

Mindfulness the Gatekeeper

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The Buddha's instructions for getting the mind into concentration are in his descriptions of right mindfulness. For example, the body: You keep focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The “body in itself” here means the body simply as its sitting here right now. You don't think about the body in the world, because that would give rise to other duties: Is your body attractive enough? Is it strong enough to do the work that needs to be done? That's putting the duties of the world first, and then your body has to serve those duties.

But because we're developing the mind, training the mind, we have other duties, duties that put the mind first—the Buddha's duties that put the problem of suffering first. And the best way to keep those duties in mind is to simply be with the body in and of itself, how it feels to be with the body right here right now.

For example, the breath: If you're concerned about the duties of the world, the breath has only one function for you, which is to keep you alive. So when you're taking on duties for the sake of the world, the breath doesn't have much meaning. It doesn't play a large role in your awareness. But when you're taking on the duties for the sake of the well-being of the mind, the breath suddenly plays a much bigger role. It's what you're living with here as you stay with the body. And it's the aspect of the body that you have the most control over, that determines whether the body is going to be a good place to stay or not.

So when you look at the body just in and of itself, the relationship of the mind with the breath becomes much more important. This encourages you to pay a lot of attention to how the breathing feels, and at the same time to work with it, to make it a good place to stay. This is the duty of mindfulness, to remember we're not here just to watch things. We're here to figure out cause and effect so that we can make the present moment a good place to stay, where we can observe the mind carefully.

Think about the Buddha's image of the practice as being like building a fortress, and peopling it with people to defend the fortress. The first line of defense is the mindfulness. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper. Now, the gatekeeper doesn't just sit there watching people coming in, going out. He has to recognize: Who are the friends? Who are enemies? If he recognizes friends, he lets them in. If he recognizes the people are enemies, or if he sees the people he can't trust, he does his best to keep them out. He's not a mannequin gatekeeper.

Sometimes you hear that mindfulness is simply being aware of things rising and passing away. But that's like a mannequin policeman. You know those towns where they don't have enough money to pay for enough police, so they take a mannequin and they put it in a police car, and park it by the side of the road to get people to slow down. Now, that may work in a few cases, but if you drive past that spot often, you begin to realize, "This is a mannequin. This isn't a real policeman." And then it doesn't have any effect anymore.

In the same way, there are some defilements in the mind, some causes for suffering in the mind, where all you have to do is look at them squarely, and they get embarrassed and disappear. Mannequin mindfulness works for things like that. But there are other defilements that have no sense of shame at all. You look at them and they just stare right back. They just keep on doing what they want to do. That's when you need a real gatekeeper, someone who's more proactive and remembers his duties. That's the function of mindfulness: to keep something in mind. In this case we keep our duties in mind.

The duties here are the duties for the four noble truths. These are duties for the sake of your well-being. The first duty, with the first noble truth, is to comprehend suffering. Now "comprehending" here means understanding suffering to the point of dispassion. Ordinarily, we wouldn't think that we're passionate for our suffering, but as the Buddha said, suffering isn't something that just happens to us. We actually go out and do it. We cling to things, thinking that it's worthwhile to cling to them. We tend to ignore the drawbacks.

It's like holding a vicious animal in your hand because the animal has something you like. Maybe it has a nice fur coat or something. But then it bites and bites and bites, and it's as if we refuse to see the connection between the fact that we're holding on to the fur coat and getting bitten at the same time. So when the Buddha says to comprehend suffering, he wants us to see the connection between our attachment to the fur coat and the teeth of the animal, realizing that it's not worth it.

Now, the duty with regard to the second noble truth, which is the cause of suffering, is to abandon it. The reason we're holding on to the animal is because we've got craving for it, either because we think it's something fascinating, it has a beautiful coat that we want, or we want the fur coat because it gives us a sense of status. We're the person who has the fur coat, either that we want for ourselves or that we want to give to somebody else.

Then there's the craving that doesn't like a state of becoming, being that person with a fur coat, and wants to destroy it. All these things lead to suffering. Particularly the first one—it's called craving for sensuality. "Sensuality" here doesn't mean sensual pleasures so much as it means our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. We can plan and plan and

plan for, say, a meal we want to have when we leave the retreat, where we want to go, what kind of food we want to order, or when we go home what kind of food we want to make. And we could think about that for whole hours.

We're attached to that thinking more than we are to the actual food. Say, for example, you've made up your mind that you want a pizza at a particular restaurant. You go there, and the restaurant's closed. You say, "Well, that's too bad," but then you immediately think of another place you want to go. No big deal. But if you were told you couldn't engage in that kind of thinking at all, you'd rebel. That's because you're really attached to the thinking. But thinking about sensual pleasures all the time gives rise to a sense of lack, and that lack is what leads the mind to do unskillful things that lead to suffering. So that's what you want to let go of.

When you can do that, you then follow up with the duty for the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, which is to realize it—in other words, realizing that when you let go of craving, suffering ends. There may be stress in the world outside, problems in the world outside, but the suffering that weighs down the mind is gone. You want to see that clearly. And you do that by developing the path. That's the duty with the fourth noble truth. If the qualities of the path are not there yet, you give rise to them. When they are there, you try to maintain them and develop them.

So this is what your gatekeeper has to remember. For instance, concentration arises in the mind, and then it goes away. You don't just say, "Well, that's the nature of concentration, the nature of things, to arise and pass away," thinking that that's discernment. Actually, it's simply not doing your duty. Your duty is to try to figure out how to get that concentration back. Try to remember what gave rise to it to begin with and recreate those causes again. If you can't, then keep watchful for the next time when concentration arises so that you can see the connection between what you do and how the mind settles down, so that this becomes a skill.

Now, part of the skill in creating a state of concentration is that we're creating a state of becoming. Becoming is an identity you take on in a particular world of experience. It's all centered on a desire. Say you have that desire for a fur coat. Okay, everything in the world that's related to the fur coat is part of that world. Things that are not related to that fur coat—either they don't help in gaining the fur coat or they don't form obstacles to the fur coat—are not part of that particular becoming at all. Then there's the "you" that takes on an identity: both the you that wants the fur coat and will enjoy the fur coat when you get it, and the you that can provide it. All that together constitutes a state of becoming.

Usually, when we think of becoming, we think about levels of becoming up in heaven or down in hell: in other words, worlds outside. And there is that

level of becoming. We're on the human level right now. But those outside becomings come from the becomings in the mind. You have a picture of something you want, and then all the things that are related to that something you want suddenly appear in the mind. Then you go in and you figure out how you're going to get it. And that happens how many times in the course of the day?

It's our desire for those things, our craving for that kind of process: That's what leads to suffering. But in the Buddha's approach, we have to create one state of becoming so that we can let go of the others, and that's the state of becoming which is concentration. The world of your concentration is your sense of your body as you feel it from the inside. You're the meditator trying to get the mind to settle down. That's a becoming you're going to hold on to.

Like Ajaan Chah's story: You're coming back from the market, you've bought a banana, and someone asks you, "Why are you holding the banana?" You say, "Because I want to eat it." And then they ask you, "Are you going to eat the peel as well?" "No." "Then why are you holding the peel?" And Ajaan Chah says, "With what are you going to answer that person?" And his answer has two levels. The first level is, you've got to have the desire to come up with a good answer. So you answer with desire. He's pointing to the fact that we need desire on the path. Not all desire is a cause of suffering. Some skillful desires are actually part of the path. The second part of the answer is, "The time hasn't come to let go of the peel yet. If I let go of it now, the banana will become mush in my hands."

It's the same with the mind. If you want to get it to understand suffering, you need to have a good place to stay in concentration. You're trying to understand all your mind's attraction to other forms of becoming, so you need this form of becoming to hold on to, both to understand the process of becoming, and to compare this state of becoming with others, seeing that this one is a lot better.

This is why we work at developing this state of becoming as part of the path. This is one of the duties that our gatekeeper has to remember. You're trying to figure out the mind in concentration. You don't just watch it come and go. When it comes, you ask yourself, "How did it come? What did I do?" When it goes, you ask yourself, "What did I do?" After a while, you start seeing connections. And the concentration becomes a skill. That's how you develop the path.

In the beginning, it might seem like a lot of work. We come here, we want the mind to settle down and be still, but there's not much stillness. It's grappling with staying with the breath, then losing it, then coming back, then losing it again. But remember, we're building a home for the mind here. If you have a place where you want to build a home, you don't just lie down there and

tell yourself, “Okay I’ve got my resting spot.” You first have to clear the land, put up a roof, put up walls, put up windows and doors you can open and close. You fix all the things that are necessary for a home. That’s when you can lie down.

So even though there may be some frustration in noticing the mind slipping off, each time you catch the mind slipping off remember that your gatekeeper is at work catching these things. If the gatekeeper weren’t catching these things, you’d just be wandering around in who knows what thoughts. You’re training your gatekeeper to get more and more alert, so that it knows its duties. Otherwise, we keep doing the wrong things.

There was a famous meditation monk in Bangkok years back whose name was Chao Khun Nor. He was doing walking meditation in front of his hut one night, and a young monk came up and said “I’ve been harassed by these thoughts all day, I can’t get rid of them.” Chao Khun Nor looked at him and said, “You’re doing the wrong duty.” Then he turned around and went back into his hut. Fortunately, the young monk had been studying the Dhamma, and as soon as he heard the word “duty,” he thought of the duties of the four noble truths. He was developing the thoughts instead of letting them go. Or you might say, whatever it was that was causing the thoughts, he was trying to let to go of the thoughts without letting go of the cause.

Ajaan Fuang tells a similar story. He was harassed with severe headaches when he was young. He tried Chinese medicine, Thai medicine, Western medicine, nothing worked. It got so bad that he had to have monks staying his room staying at night in case he got up in pain, because he said, even if he just lied down, as soon as his head hit the pillow, pain would come crackling up. So one night he woke up in the middle of the night, got up, and the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were all asleep. He asked himself, “Who’s looking after whom here?”

But then he told himself, “Well, as long as I’m up, I might as well meditate.” And as he was meditating, he suddenly realized: He was following the wrong duty. He was trying to abandon the pain of the headache, without searching for the cause. So he looked at the cause and he found it. Then he realized, one, that the pain of the headache and the suffering were two separate things. And two, if you look for the cause of the suffering, that’s something you *can* abandon.

So try to train your gatekeeper so that he remembers your duties as you’re sitting here, the duties that you’ve adopted for the sake of the mind, for the sake of the well-being of the mind. As for any of the duties for the sake of the world, you can put them aside right now. This is your time. And the Buddha teaches these duties not because he’s imposing them on you, but because they

are for your genuine well-being. So when your gatekeeper's well-trained, you'll be working for your well-being at all times of the day and night.