



## 63 – Skilful Mindfulness: the captain's memory

### **Remembering the map in the midst of the storm**

#### **The glue of the programme**

*'Mindfulness is the authority. Mindfulness is the governing principle that keeps all other factors in their proper place.'* ~ Nyanaponika Thera

*'But mindfulness... I say is always useful.'* ~ Gotama (the Buddha)

#### **The keeper of the watch**

In this Training stage of our journey, having established our direction, ethics, and energy, we arrive at the seventh factor of Gotama's Middle Way Programme – 'Mindfulness'. We might reasonably ask, 'Haven't we already worked with mindfulness?' We have explored mindfulness through many different lenses – but its function has matured as our raft took shape.

At this stage, mindfulness means something simple and practical. It is the capacity to remember what we are doing while we are doing it – not losing the plot. It is remembering our values in the middle of a conversation, our intention in the middle of an urge, and the wider direction in the middle of a small emotional storm. Mindfulness keeps us awake to what is happening now, so that we are not simply swept along by habit, craving, fear, or resentment.

We have trained this capacity in different forms along the way:

- ★ 'Grounding Mindfulness' (Chapter 07) steadied the body when the waves were high, helping us come back to breath, posture, and present-moment contact before reactivity took command.
- ★ 'Affective Mindfulness' (Chapter 27) helped us recognise pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling tones, so that liking and disliking did not automatically drag the raft off course.
- ★ 'Healing Mindfulness' (Chapter 31) strengthened and protected our capacity to stay close to challenging experiences, allowing pain, difficulty and disappointments to be known without being turned into another wound.
- ★ 'Monitoring Mindfulness' (Chapter 36) watches the movements of thought

- without being swallowed by them, noticing stories, assumptions, memories, and confusion as passing mental events rather than commands.
- ★ ‘Liberating Mindfulness’ (Chapter 44) widened mindfulness into a spacious, non-reactive awareness, giving experience room to arise and pass without the compulsion to grasp, resist, or identify with it.
  - ★ ‘Ethical Mindfulness’ (Chapter 53) sharpened mindfulness into remembering-to-remember in moments of choice, helping us bring our values, intentions, and commitments into speech, action, and relationships.

Now in this chapter on Skilful Mindfulness, these strands converge. Mindfulness becomes the integrating capacity that keeps the training aligned as we live, choose, speak, and act.

If Skilful Application (Chapter 62) is the engine of the raft, Skilful Mindfulness remembers why the engine is running and in which direction we intend to travel. If Skilful Perspective (Chapter 57) is our realistic view of how things work, Skilful Mindfulness remembers to see through that lens when pressure rises. If Skilful Intention (Chapter 58) sets the rudder straight, then Skilful Mindfulness notices any subtle drift. And when Skilful Speech, Skilful Action, and Skilful Livelihood (Chapters 59–61) are our chosen ways of moving through the world, Skilful Mindfulness checks whether the next word or step aligns with those commitments.

Without Skilful Mindfulness, the operating protocols drift apart. Application becomes blind striving. Perspective narrows under stress. Intention fades. Action slips into habit.

With Skilful Mindfulness, the Middle Way Programme functions as one coordinated system, keeping the view clear, the rudder steady, the engine purposeful, and the platform stable.

### **Remembering in real time**

The Pali word *sati* is often rendered as mindfulness, but its original meaning leans closer to remembering or recollection – a quality of not-forgetting when pressure rises.

That nuance matters here. We have already clarified Perspective, set Intention, committed to Speech, Action, and Livelihood, and understood how Application

and Collectedness support our journey. The challenge now is not learning something new, but keeping what we know onboard in heated moments.

Forgetting happens quietly.

We forget when we are tired.

We forget when we are praised.

We forget when we are hurt.

We forget when something feels urgent.

Skilful Mindfulness interrupts that drift. It does not argue with or suppress our experience. It simply brings the training back into view. ‘This is pleasant – do not cling.’ ‘This is unpleasant – do not react.’ ‘This is a mood – not an identity.’

When Skilful Mindfulness is present, the training stays active. When it collapses, we fall into what Gotama called heedlessness – acting without remembering consequences or direction.

Skilful Mindfulness is gentle, but it is not sleepy. Gotama described the mindful traveller as ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful. Ardent does not mean tense or aggressive; it means awake enough to care. It is the warmth of attention that keeps the watch from becoming dull. Without this quiet energy, mindfulness can slide into passive noticing while the raft keeps drifting.

### **Remembering and clear comprehension**

Mindfulness does not travel alone. In the early teachings it is paired with clear comprehension (Chapter 10): knowing what we are doing, why we are doing it, whether it fits the situation, and where it is likely to lead. Mindfulness remembers the map; clear comprehension reads the present conditions. Together they stop awareness becoming vague or passive.

This matters because we can be aware and still drift. We might know, ‘anger is here,’ but clear comprehension asks, “What happens if I speak from this?” We might know, ‘craving is here,’ but clear comprehension asks, “Where does this current lead?” In RAFT terms, Skilful Mindfulness keeps the mission alive on the bridge; clear comprehension checks the weather, the depth, and the next safe manoeuvre.

### **Ethical attention in motion**

When remembering becomes steady, something else begins to happen. We do not just recall the instructions – we begin to see more clearly what fits them and what does not. Mindfulness at this stage is not neutral drifting. It is not blank awareness. It is remembering with care for consequences. Because we know where certain channels lead, attention becomes quietly discerning. We start to notice the direction of things.

We notice how one thought tightens the body and narrows the mind.  
We notice how another softens the breath and steadies the mood.  
We notice how certain impulses leave a clean wake behind them, while others create turbulence that lingers.

This is not moral harshness. It is practical navigation. When Skilful Mindfulness is active, we are not scanning for faults – we are actively tracking the consequences. We know that each small movement shapes the crossing.

Throughout this journey, we have practised spaciousness – allowing experience to arise and pass. That remains important. But now spaciousness is joined by discernment. We are not only observing waves; we are noticing which ones are pulling us toward the reef. This is why Skilful Mindfulness has an ethical dimension. It does not judge who we are. It simply recognises what leads toward harm and what leads toward freedom. And because it remembers, it can respond early – before the drift becomes a collision.

### **The keeper of the watch and the stowaway**

We have met this pattern before (Chapter 14) – Mara – not as a mythic figure, but as the familiar voice of self-justification. It is the movement in the mind that tells us exactly what we most want to hear when we are unsettled. It rarely arrives dramatically. It begins as something small.

‘It doesn’t really matter.’

‘No one will know.’

‘I’m not angry, I’m just being honest.’

‘This is who I am. I’ll never really change.’

Without mindfulness, these thoughts feel reasonable. They slide into the stream of thinking unnoticed. We act before we realise that a direction has already been chosen. With Skilful Mindfulness, something subtle shifts. We recognise the

pattern. Not with alarm. Not with hostility. Just with familiarity.

‘Ah, I have seen this before!’

This recognition is Skilful Mindfulness at work.

It remembers what usually follows. It remembers the tightening in the body, the narrowing of the mind, the restless aftertaste that lingers. It remembers how a small drift becomes a larger one. And because it remembers, it does not need to argue. It simply pauses. It keeps hold of the wheel.

Imagine the raft set on a steady course. The sea is calm, and the direction is clear. But beneath the surface, there are slow-moving currents. They do not feel dramatic. They do not announce themselves. They just begin to carry the vessel slightly sideways. Without attention, we look up and find ourselves far from where we intended to be.

Mindfulness is like noticing the current early. It feels the slight change in direction. It senses the subtle pull. It adjusts before drift becomes distance. This is how mindfulness is protective. It catches movement at the beginning rather than correcting course much later. We are not trying to eliminate currents or silence thoughts. We are learning to recognise them quickly. Often, that is enough.

### **At the sense doors**

Skilful Mindfulness often works earliest at the sense doors (Chapter 55). A sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought enters our experience, and the chain begins: contact, feeling-tone, pull, story, action. If mindfulness arrives late, we wake up halfway through the reaction. If it arrives early, we can notice the first drift of the system before it becomes an unintended diversion.

This is why small moments matter. We hear an edge in someone’s voice. We see a message on our phone. We feel a body sensation. We remember: ‘This is contact. This has a feeling-tone. I do not have to follow the first pull.’ The captain’s memory returns before the current carries us too far.

### **How we practice – the patrol and the protocol**

At this training stage, practising mindfulness does not mean concentrating harder or trying to silence the mind. It means staying gently aware of what is

happening as it unfolds. We are learning to catch experience early, checking in before it gathers speed. Rather than waiting until we are already reactive, we notice what is present and remember where it tends to lead.

This is not constant self-analysis. It is light, steady monitoring. We are not searching for problems. We are staying oriented. The early teachings describe four steady reference points that help us do this – body, feeling tone, mind state, and patterns of experience. These are not abstract categories. They are practical places to look when we want to remain balanced and deliberate.

We check:

1. **Body** – Is the body braced, restless, slumped, buzzing? The body often signals a shift before the story in the mind fully forms. When we notice tension, we soften deliberately. When we notice collapse, we straighten and breathe. (Chapters 7-13)
2. **Feeling tone** – Is this moment pleasant, unpleasant, or neither? Pleasant can quietly turn into grasping. Unpleasant can quickly turn into resistance. Neither can drift into distraction. Simply naming the tone steadies us. (Chapter 27)
3. **Mind state** – Is the mind contracted, scattered, irritated, dull, bright? We recognise that mind states are conditions, not identity. They are weather passing through the sky. (Chapter 36)
4. **Principles** – Are the familiar patterns becoming visible? Are the Five Hazards beginning to stir – Sensual Desire, Ill Will, Tuning Out, Anxiety and Agitation, and Immobilising Doubt (Chapters 37-42)? Are the Seven Supports available – Liberating Mindfulness, Penetrating Inquiry, Enthusiasm, Energetic Joy, Deep Calm, A Unified Mind, Balancing Equanimity (Chapters 43-50)? Are we seeing cause and effect clearly? The fourth anchor of mindfulness remembers the map of practice, not as theory, but as a way of recognising what is unfolding (Chapter 53).

These four areas function like the dashboard of our raft. We do not stare at the instruments obsessively. We glance at them often enough to stay oriented. Small adjustments made early prevent larger corrections later.

To keep this practical, we use a simple hinge – Feeling-tone → Breath → Choice.

1. **Feeling-tone:** we name the tone of the moment. Pleasant. Unpleasant.

Neither.

2. **Breath:** we take one conscious breath. Not to escape – just to create a gap.
3. **Choice:** within that gap, we choose the next small step and quietly ask, ‘Does this move keep us on course towards the Safe Shore?’

Often, that single breath keeps the wheel in our hands. It slows the chain reaction just enough for clarity to return. When a compelling urge tightens its grip, we do not panic. We pause. We name what is happening. We recall where this path has led before.

‘I see you.’

‘I remember where this goes.’

‘I am steering the Middle Way.’

In that small space between impulse and action, Mindfulness interrupts carelessness. We do not eliminate urges. We simply refuse to drift with them. This is how Skilful Mindfulness becomes protective. Not through force, but through steady remembering. Not by fighting every wave, but by noticing the conditions early and adjusting our course appropriately.

Over time, this watchfulness becomes natural. We no longer need to strain to remember. The lookout is kept lightly, and the crossing becomes steadier because of it.

### **A secular dharma perspective – Mindfulness**

In Stephen Batchelor’s reworking of the eightfold path, Mindfulness is not treated simply as a technique of bare attention, nor as a mystical state to be cultivated for its own sake. It functions as a capacity of recollection within an ethical project: remembering the framework of care within which we are trying to live. In Batchelor’s cartography of care, Mindfulness helps keep the path from fragmenting into isolated practices, so the different dimensions of training remain available as one integrated way of practising.

Rather than retreating from experience into neutrality, Mindfulness becomes a form of engaged awareness: remembering what matters in the middle of ordinary life. It does not float above experience; it participates in it. It remembers the commitments we have already made and the consequences we have already

learned. Mindfulness, then, is not merely a private state of calm. It is the lived practice of keeping the path in mind while navigating relationships, speech, work, and choice – the steady recollection that allows care to remain active when conditions are unstable.

### **Self-reflections**

1. When I forget my practice in the heat of the moment, what exactly did I forget – my intention, the consequences, the tone of the body, or the next wise step?
2. Where has my attention been resting most today – on worries about the future, replaying the past, or staying with what is happening right now?
3. When a strong urge or reaction arises, do I notice it early in the body or only after it has taken the wheel?
4. Which areas do I tend to skip when I'm reactive – body, feeling tone, mind state or principles – and what changes when I deliberately include them?
5. Can I identify a recent moment when remembering returned just in time? What triggered the recollection?
6. Does mindfulness feel effortful and fragile right now, or steady and protective? What helps to strengthen it?
7. Looking back at a recent misstep, can I see the precise moment when carelessness replaced remembering? What was the signal I missed?

### **Journaling prompts**

1. **The remembering log:** Write about one moment today when you forgot your practice and were carried by anger, craving, or distraction. Then write about one moment when remembering returned. What helped the remembering happen?
2. **Feeling-tone → breath → choice record:** Describe three small moments where you named the feeling-tone and took one conscious breath. What changed in the next step you took?
3. **The four-area check:** Write a brief status report on your current state:
  - a. Body – what is it doing right now?
  - b. Feeling-tone – pleasant, unpleasant, or neither?
  - c. Mind state – contracted, restless, spacious, bright, dull?
  - d. Patterns – is any familiar loop beginning to form?What do you notice when you look at all four together?
4. **The early signal:** Describe a recent reaction that gathered momentum. At

what exact point could remembering have entered? What was the earliest signal in the body, feeling-tone or mind's mood?

5. **Rewrite with a pause:** Take one recent unhelpful interaction. Rewrite it with a single added breath and one moment of remembering. What would realistically have changed?
6. **Watching a thought:** Choose one thought you noticed today. Was it moving toward steadiness or away from it? How did you respond when you saw it clearly?
7. **One lens for the day:** Choose one guiding lens for tomorrow – examples include impermanence, kindness, restraint, patience, clarity... At the end of the day, write how viewing events through that lens shaped your choices.

### **Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives**

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of 'Skilful Mindfulness' the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** From a neuroscience angle, mindfulness asks us to keep a chosen direction alive while new stimuli keep arriving. This relies on working memory and attention control – not as one single brain 'box,' but as distributed networks that help us hold intentions, filter distraction, and guide behaviour. Under stress, these control systems are harder to access. That is why mindfulness is not simple a pleasant state; it is training in remembering under pressure.

Research on mindfulness suggests modest but meaningful effects in networks involved in attention, salience detection, emotion regulation, and self-related thinking. The evidence is not perfectly uniform, and mindfulness is not a magic repair job. But the practical pattern is clear enough: when we repeatedly notice drift and return to what matters, we strengthen the capacity to stabilise attention, interrupt automatic loops, and choose a wiser next step.

- ★ **Psychology:** Psychologically, mindfulness is very close to metacognition – the mind becoming aware of its own activity and then using that awareness to guide the next step. In the classic literature, metacognition is not only 'thinking about thinking'; it includes knowledge about how our mind works and the ongoing monitoring and control of memory, comprehension, judgement and strategy. Later models describe a loop

between what the mind is doing and a higher monitoring level that watches performance, updates confidence and adjusts behaviour. In simple terms, it is the difference between being inside a thought and realising that a thought is currently shaping us.

Mindfulness research often describes that shift as decentering. When we de-centre, we become aware of experience, identify with it less completely, and react less automatically to what the thought or feeling is saying. Reviews of the field describe three recurring elements – meta-awareness, disidentification from inner events, and reduced reactivity – and experimental work on self-distancing shows that this stance can reduce emotional escalation. Recent work on self-control adds an important nuance: good regulation depends not only on effort, but on metacognitive knowledge about our patterns, our vulnerabilities and the strategies that genuinely help. So psychologically, mindfulness is not passive observation; it is the supervisory capacity that turns awareness into choice.

★ **Philosophy:** Philosophically, one close Western parallel is the Stoic practice of *prosochē* – vigilant attention to impressions, judgements and actions. The basic Stoic idea is simple: we do not control the first flash of an impression, but we do have responsibility for whether we agree with it and act from it. That is why Stoic attention is not mere noticing. It is an ethical watchfulness that keeps our governing centre aligned with reason and with what is actually in our control. Stoic texts treat it as something that must extend into every part of life, not just moments of formal reflection. The comparison with Buddhist mindfulness is illuminating, but it should not be flattened into sameness. Scholarship on mindfulness and *sati* shows that these terms travel with different assumptions about selfhood, ethics and practice, and scholars of Stoicism themselves disagree about how closely *prosochē* maps onto modern mindfulness. Even so, the family resemblance is real enough to be useful: both traditions ask us to remember a discipline at the exact moment when appearances feel most convincing. The Stoic version tells us to test an impression before assent; the Buddhist version tells us to remember the path before craving or aversion takes over. In both, attention is an active safeguard rather than a passive stare.

## **Remember to remember**

Skilful Mindfulness is the quiet thread that keeps the whole training intact. It is not just watching what happens – it is remembering what matters while it is happening. It remembers our direction when the mood shifts. It remembers our values when the urge speaks loudly. It remembers that feeling-tone precedes reaction, that actions have consequences. Crucially, it remembers that we have chosen a different way to live.

Without this remembering, the factors scatter – effort strains in the wrong direction, intention fades, and we drift into old weather before we notice. With it, the system holds together. We do not need to be dramatic. We simply need to remember, again and again, what we are practising.

In RAFT terms, Skilful Mindfulness keeps the journey alive. It remembers the map, checks the compass, and notices when the rudder has slipped a few degrees. It protects the crossing not by force, but by presence. When we maintain the watch, we protect ourselves – and in doing so, we protect everyone who travels with us. Each time we remember instead of drifting, mindfulness grows from a fragile faculty into a reliable power. Carefulness replaces carelessness. Over time, the path is no longer something we try to remember – it becomes the way we naturally move: steady, aware, and quietly committed to arriving at the Safe Shore.

*“Mindfulness isn’t difficult. What’s difficult is to remember to be mindful.” ~ Sharon Salzberg*

*“My experience is what I agree to attend to.” ~ William James,*

## **Sutta references**

### **★ Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) – The Four Foundations of Mindfulness**

- Summary: The definitive text. It instructs the practitioner to "abide contemplating the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure concerning the world.",

### **★ Mahācattārisaka Sutta (MN 117) – The Great Forty**

- Summary: The Buddha explains that Mindfulness circles around every other factor. It is the quality that notices: "This view is wrong, this view is right." This confirms Sati as the manager of the path.

### **★ Sedaka Sutta (SN 47.19) – The Acrobat**

- Summary: Uses the metaphor of two acrobats balancing on a bamboo pole. The Buddha teaches that the best way to look after the other acrobat is to maintain one's own balance perfectly. This grounds the social ethics of mindfulness: my stability is my gift to you.

[RAFT to Freedom](#) © 2025 by Dr Cathryn Jacob and Vince Cullen is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

