievement to the simple act of blinking an eye, is ultimately an expression of our longing to feel complete, safe and fulfilled. Consciously or unconsciously, every action stems from this innate drive for happiness.

One of our greatest mistakes is to assume, almost unconsciously, that the quality of our lives depends entirely on external circumstances, people, wealth, status and power. As a result, we engage only at the surface level, overlooking the deeper sources of our suffering and fulfillment.

The truth is, most of our problems — perhaps over 90% — originate from our own minds, yet we persist in seeking solutions outside ourselves. Most

2 Nikāya schools refer to the early Buddhist sects that emerged after the Buddha's death, each with its own monastic community, disciplinary code, and doctrinal emphasis. The term Nikāya means "group" or "assembly" in Pali. Among these, the Theravāda tradition is the only surviving school today.

human suffering arises from within, but we attempt to fix it by rearranging the world around us.

Likewise, true wellbeing can only happen from within, but we mindlessly chase it through external pursuits. This fundamental mismatch — between where our problems originate and where we look for their solutions — lies at the heart of much of modern discontent.

This paradox stems from ignorance. The solution lies in “knowing” — in wisdom, in insight, in awakening to the truth of how things really are through direct observation and investigative inquiry.

It is in this context the Buddhist practice of “mindfulness and awareness” as taught by the Buddha becomes relevant and critical in addressing the problems we face daily in life. It serves as a direct antidote to all problems; a panacea for all mental problems, and a spiritual technology for human flourishing and genuine wellbeing.

Mindfulness and Awareness

In Buddhism, “mindfulness” and “awareness” are foundational mental qualities. Although closely related, they serve distinct and complementary roles in the journey toward insight, transformation and liberation.

Mindfulness is the sustained, non-distracted attention to the present moment; a steady remembrance to stay connected with one’s chosen observation, such as the breath, bodily sensation, emotions, or thoughts. It is non-judgmental, stable, and focused bare attention that lies at the heart of the practice; for example, mindfulness is being fully present with the breath as it moves in and out of the nostrils, without becoming lost in thoughts.

On the other hand, awareness brings clarity and discernment regarding what is happening in relation to that object or experience. Awareness is clear comprehension or understanding of the context, purpose and appropriateness of one’s actions or experiences.

It accompanies mindfulness, and adds the knowing quality or the discriminative quality to mindfulness. In short, awareness is the wisdom

side of attention, which is knowing how to act or respond. It allows us to see these reactions clearly as they arise, without feeding them.

For example, imagine you are chairing a tense discussion when a colleague speaks harshly, and irritation arises. If you are mindful, you can observe the emotion as it surfaces, acknowledging, “I am listening; I don’t need to react.”

In that moment, grounded in awareness, you remain calm and poised. You neither suppress nor indulge the irritation but hold space for it. This present-moment mindfulness grants you the freedom to choose your response — mentally, verbally and physically — with resilience and clarity.

Mindfulness is like switching a light on an object, and awareness is like the ability to clearly see what the light reveals. Once we see it clearly, then we assess it and comprehend it; that is awareness. You cannot see clearly unless the light is already on.

Together, mindfulness and awareness work in synergy to cultivate insight and wisdom. Therefore, both mindfulness and awareness are closely related and function as inseparable companions in practice — co-arising and mutually reinforcing each other.

Therefore, the term mindfulness is often used broadly to encompass both mindfulness and awareness, though they are distinct and yet complementary qualities.

Turning Inward

Turning in is the only way out. Mindfulness has the power to break the cycle of reaction, or interrupt this automatic chain reaction. Turning in means observing our inner state of being, which is fundamentally looking at our mental states — our thoughts and emotions.

Joy or misery, though often triggered by external events, are ultimately experienced within the mind. It is not the external conditions per se that creates mental suffering. It is the negative emotions that erode happiness from within, even when outside circumstances are in perfect order.

While external hardships, such as poverty or physical pain, can cause distress, genuine suffering more often originates within — from the turbulent emotions of anger, fear, guilt, resentment, jealousy, envy, shame, anxiety, regret, and grief.

Our mental state determines whether we feel elevated or distressed. A single negative thought can generate a great deal of distress even if no external harm has occurred. If we harbour a negative thought or strong feeling of aversion toward someone, they do not have to say or do anything; just their presence is enough to disturb our peace, because the discomfort is arising from within us, not from them.

We might try to recall the last time we truly suffered from poverty, physical harm, domination, suppression or disease; and for many of us, such experiences are rare or distant. Yet we cannot deny that, on a moment-to-moment basis, we suffer from reactive inner disturbances, such as agitation, anger, frustration, resentment, envy, jealousy.

In the midst of this inner storm, we lose our composure, our mental stability is shaken, and our clarity and decision-making are compromised.

Over time, mindfulness weakens the momentum of our habitual, reactive patterns. What was once automatic becomes optional — a matter of choice and discernment.

Through this simple yet profound shift from unconscious reactivity to conscious observation, we begin to reclaim agency over our inner world. In doing so, we cultivate clarity, freedom and emotional resilience; the very roots of inner transformation.

When we are mindful and aware of our emotions, we begin to develop the insight and wisdom to recognise a simple but profound truth: Positive emotions, such as compassion, loving kindness, empathy, affection and gratitude naturally lead to happiness.

In contrast, negative emotions like anger, jealousy, resentment, hatred and greed inevitably perpetuate suffering. Through mindfulness, this realisation moves beyond theory and becomes a direct, first-person experience.

When we are truly mindful of our emotional states, we directly feel their inner texture — the pleasantness or unpleasantness they carry.

Once this becomes our lived experience, a subtle yet powerful transformation begins. Our emotions start to shift, not through force or suppression, but naturally and effortlessly. Anger gradually gives way to patience; envy transforms into sympathetic joy, ignorance yields to insight.

This process of emotional transformation is at the heart of mindfulness practice. The goal is not to suppress or deny our emotions, but to cultivate the capacity to observe them with clarity and relate to them with wisdom and compassion. Through this awareness, we learn to engage with our emotions constructively, allowing them to evolve into more wholesome and liberating states of mind.

The Two Arrow Doctrine

Our habitual reactions are the root of suffering. Much of human suffering does not arise from events themselves, but from our unconscious, automatic reactions to them. Here the Buddha's Two Arrows Doctrine explains best.

The core project of the Buddha was to address the issue of suffering. The Buddha acknowledged that physical pain is inevitable, so long as you have a body, hunger, heat and cold, physical discomfort, aging, illness, and death are inevitable. But much of our deeper suffering arises not from these physical conditions themselves, but from our mental reactions to them.

In the *Sallatha Sutra*, the Buddha illustrated suffering through the metaphor of two arrows. The first arrow represents life's inexorable hardships — aging, illness, death, tragedies, failures, loss, rejection, etc. The second arrow symbolises our emotional and psychological reaction to the first arrow.

The first arrow is often beyond our control and must be accepted as part of life. But the second arrow, our mental and emotional reactions to that pain, is where transformation is possible. Mindfulness offers a way to reduce the impact of the second arrow by cultivating awareness, equanimity, and clarity.

Awakening through Mindfulness

In Buddhism, investigative inquiry is a core mental activity that plays a crucial role in awakening. It involves examining our experience with mindfulness and discernment, rather than blindly following habitual patterns or assumptions.

Through investigative inquiry, we begin to see our mental states and actions with clarity, and how they are shaped by limiting forces, such as craving, aversion, ignorance and ego-clinging. This clarity of awareness begins to dissolve the spell of *samskaras*³ — latent mental tendencies stored in the subconscious, allowing space for insight, freedom, and transformation.

According to Buddhist psychology, our behaviour is largely shaped by *samskaras*. These tendencies are not random; they arise from prior causes such as past karma, perception, craving, aversion, and ignorance.

This cycle of thoughts and tendencies is in constant motion, rotating from moment to moment. If one observes carefully, one will notice that thoughts often emerge before one consciously thinks them. They seem to bubble up from somewhere deep within.

Take a simple example — blinking your eyes. You might say, “I blinked because I thought to”, but if you look more closely, you will see that the decision to blink did not arise from a deliberate, conscious thought. Rather, a subtle impulse surfaced, like a tiny bubble rising from the depths of a still lake. When it reached the surface of awareness, it took form as a thought: “I will blink now.” And only then did the action (to blink) follow.

In truth, we did not initially “think” the action in the conventional sense; we were prompted by a quiet signal from the subconscious — a mental formation shaped by past patterns.

Thus, before every word we speak or deed we perform, there is often a subtle mental impulse arising from the depths of the subconscious. Without awareness, these impulses govern us. With awareness, we begin to see the

3 Samskāra refers to the mental impressions, dispositions, or habitual patterns formed by past actions, thoughts, and experiences. In Buddhist and Indian philosophy, these condition future actions and perceptions, shaping one's character and contributing to the continuity of samskāra (the cycle of rebirth).

inner mechanics of thoughts and behaviour, and with that insight, the possibility of freedom opens.

These thoughts bubbling up from inside are our tendencies inherited from our past, activated by specific corresponding triggers as habitual ways of thinking, feeling and reacting.

For example, if someone has a tendency to become defensive, that might get easily triggered when they encounter criticism, prompting a reflexive thought of aversion or resistance. A person with a habit of craving comfort may feel that desire or clinging, when they are alone or emotionally low. The external situations stimulate or awaken those ingrained internal patterns.

This is where mindfulness becomes crucial. When a conditioned reaction begins to arise from the depths of the subconscious, there is a fleeting moment, a narrow window of awareness, before the impulse fully crystallises into a conscious thought or feeling.

In that space, we can choose to engage with it or to let it pass. But this window is so subtle and brief that we often miss it. Most of the time, we are in autopilot mode, swept along by ingrained habits. Only a mindful presence can detect that subtle window of opportunity, and it is easiest to transform the impulse at that stage.

Once the thought takes full form, it becomes much harder to manage. It takes hold and often overrides our will power. At that point, trying to resist is like trying to stop yourself mid-air after jumping off a cliff. You can only hope for a soft landing at best.

Mindfulness helps us intercept reactive patterns at their roots. It draws our attention to the impulse as it arises, before it overwhelms us. In that sacred pause, we gain the power to observe the seed of thought as it begins to sprout. This is the moment of conscious choice; a space to discern — Is this wholesome or unwholesome? Should I entertain or let it go?

Depending on how you respond, an impression takes shape as a thought, positive or negative. Though the thought may fade from conscious awareness, it does not disappear; instead, it sinks into the subconscious as a *samskara*.

For example, the moment you hear an insulting remark, you notice the word. If you are mindless, our ingrained patterns react instantly, leaving no space between stimulus and response. You might think, “This is wrong. I cannot accept it. How dare they”? and in an instant, you are swept up in agitation and emotional turmoil. No matter how intelligent or capable you may be, without emotional intelligence, this is where things begin to go wrong.

If you are mindful, you still hear the word, yet you remain aware of the disruptive situation without being consumed by it. You detect the arising impulse of aversion in the mind, recognise the emotion, and become aware of the feeling: “I am experiencing irritation.”

You pause, create inner space, and say to yourself, “Stay calm. Let it go.” In that pause lies your freedom — the power to respond rather than react. In that moment, you consciously generate a mindful thought of “letting go”. That thought, too, sinks into the subconscious as a new *samskara*, a positive imprint.

Over time, the more you respond with mindfulness, the more your mental patterns begin to shift toward positivity, compassion and empathy. This gradual process is called mental purification, or emotional transformation.

Mindfulness: A Response to the Modern World

It becomes clear that, without emotional intelligence, our stability is conditional, sustained only when circumstances are favourable and no external triggers disturb our inner state.

However, life rarely unfolds exactly as we wish. We are not the only actors on the stage; others are also involved, and their actions, intentions and energies intersect with ours.

In such moments, we are easily influenced by external conditions, often resulting in stress, and reactivity. It is precisely in such clouded mental states that we are most prone to errors. Many of the blunders and misjudgments in both personal and public life stem from lack of emotional intelligence.

The true test of character and clarity comes when we are confronted with strong, opposing stimuli — those moments that disturb our emotional and mental balance and cloud our ability to make fair and effective judgements.

When the mind is unsettled, we inevitably fall under the sway of clinging or aversion — the twin emotional forces that lie at the root of most human suffering. In such states, our inner clarity becomes distorted and our decision-making is compromised.

When people cultivate mindfulness and remain aware of their thoughts and feelings, they begin to develop genuine emotional intelligence. It stabilises the mind, and enables us to remain rooted in the moment with awareness and clarity, and less reactive to external stimuli.

In today's world, particularly in leadership, governance and business, mindfulness serves as a powerful tool for ethical, intelligent and effective decision-making. It invites us to become aware of our inner world and empowers us to transform it and, in doing so, we reshape our outer experience. This inner awareness allows a person to respond to even high-pressure or emotionally charged situations with clarity, compassion, empathy and deep sensibility.

Mindful Leadership Traits

Mindfulness offers a profoundly human, non-religious approach to leadership, one rooted in the present moment, compassion, wisdom and responsibility. It provides a transformative framework for cultivating integrity, emotional intelligence, inner discipline and human-centred leadership.

By cutting through ego-driven tendencies, mindfulness enables leaders to see clearly, act wisely, and serve selflessly. This inner mastery forms the bedrock of ethical public service, shifting leadership from transactional management to purpose-driven service, and from power-driven politics to service-oriented leadership, vital in today's volatile and fragmented world.

Authentic leadership begins with the inner world. Before leading others or managing systems, one must develop self-awareness, emotional resilience and mental clarity. Mindfulness empowers leaders to break free from

reactive patterns, fostering wisdom, purpose and integrity. When inner alignment is achieved, outer actions flow with clarity and balance, resulting in leadership that is effective, ethical and enduring.

A mindful leader listens deeply, pauses before reacting, examines intentions, and considers the wider impact of actions. Anchored in moral awareness, dignity, equity and environmental responsibility, their governance emphasises transparency, accountability and long-term wellbeing.

Guided by empathy and wisdom, they weigh not only legal dimensions but also ethical and human consequences, aligning with principles such as Right Intention, Right Action and Right Livelihood, ensuring decisions that cause no harm and foster mutual flourishing.

Equanimity, cultivated through mindfulness, enables leaders to face crises without being overwhelmed by stress or fear. In an uncertain world, this resilience supports policymaking grounded in wisdom rather than impulse.

Mindfulness also nurtures a systems perspective, grounded in interdependence, recognising the interconnectedness of all phenomena and promoting harmony, inclusivity and sustainability.

These are the hallmarks of true leadership — emotionally intelligent, resilient, and visionary leaders who inspire trust, foster harmony and leave enduring legacies. Mindfulness and inner awareness are not optional traits but foundational, transforming leadership into a force for collective good.

Governance as a Conscious Act of Service

In an era where rapid technological advancement and relentless physical development dominate human ambition, the material aspect of life has overshadowed deeper dimensions of existence.

Science and technology have undeniably brought unprecedented progress, but this progress has often been harnessed to fuel domination, greed and the superpower race, where nations compete for control rather than cooperate for collective survival.

Wars, economic exploitation, and mindless pursuit of growth have fractured societies, deepened inequalities, and diverted human intelligence toward destruction rather than harmony.

At the same time, unchecked consumption and profit-driven systems have over-exploited natural resources, accelerating environmental degradation and ecological imbalance.

The combined weight of these forces has pushed the planet to a critical tipping point, manifesting in climate change, biodiversity collapses, social unrest, and a growing sense of alienation among human beings. What once promised liberation through innovation now risks becoming a path to self-destruction, unless balanced with wisdom, compassion and a re-awakening of human consciousness.

What is urgently required in such a time is a new paradigm of human awakening, one that integrates scientific consciousness with human consciousness.

Scientific consciousness calls for clarity, rational inquiry and evidence-based understanding of the world, enabling us to grasp the interdependent systems that sustain life. Human consciousness, on the other hand, awakens us to compassion, ethics and spiritual awareness, dimensions that remind us of our shared responsibility toward all sentient beings and the Earth itself.

When these two forms of consciousness are brought into dialogue, they create a holistic vision of development, one that is not only technologically efficient but also morally grounded and ecologically sensitive.

This synthesis must find expression in leadership and governance. Today's leaders need to embody environmental consciousness, emotional intelligence, inclusivity, and a holistic worldview.

True progress, such leadership recognises, is not measured solely by GDP or infrastructure, but by the harmony between the outer and inner worlds, and between human aspirations and the wellbeing of the planet.

Only through this awakening, where inner transformation balances outer development, can life unfold in its fullest potential, ensuring the flourishing of both the physical world and the sentient realm. This is not merely a choice but an urgent necessity, essential for the survival of humanity and the continuity of the Earth's living systems.

Governance, therefore, must rise to this responsibility as a conscious act of stewardship that safeguards the interests of both modern and post-modern societies, as well as the planet, for generations to come.

At its core, governance — whether in government or corporations — is about how power is exercised and how decisions shape people's lives. Good governance goes beyond the basic exercise of authority to ensure that public affairs and resources are managed effectively, transparently, accountably, and ethically. It upholds both man-made and natural law while promoting sustainable development, peace, and human rights.

Principles such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, participation, responsiveness, equity, efficiency, and inclusiveness, form the foundation of governance. When practiced together, they transform governance from a mere mechanism of administration into a trust-based relationship and the people they serve.

Good governance ensures power is exercised with integrity, decisions are made in the public's best interest, and today's policies safeguard the wellbeing of future generations. It is the bedrock of stability, sustainable development and institutional legitimacy.

Mindful governance builds upon these principles by grounding decision-making in awareness, compassion and clarity. Policies shaped through mindfulness and emotional intelligence are guided not only by political expediency but by awareness of their human and environmental consequences.

In this way, governance becomes more than management; it becomes a conscious act of service where accountability is embraced as a shared responsibility. Mindfulness, coupled with emotional intelligence, transforms governance into a practice of cultivating harmony, peace,

resilience, and collective progress, ultimately leading to safeguarding the future of both people and planet.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is a universal human capacity, deeply relevant across all walks of life and essential for navigating the emotional, psychological, ethical and even governance complexities of the modern world.

It is not a luxury reserved for the privileged, nor a spiritual indulgence confined to monastics or spiritual seekers; it is a timeless inner technology, universally accessible and increasingly necessary, regardless of one's background or belief.

In a world overwhelmed by chaos, distraction and disconnection, mindfulness offers a pathway back to clarity, coherence and wholeness. By turning inward and cultivating awareness of our thoughts, emotions and feelings, we shift from mechanical reactivity to conscious, empowered living.

In governance and leadership, this shift translates into decisions guided by wisdom rather than impulse, by compassion rather than expediency, creating systems that are transparent, ethical and sustainable, and ensuring that power is exercised as a responsibility for collective wellbeing.

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