

*Whatever a mother, father
Or other relative may do,
Far better is the benefit
From one's own rightly directed mind.
– Dhammapada 43*

The English word “mindfulness” is the usual translation for the Pali word *sati*. Most generally, *sati* means to hold something in awareness. When the Chinese translated Indian Buddhist terms into Chinese characters, *sati* became a character with two halves: the top half is the character for “the present moment” and the bottom half is the character for “heart.” The combination suggests that mindfulness is connected to the heart, to being “heartfelt in the present moment.” It points to the possibility of holding our experience in our hearts, to having an accepting, soft, and spacious awareness toward whatever is occurring.

At times, mindfulness practice can feel a bit dry. It can seem to involve a detached, objective or unfeeling attitude toward our experience in the present moment. However, such an attitude arises when mindfulness is confused with subtle fear, distance, resistance, or judgment. Luckily, the mindfulness practice is self-correcting: the continual effort to notice what is actually going on in the present will in due time reveal the subtle tension that underlies a detached attitude. If we can clearly recognize the dryness of practice, it can be a signal that helps us re-establish a softer, more tender presence. Or alternatively it can be an indication that we need to hold the very dryness with soft acceptance.

Many of us have hearts that are encrusted with anxieties, fears, aversions, sorrows, and an array of defensive armor. The non-reactive and accepting awareness of mindfulness will help to dissolve these crusts. The practice has a cyclic quality; it is self-reinforcing. At first, the practice will allow us to let go of a small amount of defensiveness. That release allows a corresponding amount of openness and tender-heartedness to show itself. This process encourages us to drop even more armor. Slowly, a greater sense of heartfulness supports the further development of mindfulness.

As our neurotic thought patterns drop away, layers of judgment and resistance atrophy, and the need to define our selves through hard-held identities relaxes. As this happens, the natural goodness of the heart shines by itself.

The impulses to be aware, happy, compassionate, and free, all come from the goodness of our hearts. As we connect to these intentions and allow them to motivate our mindfulness practice, the practice becomes heartfelt.

The Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah said that everything occurs within the heart. In mindfulness practice, we let our heart hold whatever arises within itself.