

Seven Practices of Mindfulness

(Based on Thich Nhat Hanh 1993; 1998)

It is suggested that the webpage D1 is read first; with that as background, D5 will make more sense.

Preamble

We introduced the concept of Mindfulness in an earlier paper in this series – D1; this was based on Kabat-Zinn’s description which embraced the concepts of: non-judgment; acceptance; patience; trust; beginner’s mind; non-striving; and letting go / equanimity (Kabat-Zinn 1990). Here we will explore the matter further, more specifically from the perspective of Buddhist psychology and the work of Thich Nhat Hanh (TNH).

Mindfulness is to do with paying attention. Now as human beings our minds seem to be paying attention to something for most of our waking hours; that is, for most of the hours we are awake. The question is, are we paying attention in a mindful way, or are we spending much of our time pursuing the past or getting lost in the future? (Hanh 1990). If we are not mindful, we will certainly not become Awakened.

The term Mindfulness is an English translation of the Sanskrit word *smriti*¹ which is difficult to translate; the literal translation is “remember” or better “remembering” (Hanh 1998 p 64). The Chinese ideogram for *smriti* contains two symbols: one part means “now”, and the other part embraces both heart and mind². Figure 1 illustrates some of these concepts.

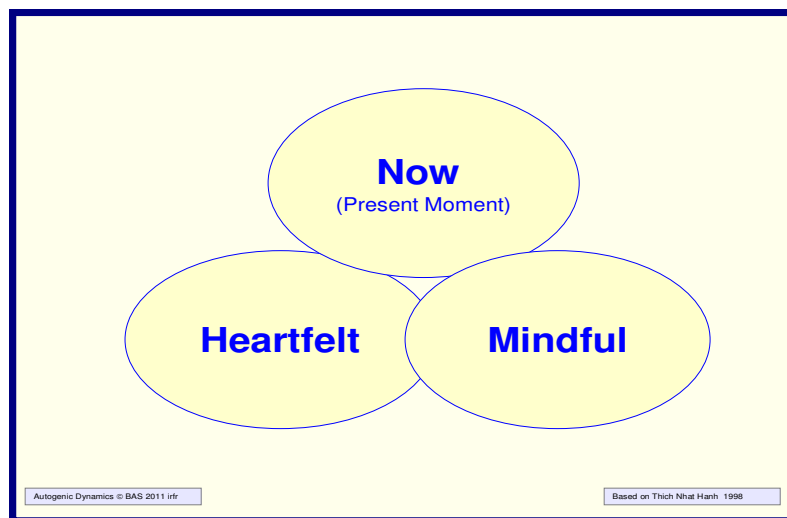


Figure 1
Smriti – Mindfulness

The Sanskrit word *smriti* has the connotation / feeling of remembering – perhaps remembering to be in the present moment.
The Chinese ideogram for *smriti* embraces the ideas of now, heart, and mind. *Now* in the sense of being in the present moment; *mind* in the sense of being mindful; and *heart* in the sense of heartfelt. See also D1.

¹ *Smrti* – Sanskrit; *Sati* – Pali; *Smriti* – TNH’s rendering of *smrti*)

² We could render this as mind embracing heart or heart embracing mind.

In the Buddha's original formulations, he described the "eightfold path" that can help us overcome and / or come to terms with *duhkha* (suffering; "unsatisfactoriness"; see D4). Mindfulness is one of these eight: Hanh suggests that Mindfulness is so crucial that if we work on this, then the other seven will actually be embraced and transformed by it (Hanh 1998 p 64).

The Eightfold path actually talks about Mindfulness in terms of Right Mindfulness; for as implied above, we can be paying attention in a non-mindful way. For example: watching violent films – that actually contain violence so that the film makes bigger profits for the producers; or concentrating on non-wholesome work – such as designing bombs.

Note that 'Right' here is not being used in the simple sense of right or wrong, good or bad (see below): but more in the sense of appropriate, wholesome. Certain ways of approaching life will lead to wholesome outcomes; other ways will lead to unwholesome outcomes and increased suffering.

The Pali word for "Right" is *samma* and the Sanskrit word is *samyak*. It is an adverb meaning "in the right way," "straight," or "upright," not bent or crooked. Right Mindfulness, for example, means that there are ways of being mindful that are right, straight, and beneficial. Wrong mindfulness means there are ways to practice that are wrong, crooked, or unbeneficial. Entering the Eightfold Path, we learn ways to practice that are of benefit, the "Right" way to practice. Right and wrong are neither moral judgements nor arbitrary standards imposed from outside. Through our own awareness, we discover what is beneficial ("right") and what is unbeneficial ("wrong").

Hanh 1998 p 11

Mindfulness as embracing seven key concepts (Hanh 1998 pp 64-67)³

1. **Being present with ourselves.** That is, we are aware of this moment.

.....Mindfulness is to be present and able to touch deeply the blue sky, the flower, the smile of our child.

Hanh 1998 p 65

So here we are present in this present moment: not lost in thoughts about the past or the future.

2. **Being present with the other:** this may be our partner, our children, anyone, a plant, the sky, or anything under the sun and anything beyond the sun. In particular, this is to do with being present with those close to us. If we do not pay attention in this moment with our beloved, one day it may be too late: and then we will be mourning not just their loss but our in-attention to their being while they were still alive (see also D2). Clearly, this overlaps to some extent with being present with ourselves: we need to be present with ourselves before we can be present with the other.

³ Note that this does not supersede/ override the concepts of Kabat-Zinn introduced in D1; rather that those concepts are all embraced by the seven key concepts of TNH.

3. **Nourish and Nurture the object of our attention:** with all human beings, and particularly with those we are close to, we have the ability to nurture and take good care of them. Intention is not enough: to be mindful means putting our intention into practice / Right Action. We are blessed as we have the neuro-physiological underpinnings of this in terms of our CARE circuits (Panksepp 1998; and see B3).
4. **To be present with, and relieve, the suffering of others:** we have the ability to be present with them in times of their suffering – so that we can reduce their suffering⁴. Thich Nhat Hanh says this:

“I know you are suffering. That is why I am here for you.”
You can say this with words or just by the way you look at her. If you are not truly present, if you are thinking about other things, the miracle of relieving suffering cannot be realised.....To love means to nourish the other with appropriate attention. When you practice Right Mindfulness, you make yourself and the other person present at the same time.

Hanh 1998 p 65-66

I was reading these words in Café Graze in Dunbar on 25.07.2011 before visiting Maggie my wife: she is suffering from advanced Alzheimer’s Disease and is now in a Nursing Home. I was very moved by the words: and when I went on to see her, I had one of the most moving visits for months – either by chance or more likely through synchronicity and mindfulness. I was simply with her in presence. The wisdom of Hanh again:

When someone is about to die, if you sit with them stably and solidly, that alone may be enough to help them leave this life with ease. Your presence is like a mantra, sacred speech that has a transforming effect. When your body, speech, and mind are in perfect oneness, that mantra will have an effect even before you utter a word. The first four miracles of mindfulness belong to the first aspect of meditation, shamatha – stopping, calming, resting, and healing.

Hanh 1998 p 66

So Thich Nhat Hanh is here implying that the crucial matter is our being present, and our reciprocal presence with the other. There is also an implicit understanding here that these first four aspects of mindfulness cannot really bear fruit without shamatha⁵ – calm abiding meditation, which we return to in due course (also see D4 and D6).

5. Looking Deeply /

⁴ In a healthy reciprocal two way relationship, they will of course at times be able to comfort us and take good care of us when we are suffering.

⁵ This is more commonly rendered as Samatha (Sanskrit – e.g. Keown 2003)

5. **Looking Deeply (Vipashyana):** we have the potential and ability to look deeply into issues: this overlaps with insight meditation, vipashyana (Hanh 1998 p 65). Note that looking deeply can perhaps only really come about when we are regularly practising some form of mental training, such as shamatha, Positive Mental Training, Tai Chi, or Autogenic Training. These mental trainings can then form the bedrock for insight.

You shine the light of mindfulness on the object of your attention, and at the same time you shine the light of mindfulness on yourself. You observe the object of your attention and you also see your own storehouse full of precious gems.

Hanh 1998 p 66

That is a wonderful phrase: “you also see your own storehouse full of precious gems”. We all have great positive potential within ourselves.

6. **Understanding:** such deep looking and insight will merge with understanding: if we have a deep understanding of another sentient being, we will develop a deep concern for their well-being. Hanh has suggested elsewhere that love that does not embrace understanding is not true love (Hanh 1998 pp 169-175).
7. **Transformation:** as we embrace all these aspects of Mindfulness, we will have the ability to transform ourselves and situations. This will at times embrace reframing / reappraisal (B2).

Hanh describes these as the Seven Miracles of Mindfulness: that is a wonderful description. We have within us the neuro-physiological circuits to be mindful, compassionate, and caring creatures as a result of extra-ordinary emotional operating neuro circuits (or systems – EONS) within us (Panksepp 1998; and B3).

These seven key concepts of mindfulness are depicted in Figure 2 on the next page.

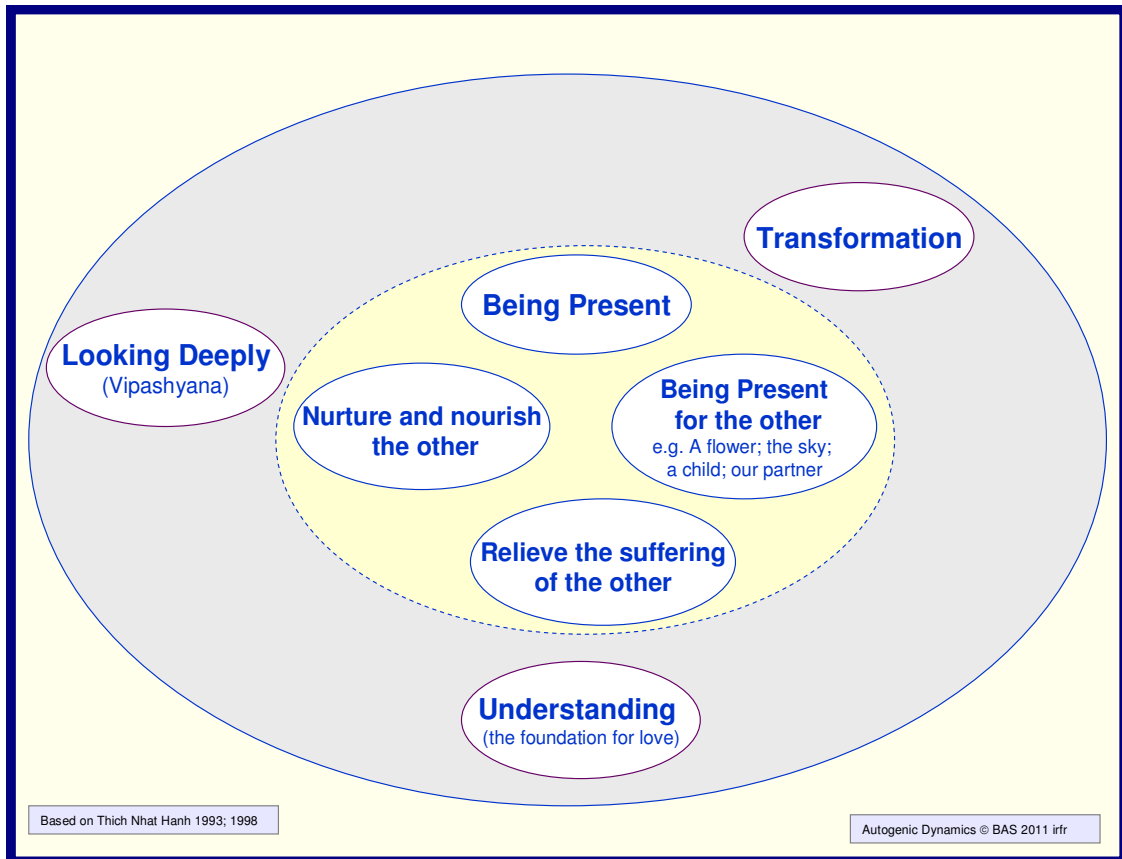


Figure 2
Seven Key Practices of Mindfulness
 (Based on Hanh 1998)

Comments on Figure 2

The inner four (concepts) can come to fruition with the practice of Calm Abiding Meditation / AT (D4; D6).

The outer three are associated with Insight-type (Vipashyana) Meditation.

All seven are inter-linked. Meditation can be both formal and informal – the formal gradually expanding to embrace all our daily activities.

Hanh uses the phrase “make the other present”; we could call this “making the other present”; here we have used the phrase: “Being present for the other”.

In a formal Calm-Abiding meditation, we can Be Present following, for example, the breath. The same is true in an Autogenic session: we are present with mindful awareness – e.g. “Left / right arm heavy”.

- Being present for the other is to be focused specifically on the other in a mindful way – with attunement.
- Attunement to others is one of the crucial pre-frontal cortex functions that are associated with meditative-type practices (Siegel 2007; 2010; C2).

References and sources

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Hanh; Thich Nhat: 1998. The Heart of the Buddha's teaching. <i>Transforming suffering into peace, joy and liberation</i>	ISBN 0-7126-7003-3
Panksepp, Jaak: 1998. Affective Neuroscience: <i>The Foundation of Human and Animal Emotions;</i>	Oxford University Press; ISBN 0-19-509673-8
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Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

B2	Reframing, Re-appraisal, and Well-Being
B3	Emotional Operating Neuro Circuits – <i>a brief introduction to Panksepp's model</i>
C2	Mindsight – <i>our seventh sense and associated pre-frontal cortex functions</i>
D1	Reflections on Foundations for Mindful Living
D2	Dona Paramita
D4	Duhkha, Impermanence, and Inter-relatedness
D6	A brief introduction to two basic forms of Meditation