

The Gatekeeper Doesn't Just Note

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The duty of mindfulness is to remember. What does it remember? It remembers what's skillful and what's unskillful, how to recognize different skillful qualities as they come up, how to recognize unskillful qualities as they come up. And it also remembers what to do with them. It doesn't stop with the recognition.

The Buddha compared mindfulness to a gatekeeper in a fortress at a frontier where there's the danger of enemies coming in. And, as you can imagine, the duty of the gatekeeper is not simply to recognize who's coming in, who's going out. If he reported to his boss, "Well, today fifty enemy spies came in," and he didn't stop them, the boss would find a new gatekeeper. This is why, when the Buddha teaches mindfulness, he teaches it together with other qualities. For example, there's the passage where he combines it with right view and right effort. Right view basically is knowing what's skillful and what's not, and the various techniques for dealing with skillful and unskillful qualities. Right effort is what actually does the work of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones in their place.

There's another passage where the Buddha combines mindfulness with alertness and ardency. Ardency is basically right effort all over again. You're not simply ardent in naming things. If something unskillful comes in the mind, you recognize it and try to get rid of it. Suppose sensual desire comes in while you're trying to meditate. You recognize it and you remember all the different techniques the Buddha gave for contemplating the drawbacks of sensuality and the advantages of getting the mind beyond it. Now, if the gatekeeper simply called out the names of people as they came in—if he saw a spy and said, "Hey, a spy!"—some spies would run away. This is why the naming technique has some results in clearing up the mind. But there are a lot of enemy spies who would pretend not to notice, not to hear, and just walk right in. And if mindfulness didn't have something else to back it up, if all it were doing was naming things, then the fortress would be overrun.

Now, in that image of the fortress, the Buddha said that you also have soldiers, which are your right efforts. They're armed with learning, once you've learned about right view. But both the gatekeeper and the soldiers have to be supported by concentration, in other words, the food stores that you keep in the fortress. This is why it's important to focus your mindfulness on one thing and try to keep it there

as much as you can, because the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness are not just for noting. They're basically—and this is where the analogy breaks down—they're basically the Buddha's instructions how to get the mind into concentration.

For example, you stay with the breath, in and of itself. You're ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's what we're doing as we're concentrating: Stay focused on one thing in and of itself. Put aside all other topics that you might be thinking about. And you do both these activities with mindfulness, you do them with alertness, and you're ardent. When you stick with them, you can get a sense of comfort.

This is where your ardency turns into evaluation. As Ajaan Lee teaches it, you evaluate the breath to see what kind of breath feels good. See what way of conceiving the breath helps the breath feel even better. Spread that good breath-energy around, so you have a sense of well-being throughout the body, along with a strong sense of nourishment. When the mind feels nourished like this, then it's a lot easier to deal with those defiant defilements, the ones that would walk right in no matter what the gatekeeper said, regardless of how well the gatekeeper knew their names. You have the strength to deal with them. Your soldiers can fight them off. You're not so taken in by them.

This is where you bring in the work of discernment, because seeing things arising and passing away is only part of the Buddha's strategy for dealing with the things that create trouble in the mind.

You see something arise, and you don't just watch it arise. You try to see what arises with it, what causes it. When it passes away, what else has passed away? Remember, when the Buddha described his awakening in the shortest possible way, it was a principle of causality: "When this is, that is. When this isn't, that isn't. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." You've got to see these connections. Otherwise, what you see doesn't count as discernment, because when there's a problem in the mind, you want to be able to figure out what the cause is so you can attack it at the cause. If you attack it at the result, the cause just keeps producing more and more problems. It's like a pipe bursting in your house. If you spend all your time bailing the water out of the house without fixing the pipe, you can bail until your dying day and you'll still not get the house dry. So when you see something arising and passing away, you've got to see what else arises and passes away along with it. Those are the first two steps in the Buddha's five-step strategy.

The next step is that when you see something arise, look for the allure. Why do you go for it? This step will take a lot of discernment, because the mind likes to lie to itself, as Ajaan Chah commented: "When you watch the mind, what you learn

is how the mind lies to itself.” There are things it likes and it won’t admit to itself why it likes them. So you’ve got to be very patient. Again, this is why we practice concentration, because we’re going to have to be watching these things again and again and again. And to watch things that steadily and that consistently and that persistently, you need to have a sense of steady well-being. You need to have a place where you can take your stance with a steady gaze, because you’re going to be trying to compare the allure with the drawbacks.

This is where the contemplation of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in. You see that whatever it is that pulls you away, it’s got to have one of these problems. It’s inconstant, stressful, not-self—in other words, you can’t control it. And those are just the main categories of the different perceptions you can apply to things to see why they’re really not worth it.

But if you compare the drawbacks with a false allure—in other words, with what you thought is the reason you went for things, but it really wasn’t the reason—you don’t get to the root of the problem. And then you might get discouraged: With all this analysis and everything, nothing seems to be clearing up the mind. Well, that’s because the mind still hasn’t opened up to itself. We talk about being quickly alert to whatever comes up in the mind. It’s that question of the allure. You have to look really carefully for that, because it whispers in the mind. It’s like the subliminal messages they put on TV. They’re there and they’re gone. So when the mind is telling itself, “Yeah, let’s go with this. Who cares about what the Dhamma says? Who cares about the fact that we’re trying to meditate?” it’ll dangle a little something in front of the mind and then disguise it. The message will have been received, but large parts of the mind are ignorant of what’s going on. It’s like spies inside and outside of the fortress sending messages back and forth to each other that the gatekeeper of mindfulness is oblivious to.

So those are things you’ve got to be really careful about. You’re looking for the details of what’s happening in the mind. That’s the place where you want to focus: Why do you go for things that you know are not in your own best interest? It’s when you really see what the issues are, really see what the allure is, then you can compare it with the drawbacks. And when your sense of the drawbacks gets strong enough, that’s when you find the escape through dispassion.

So remember, mindfulness has to work together with other factors of the path, and its work is more than just naming whoever comes in and out of the gate of the fortress. Recognizing those people is part of its job, but it works with a team, or it works with several teams actually. And only when it works together with its teams can it really do the job that needs to be done, which is to figure out why it is that

the mind creates suffering for itself even though it doesn't want to suffer, and how it can learn to stop.

So when you understand the function of mindfulness, it's a lot easier to get the best results out of it. Try not to settle for just partial results. Try to go all the way.