

## *Mindfulness as a Goad*

*July 23, 2011*

When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, he says that there are some that are appropriate when the mind is sluggish. Those factors are analysis of qualities, rapture, and persistence: the qualities that energize the mind. Then there are qualities that are appropriate when the mind is overly excited, overly energetic: calm, equanimity, and concentration. Those calm the mind down. You need both sets of qualities in the practice. It's simply a matter of finding balance, and of having a sense of time and place.

There's one quality, though, that's appropriate everywhere, all of the time. That's mindfulness. So it's especially important, as we practice, that we understand what mindfulness is. Sometimes you hear that mindfulness is simply an open, accepting, awareness of things—just noting what's happening and allowing it to happen, without interfering. But that's actually equanimity.

The Buddha himself defines mindfulness as the ability to remember for a long time what's been done and said. It's the ability to keep things in mind.

And what do you keep in mind? To begin with, you keep in mind the need to develop the skillful factors of the path and to abandon the unskillful ones. This applies to all the factors. Once you know what's right view, what's wrong view, right resolve, wrong resolve, all the way down to right concentration and wrong concentration, you keep in mind your intention to develop the right side and to abandon the wrong.

The Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper for a frontier fortress. In a frontier fortress you have to be very careful because there are spies and other people from the outlying countries. They want to sneak in and do damage to your fortress. So you have to be very careful who comes in and who doesn't. And mindfulness, the Buddha says, is like a wise gatekeeper who recognizes who should be let in and who should not be let in, and he lets in only those who should be let in. So you have to keep this distinction in mind. Which qualities in mind are skillful and which ones are not? Which ones should be developed and which ones abandoned?

There's another passage where the Buddha says that mindfulness is like a goad. Most of us have gotten away from animal husbandry and farming, and so we don't even know what a goad is. It's a long stick with a sharp point. You use it to poke your animals when they're going the wrong direction, or if they're standing still when they should be going. The implication here is that the ability to remember

what's skillful and what's not, and to be able to give yourself a little push or a poke in the right direction: That's what mindfulness does for you.

And sometimes it's more than just a little poke. There's another passage where the Buddha says that when you see that something unskillful has arisen in your mind, then you act as if your hair were on fire. You do everything you can, as quickly as you can, to put it out. You're relentless and mindful in being focused on putting out the fire, and nothing else.

So all of these passages show that mindfulness is not just a broad, open, accepting, state of mind. It serves a particular purpose, and it can be narrowly focused: keeping in mind what you know about what is skillful and what's not, and reminding yourself that you really do want to focus on pursuing the skillful path and avoiding the unskillful one at all costs.

This is why mindfulness and discernment usually go together. In fact, in Thai they have a term, *sati-pañña*, mindfulness-discernment, which is their word for intelligence. It's the intelligence of a really practical person, one who knows the distinction between what's skillful and what's not, and is wise enough to know that you have to keep that in mind so that you can act on it all the time.

In the Buddha's portrayal of how all the different factors of the path work together, right mindfulness, right view—which is the discernment factor—and right effort all go together. You have right view about what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and what's not. You keep that in mind, you keep in mind your desire to do the right thing, and you motivate yourself to act on that desire. As the Pali phrase says, you generate the desire to prevent unskillful qualities that haven't arisen from arising, and abandon them if they have arisen. At the same time, you generate the desire to give rise to skillful qualities and then, once they're there, you encourage them, develop them.

So you're not just sitting here watching things coming and going, arising and passing away, and saying, "Well, that's that." You realize that your mind is the factor that shapes your life and that what its decisions will have a huge impact. You keep that in mind. And when the mind begins to wander off, you use the goad of mindfulness to bring it right back. Sometimes all you have to do is just remind it and it'll come back. Other times, it's a bit more resistant. That's when you give it a sharp poke.

This is where you can use other meditation techniques as well. But mindfulness helps there, as well. It has to keep in mind all the various techniques that you've heard about, and that you've actually put into practice and found that they work. You've got to keep all that in mind.

Because we do have this tendency to forget. Sometimes the forgetting is just a

simple dropping of what we were trying to remember, and other times it's willful forgetfulness, when part of the mind has decided it's not interested in the path at all. It wants to go off and get a little pleasure on the side: fantasizing about this beautiful person, that lovely sound, those nice flavors, whatever you're fantasizing about. When you're in that state of mind, you willfully forget the fact that you're sitting here meditating or that you're trying to follow a path of practice. That's when mindfulness has to be especially sharp in reminding you.

So try to be very clear about what mindfulness does. We're not here just to watch things arise and pass away, trying to be equanimous. There are times when equanimity is going to be needed, but not the type of equanimity that simply lets things take over, regardless of whether they're good or bad. There are times when equanimity is skillful, and times when it's not. You want to keep in mind the Buddha's teachings, you want to keep in mind the Buddha's example, you want to keep in mind whatever other teachings you've heard that are skillful, along with your own discoveries concerning your own mind about what's skillful and what's not, and what works and what doesn't work.

This is why mindfulness is useful at all times, regardless of whether the mind is sluggish or over-energized. You can't let yourself forget these things. Otherwise, it's like having a water buffalo when you have no goad, no control over the buffalo at all. If you're trying to plow the field, the buffalo will just go anywhere it wants, and then stop whenever it wants. The field never gets plowed, and you never get done with your work.

So remember that little voice inside that remembers: that remembers to be heedful, that remembers to be on top of things, and remembers the importance of your actions. Your actions really do shape your life; they really do shape your meditation. The decisions you're making from moment to moment to moment are important. Keep that point in mind and you'll find that it really helps you keep on track, and keeps you at work. And if the work seems tiresome, remember that it's not all just work. You can have elements of calm, concentration, and rapture, all the good parts of the path as well. But the mindfulness is the stick. You need both the carrot and the stick in order to get your field plowed so that it will provide the food you need to stay nourished.