

The Boundaries of Mindfulness

March 31, 2010

When there's a Dhamma talk while you're meditating, leave the talk in the background. Make the breath your primary focus. Use the talk as a fence around your meditation so that when you wander away from the breath, you run into the fence, which reminds you to go back. Otherwise, while you're with the breath, you don't have to give the fence any thought at all. If there's anything in the talk relevant to what you're doing, it'll come right in. As for anything else, let it go pass. You don't want it to disturb your meditation. It's there simply to make sure that you stay in balance, that your mindfulness, alertness, and all the effort you put into the practice stay in bounds.

This is an important point that's often misunderstood. We're sometimes told that mindfulness is a broad, open, accepting mind state that doesn't really choose what to focus on, doesn't really choose what to like or dislike. It has no boundaries at all. But the Buddha makes it very clear that when you meditate, you have boundaries. There are proper and improper places to focus your attention.

He gives several analogies. One is of a monkey who goes into areas where he shouldn't go. If he stays in the forest, he's safe. But if he goes to areas where both monkeys and human beings go, then human beings tend to set out traps. The monkey gets caught with his hand in a trap and he can't leave. The hunter can then come and kill him and do what he likes with him.

The area where both monkeys and human beings go stands for sense pleasures, any concern with the world outside. When you're doing mindfulness practice, the Buddha tells you to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Your frame of reference has to be either the body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities—dhammas—in and of themselves. That's your territory. Every place outside of your territory is dangerous.

So you want to stay grounded. You want to keep these themes as your frame of reference. When you look at the body in and of itself, you're not looking at the body in terms of the world, whether it's strong enough or good-looking enough for the world. Those are worldly concerns. Your main concerns are what is it to have a body sitting here right here right now? What is it like? And how can you make that a basis for developing good qualities in the mind? That's your concern. Other concerns are not your concern. You drop them.

The Buddha has another analogy. A quail goes wandering away from its usual territory. A hawk swoops down, catches it, and carries it off. The quail says, "Just

my bad luck that today I was away from my ancestral territory. If I had been in my ancestral territory, this hawk couldn't have caught me." The hawk feels a little piqued at what the quail says, and says, "So where is your ancestral territory?" The quail says, "A field with stones and lumps of earth plowed up." And the hawk says, "Okay, I'll let you go, and you can go back there. But don't think that I won't be able to catch you there." The quail goes and stands on top of a stone in the ploughed field and says, "Come and get me, you hawk! Come and get me, you hawk!" The hawk swoops down and just as it's about to catch the quail, the quail hides behind the stone, and hawk shatters its breast on the stone.

Again, the ancestral territory is your frames of reference: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves. But it's not just these things. It's also the qualities you bring them. It's the whole process: You're ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. All of that together constitutes the establishing of mindfulness. You keep your basic frame of reference in mind, you're alert to see what's happening relevant to that frame of reference, and you're ardent to do all this skillfully, at the same time putting aside any other reference, any interest in the pleasures of the senses.

So you can see that there is a boundary here between places where you should go and places where you shouldn't.

Another image the Buddha gives is of a man carrying a bowl of oil on top of his head, and the bowl is filled to the brim. Off to one side is a beauty queen singing and dancing, and on another side there's a crowd of people all excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing. The man has to walk between the two. And there's another man following right behind him with a sword upraised. If the first man spills so much as a drop of oil, the man behind him will cut off his head. "So," as the Buddha said, "do you think a man in that situation would let his mindfulness get scattered outside?" No. He has to stay focused right there on his bowl of oil. In the same way, when you're focused on the body, you really want to stay with the body and not let yourself get dislodged from it. You want that to be your frame of reference.

The Buddha talks about mindfulness of the body as a post to which six animals are tied. If the six animals were all tied together with the leashes but without the post, the strongest animal would pull all the rest in its direction. But they're all tied to a post, so they have to stay right there, next to the post. In other words, in whatever direction your senses may pull you, as long as your mindfulness is firmly established in the body—this is your frame of reference and you're not going to let it get dislodged—then things can settle down.

So you're not here just to allow your mind to flow around to whatever it may notice. You have to keep a certain frame of reference in mind right here with the breath, right here with the body. And you want to use your discernment so that you can maintain this frame of reference. You can't hold it simply through force of will. You've got to use your discernment. You've got to use your powers of judgment.

Again, this goes against what's normally taught about mindfulness, that it's a nonjudgmental state of mind. But as you're looking at the present moment, you have to be very clear about what you need to keep in mind in order to encourage skillful qualities, and what you need to keep in mind to abandon unskillful ones. This is how mindfulness and ardency work together.

One of the images the Buddha gives is of a gatekeeper at a fortress. He's very careful to let in only the people he knows and to keep out people he doesn't know. In the same way, with mindfulness as your gatekeeper, you develop skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones. Now, that gatekeeper has to use his powers of judgment. When you're practicing right mindfulness, you combine your mindfulness with right view. That means you have to be very clear about what you should be doing, what you shouldn't be doing, and to use your powers of observation to let go of anything unskillful and to develop what's skillful. On the one hand, you're keeping in mind the basic principles of the Buddha's teachings, but on the other, you have to keep in mind the lessons you've learned from experience as to what works and what doesn't.

This is why the Buddha gives the image of the wise, experienced cook working for a prince who learns how to read the prince. He sets out kinds of different curries for the prince, and notices which ones the prince chooses, or which ones he praises, which ones he keeps going back to eat more of. Then tomorrow he provides more of whatever the Prince liked. It's the foolish, inexperienced cook who keeps putting out the same food all the time without really noticing what the prince likes and doesn't like. In the same way, as you're practicing mindfulness, if the mind settles down with any particular theme, remember that. Keep going back to that theme. If you don't really take note of what the mind likes, what the mind doesn't like, you're like the foolish inexperienced cook who doesn't get a reward from the prince because he's not careful to read what the prince wants.

So there's a lot going on in the mindfulness practice. It's not just being aware, aware, aware. It's remembering this issue of skillful and unskillful: where is the skillful place to focus, what are the skillful qualities of mind to bring to a situation, what are the things you've got to watch out for. You've got to keep these things in mind in a way that's appropriate to what you're doing right now.

For instance, with the breath—the wise, experienced cook notices: What kind of breath feels good? What kind of breath does the mind like? What kind of breath feels energizing? What kind of breath feels calming? What does the body need right now? Does it need energizing breath, or does it need calming breath? And how do you think about the breath in a way that allows it to spread around the body? Think about the breath as the energy filling the body, out to the pores of skin. Some of it is still, some of it is circling around, and some of it comes in and out. Try to get a sense of how these different types of energy interact in the body, and how the way you breathe, the way you focus on the breath, and the way you think about the breath can bring these different energies into harmony, so that you find it more and more appealing to stay right here. This makes it easier to stay focused in your ancestral territory, and not wander off into the area where human beings set traps, or where the hawk can catch you.

So it's important to have a clear idea what mindfulness is all about. It's one element in a larger path. Try to bring right view to bear on what you're doing right now, along with right effort. If you notice something skillful is happening right now, you don't just note it and let it go. You're supposed to develop it. If something unskillful comes up, okay, here your duty is to let it go, and try to understand why it came up. The Buddha talks about understanding what he calls origination and passing away, say, with reference to the body, or with reference to mental qualities. "Origination" here doesn't mean just arising, it means arising from a particular cause. You want to notice that.

And the only way to notice that is to experiment. As you try to get the mind to settle down, you begin to see things in mind you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. If you sit here allowing things to come and go, come and go, it's like a scientist who goes out and sits passively in a field without experimenting, just watching the animals come and go. He's not going to really learn anything, even though he's a scientist. It's the scientist who sets up an experiment, creates controls, tries different ways of influencing the plants or the animals, so that he can figure out exactly what's going on there, what the causal relationships are: That's the scientist who's going to gain knowledge.

So our experiment here is learning how to get the mind to settle down. You make that your goal. Then you try to figure out what's working and what's not working in that direction. On the side of the body, you look at what kind of breathing is easy to stay with and feels good. On the side of the mind, you want to look at what attitudes you're bringing to the meditation that are helpful, and which ones are getting in the way. Sometimes your desire for results can be too strong, and that gets in the way. So you've got to learn how to temper that. Other

times, it's too weak. You just sit here and doze off or wander away, and nothing really happens. So you've got to use your powers of observation so that you can take what you've remembered from the Buddha's teachings and add to it what you've learned from your own experience to make your desire just right.

That's how your stock of what's available to mindfulness begins to grow. You get a better and better sense of what's relative to a particular problem at a particular time, because you've been staying in your territory, and you've been exploring it, learning about it. You don't waste time or expose yourself to danger wandering outside.