Mindfulness, Investigation, and Right Effort

As my understanding and practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation develops, it seems clear to me that there are three essential skills we must nurture in order for our contemplative insights to mature—mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, and energy, in the form of Right Effort. The importance of these three mind-conditioning functions are already established, as they are also the first three of the seven Awakening Factors.

My intention with this talk is to describe their characteristics—how to recognize their presence while meditating, or even during daily activities, to further the process of liberating the mind from distress and confusion. My hope is that this discussion will complement and clarify the processes described and experienced during the preceding guided meditation, “Contemplating Mindfulness, Investigation, and Right Effort”, which was recorded and will be posted on the website in the Audio/Guided Meditations tabs.

MINDFULNESS: The Pali term for mindfulness is *sati* (sah-tee) and is understood to represent *present-moment awareness that is not distracted and keeps in mind the transitory and fabricated nature of our subjective experience.*

The original meaning of sati was related to the memorization of Brahman teachings, along with the rites and rituals that must be performed perfectly in order to appease the gods. The Buddha repurposed this memorization and performance to be organized instead around not being absent-minded regarding the transitory and non-self characteristics of ongoing experience.

A contemporary term that seems psychologically equivalent to mindfulness is metacognition, which is described this way within the Wikipedia website:

Metacognition is an awareness of one's thought processes and an [understanding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Understanding) of the patterns behind them. The term comes from the root word [*meta*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meta_(prefix)), meaning "beyond", or "on top of". Metacognition can take many forms, such as reflecting on one's ways of thinking, and knowing when and how oneself and others use particular strategies for [problem-solving](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_solving). There are generally two components of metacognition: (1) cognitive conceptions and (2) cognitive regulation system. Research has shown that both components of metacognition play key roles in metaconceptual knowledge and learning. [Metamemory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metamemory), defined as knowing about memory and [mnemonic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mnemonic) strategies, is an important aspect of metacognition.

The two components of metacognition described in the quote are relevant to the other two functional categories I will review—cognitive conceptions are the target of investigation of mental phenomena, and cognitive regulation relates to Right Effort.

INVESTIGATION OF MENTAL PHENOMENA: The Pali term for this quality of introspective inquiry is *dhamma vicaya* (dah-mah vee-chay-yah). The word *dhamma* can be understood to describe *the true nature of subjective experience processes, as transitory and essentially fabricated*. From this perspective, a dhamma is a moment of experience that appears to be a self, and investigation of mental phenomena functions toward “deconstructing” that identification. *Vicaya* is understood to involve *detached investigation and analysis, which functions to discern whether what is forming in consciousness is wholesome or unwholesome in terms of the process of Awakening*. This discernment extends from simply understanding the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of self-talk, the honesty and integrity of one’s values and actions, and extending to the ultimate realization, the doorway to Nirvana, the Unconditioned state of mind.

RIGHT EFFORT: The Pali rendering of this function is *samma vayama* (sah-mah vah-yah-mah). *Samma* is translated as *right, appropriate, or most suitable*, and *vayama* is understood to refer to *the application of effort*. For me, this means the ability to mindfully channel the energy that flows through attention effectively, away from unwholesomeness, craving and clinging, and towards wholesomeness, liberation from craving and clinging.

In “Wings to Awakening”, on p. 100, Thanissaro describes “The Four Right Exertions”:

The four activities included in this set show how effort can be applied to developing

skillful qualities in the mind. The basic formula runs as follows: There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds & exerts his intent:

• for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen…

• for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen…

• for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen… (and)

• for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen.

These four aspects of effort are also termed guarding, abandoning, developing, and maintaining.

We can also consider different levels of Right Effort:

* Initiating effort, which, allied with the function of mindfulness and investigation, initiates a change in focus away from unwholesomeness and towards wholesomeness.
* Sustained effort, which persists in undistracted attention regarding wholesomeness being fully realized.
* Determined effort, which is brought to bear during challenging mental conditions. These challenging conditions can occur because the unwholesome conditions are potent. Alternatively, determined effort can be applied to more advanced and subtle levels of consciousness that are free from the hindrances. This sort of determination is oriented towards coordinating and realizing the full potential of the Seven Awakening Factors. In this case, Right Effort operates very efficiently in channeling attention and can be identified with the Energy Awakening Factor.

Here are some thoughts about how to integrate the categories of mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena and Right Effort effectively through the basic practices for cultivating mindfulness of breathing meditation:

* We must consciously intend to be mindful, regarding where the sensations associated with breathing are in present-moment awareness, as well as the quality of attention available—focused or distracted, too tranquil or too agitated. This must involve investigation, a detached curiosity about what may be in the range of attention. Doing this requires two functions: Intentionally aiming mindful attention toward the object, and then maintaining this attention in an unwavering way. In this example, this initiates the investigative process, focusing on either any breath sensations or any area of focused attention that may arise.
* The next step, closely timed and associated with mindful investigation, is to intentionally decide whether that moment of focused attention is wholesome or unwholesome and to act on that decision, according to the process described in the quote above from Thanissaro. This ability to manage the flow of attentional and behavioral energy advantages more successful adaptations to changing environmental conditions, and, more importantly, the ability to develop spiritually.
* Patient repetition of this procedure is required, as being distracted—daydreaming, remembering, etc.—is the normal process of living in the world, and interferes with effective functioning in many areas of life. Mindfulness, investigation of Mental Phenomena and Right Effort apply away from formal meditation practice. For example, when committing to learning how to play a musical instrument, a lot of mistakes occur initially, but with patient and dedicated practice, beautiful music can be created. Being mindful while investigating one’s musical practice sessions, and then making an effort repeatedly to correct mistakes builds the craft of musicianship. Apply that same determination to being mindful, investigative and self-disciplined while practicing mindfulness of breathing meditation and make beautiful music with your personality!