

PERIPHERAL AWARENESS

by

Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Mindfulness done correctly is when the mind is *anchored* in something. That something must be a thing that is not directly attended to, but instead, has to be a *reference point* to the attended thing (hence we call it “anchor”). If a thing is not directly attended to but there, we call that thing to be a “background”. It’s a background to a thing we attend (which makes that thing a “foreground”). This is the basic principle of mindfulness, on which we can expand here below.

One begins developing this practice of awareness by being mindful of the experience as a *whole*. For example, one is mindful of ‘being-seated-on-a-chair-reading-a-Dhamma-essay’. That is one’s *situation* at that very time. That is one’s experience as a “whole”. This is always the necessary starting point. What is very important is to prevent the tendency to become absorbed in one particular thing. (Feeling, sensations or perception, and similar). Instead, one has to broaden the mindfulness and become aware of the *generality* of one’s current situation, without losing the sight of the particular either.¹

Of course, the attempts of discerning the background of one's current experience will not be perfect in the beginning. One will more often than not fall into a mistake of over-attending one’s experience as a whole. This is a mistake of making that background into an *object* of one’s attention, defining it, clarifying it, trying to keep it in front. These are all ways of making it a *foreground*, which means that then something else will be in place of the background.

The natural tendency is to ask “*What* is then the background?”. This is however a wrong question. And it's wrong because we are not concerned with the *content* of the background (or foreground for that matter), which would be the answer to “what?”. Instead our concern should be with *nature* of it. So one needs to restrain the tendency to clarify *what* is that “background”, and learn how to start discerning the *domain* of it. The domain of the “*periphery*”, its nature, in regard to *what* is presently *enduring* here.

Thus, something one attends to directly is what a foreground is at the time. It can be anything that is the current object of one's attention. That thing has manifested, and it is enduring as such. That’s the basic structural property of one’s experience, there is no problem with this. However, if one wants to develop mindfulness, a step further is necessary. That step is developing the peripheral “vision” in regard to that very same foreground object, but *without*

¹ This is why the correct practice of mindfulness results in higher establishments of mind (*samadhi*). For example, this is where mind surmounts the fundamental “generality” of form, by the way of surmounting the generality of earth, water, fire and air. Also, there is a reason that the order of elements always stays the same. They have a particular structural order of their generality. And one can discern them in that order only.

making that peripheral vision the new object by *directly* attending to it. The Buddha referred to this as "*yoniso manasikara*", which is often translated as "proper attention". *Yoniso manasikara* is the correct way of attending to the peripheral. *Manasikara* means "attention". *Yoni* means "womb". So when a thing is present in the front, in the foreground, its peripheral background is that very "womb" the thing has "came from", so to speak. *Yoniso manasikara* is womb-attention, or less literally: a peripheral attention.²

Thus, the point is to learn *how* to attend. Not so much "what". It's about discerning the habit of "over-attending" and learning how to not resort to it. This habit manifests through either indulging or resisting the object of one's attention. Either way, one is fully concerned with it. This is why one must stop trying to "observe" one's experience as an object of one's attention and instead, acknowledge it and let it *endure* on its own. (Let it persist or change-while-remaining-the-same-thing). Once the arisen experience of one's attention is allowed to *be*, then gradually and *indirectly*, discerning of the peripheral *domain* can manifest.

The most practical way of practising this is through mindfulness of body postures. That's why these things are often called "foundations" of mindfulness, or "anchors" or "reference points". It's because they are *always* rooted in the *background*. (E.g. foundations are *under*; an anchor is at the *bottom*; the reference point is at the *distance*. Under, bottom, away... it means 'not-here-directly-in-front-of-me'). So for example: while I'm seated, I'm reading an article, actively scrolling through the pages, paying attention to what's being said in it. Things I'm "doing", like reading, writing, talking, etc. are things I'm attending to (foreground). And I'm attending to them all *while* I'm *seated*. That's the reference point that is enough for proper mindfulness. That is what's the background here. Yet, if I switch my attention and start attending to the fact that I'm sitting on the chair, then the body posture of "sitting" ceases to be the background in my experience. Why? Because I've broken the relationship of "referencing". There is no more "*while*", since I forgot about the reading, and became concerned with sitting. When this happens, one can either go back to the original foreground, or discern the newly present background in regard to the attended experience of sitting. The new background will have to be something even more *general* than "sitting posture". And the more general thing in that case is nothing other than awareness of the "body there".³

Body postures are more general than attending to a particular action or perception. But having a "body *there*" is even more general than the postures. Because to be walking, sitting, standing or lying down, one needs to have a *body* in the first place. That's why one can also use the knowledge of "there is body", as the peripheral anchor for one's daily actions and experiences. The presence of one's living body is a fundamental requirement for *any* action. We

² That's also why this type of attention is said by the Buddha to be one of the necessary pre-requisites for the arising of the Right view.

³ "...or mindfulness that "there is body" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for the final knowledge." - MN 10, *Satipatthana Sutta*.

can go even higher (even more general), as we mentioned earlier, and develop awareness of the phenomenon of Earth, Water, Fire or Air. Or even further, in the practice of more refined *kasinas*, as described in the *Suttas*. The point is that the principle remains the same.

We need to stress that this is something that requires *development*. It's not something that can be just "figured out", or read once and made sense of. It requires a diligent *repetition* of "stepping back" when over-attending one's experience as a whole. And then "stepping in" when ignoring it (under-attending it, forgetting about the background). So, it takes time and effort in order for it to be correctly *discerned* and *recognized*.

The problem with common practice of meditation is that people are encouraged to get "absorbed" into the particular "meditation object". The practice becomes a form of focusing on the foreground at the expense of everything else. And not just that, people end up focusing on the objects twice as hard. This is because their view of meditation is to look and *perceive* the "momentary" foreground (the whole idea of "observing 'sensations'"). Then *within* that they try to perceive even *more particular* things. So it's not just the *domain* of the foreground, but the content proliferates further too. In cases like this, the 'background', as a foundation of mindfulness that needs to be understood, is even further obscured.

The 'reference point' means being aware of something, without having to *actively* think about it. That's the basic principle of mindfulness. This should *always* be the basis for *samadhi* (according to the *Suttas*)⁴. That is why, if mindfulness and awareness is practised correctly, it will result in *knowledge* of the nature of things. The very definition of knowledge is knowing something without having to actively think about it. The knowledge reappears when it is attended to. One knows what one knows. This is the important point because this type of mindfulness of the background that's simultaneous with the presently arisen phenomenon⁵, results in the establishment of mind (*samadhi*) that transcends *sensuality* and *ill will*. The whole *domain* (scope) of unwholesome.⁶ And that's why that *samadhi* further results in complete knowledge of liberation.

The catch is in persistent effort of repetition of *learning* how to *attend* to things *peripherally*, without having to "directly" look at them. For a mind affected with *avijja*, the "direct look", the "*ayoniso manasikara*" always involves *appropriation* and the *Self-view*. And "learning to attend" things peripherally can be done on many different "bases" or "domains" that are structurally present as the background of our attended experience. These domains are

⁴ "Unification of mind, friend Visakha, is *samadhi*. The four foundations of mindfulness are the basis of *samadhi*. The four right kind of striving are the equipment of *samadhi*. The repetition, the development and cultivation of those same states is what development of *samadhi* is." - MN 44, *Culavedalla Sutta*.

⁵ Experience as a whole, the 'foreground-without-focusing-on-particular-object-witin-it'.

⁶ Sensuality is *always* concerned with the particular content of the experience. Particular *sight, sound, smell, taste, touch*. Thus, mindfulness of the peripheral domain to the particular foreground, can result in overcoming it.

the domain of feelings, thoughts, and even one's intentions (bodily, verbal and mental).

For example, being aware of the *general feeling* present, without trying to *perceive* it as "sensation" (i.e. "in" the body), is another way of establishing the proper mindfulness.

Or, something we often talk about, taking up of personal *responsibility*. If one takes it up, then no matter what the engagement with the particular task is, the background of it (the "womb" of that engagement) is one's own *choice* to engage with it in the first place. Taking up responsibility, means becoming aware of the "background" choices one makes throughout one's life.⁷

Furthermore, taking up responsibility for what one has chosen, a person gets to maintain that mindfulness through the very particular actions one is doing on account of it. And that mindfulness of responsibility is not something they would have to perpetually think about. No, that mindfulness is being *felt* instead. (That's why the initial awareness of *any* form of responsibility is always *unpleasant* and concerning).

The choice behind one's actions is a general *unity*, a *context* of one's acts, that is present in each of those acts individually. Present as a peripheral background. It is because of this that *sila* or *virtue* is a necessary prerequisite for understanding. When one's actions are based on *distortions* of priority (particular sensuality *over* general nature of choice regarding it, for example), one cannot see a clear responsible background while engaged in such pursuits. No perspective, so to speak. So, first actions that maintain absorptions with particularity must be divorced from the unwholesome domain. Then they must be further restrained, by avoiding the distracting of oneself. By undoing wrong way of attending to things. By not cultivating improper attention. Only then can one begin to discern *the signs* of the peripheral, characteristics of the background hereby discussed. Only then one will be able to "grasp the sign of one's mind" or *cittanimitta*. A necessary requirement for the arising of the Right view.

⁷ Hence the fully developed knowledge that came from the Right View, results in freeing an individual from his actions (*kamma*). Full understanding of the nature of the "choice" as "peripheral", removes the gratuitous *assumption* of necessity of the "Chooser" i.e. the Self. Understanding the choice or intentional intention (*cetana*) frees oneself from choosing (i.e. acting).