The Boundaries of Mindfulness

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When there’s a Dhamma talk while you’re meditating, leave the talk in the background. Make your primary focus your meditation. Use the talk as a fence. Let it go 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 your meditation, you don’t have to give the fence any thought at all. If there’s anything relevant in the talk to what you’re doing, it’ll come right in. Otherwise, let it go past. You don’t want it to disturb your meditation. It’s there simply to make sure that you stay in bounds, that your mindfulness and alertness and all the other efforts you’re putting 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. There are no boundaries at all. What the Buddha makes very clear is that when you meditate, you have boundaries. There are proper and improper places to focus your attention. He gives several examples. One is of a monkey who goes into areas where he shouldn’t go. If he stays in the forest, he’s safe, but he goes into areas where both monkeys and human beings go. Then human beings tend to set out traps. If the monkey gets caught with his hand in a trap and he can’t leave, then the hunter can come and kill him and do as he likes with him. This is the area where both monkeys and human beings go. That’s represented by the sense pleasures. Any concern with the world outside, when we’re doing mindfulness practice, as the Buddha says, you 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. “Thomas, that’s your territory. Every place outside of that is dangerous. You want to be grounded. You have to keep these as your frame of reference.” Look at the body in and of itself. When we’re 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 concern is, 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 the mind, developing good qualities of the mind? That’s your concern. Other concerns are not your concern. You drop them. The Buddha has another analogy. There’s a quail that goes wandering off, away from its usual territory. A hawk swoops down and catches it and carries it off. The quail says, “It’s just my bad luck today when I was away from my ancestral territory. If I’d been in my ancestral territory, you couldn’t have caught me.” The hawk feels a little piqued at what the quail says. “Okay, where is your ancestral territory?” The quail says, “It’s in a field with stones and lumps of earth plowed up.” 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.” So the quail stands on top of a clod of earth, or maybe a stone, in the middle of a plowed field and says, “Okay, come and just try and get me, you hawk.” The hawk swoops down, and just as he’s about to catch the quail, the quail hides behind the stone and the hawk shatters his 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, and so on. But it’s not just these things. It’s the qualities you bring to them. It’s a whole process. You’re ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. All of that together constitutes a satipaṭṭhāna, an establishing of mindfulness or a frame of reference. You keep your basic frame of reference in mind, and then you’re alert to see what’s happening relevant to that frame of reference. You’re ardent to do all of this skillfully, at the same time putting aside any other reference to interests in the six senses. So you see, there is a boundary here. Places where you should go, places where you shouldn’t. Another image the Bodhi gives is of a man carrying a bowl of oil on top of his head. The bowl is filled to the brim, and on one side of him there’s a stone. There’s a beauty queen singing and dancing. On another side there’s a crowd, all excited about the beauty queen. The man has to walk between the two. And there’s a man standing behind him, following right behind him, with a sword upraised. If the man spills as much as a drop of oil, the man behind him is going to cut off his head. So as the Buddha said, do you think a man in that situation would let his mindfulness get scattered outside? Well, no. That’s to say, focus right there on his body. 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 of mindfulness of the body as a post to which six animals are tied. The six animals were all tied together with their leashes, but without a post, the strongest animal would pull all the rest in its direction. But if they’re all tied to a post, they have to stay right there. So in other words, in whatever direction your senses might 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 to just allow your mind to float around to whatever it may notice. You have to keep a certain frame of reference in mind, right here with the breath, right over the body. And then you want to use your discernment so you can maintain this frame of reference. You can’t hold it simply through a 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 in order 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 the people he doesn’t know. As the Buddha said, with mindfulness as your gatekeeper, you develop skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones. That gatekeeper has to use his powers of judgment. When you’re mindful and you combine your mindfulness with right view, then you can be very clear about what you should be doing and what you shouldn’t be doing here. Let go of anything unskillful and develop what’s skillful. Use your powers of observation because, on the one hand, you’re keeping in mind the basic principles of the Buddha’s teachings. But at the same time, you have to look and learn from experience what works and what doesn’t. This is where the Buddha gives the image of a cook, the wise, experienced cook, working for a prince. He learns how to read the prince. In other words, he sets out all kinds of different curries for the prince and notices which one the prince chooses or which one he praises or which one he keeps going back to eat more of. So tomorrow he provides more of that. It’s the foolish, unexperienced cook that just keeps putting out the same food all the time without really noticing what the prince likes and what the prince doesn’t like. So as the Buddha said, as you’re practicing mindfulness practice, 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 and what the mind doesn’t like, you’re an inexperienced cook who’s not going to 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 mindfulness practice. It’s not just being aware. It’s remembering. There’s this issue of skillful and unskillful. Where is the skillful place to focus? What are the skillful qualities of mind to bring in a situation? What are the things you’ve got to watch out for? You’ve got to keep this in mind. You’ve got to keep it in mind in a way that’s appropriate to what you’re doing right now. So, 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? Now 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 up, up to the pores of the skin. Some of it’s still, some of it’s circling around, 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 and how the way you focus on the breath and the way you think about the breath can bring these different kinds of energy into harmony. So it gets more and more appealing to stay right here. This way it makes it easier to stay focused in your ancestral territory and not wander off into that area where monks and human beings go or where the hawk can catch you. So it’s important that you have a clear idea of what mindfulness is all about. It’s one element in the larger path. You’re trying to bring the right view to bear on what you’re doing right now, and the right effort. If you notice something skillful is happening in the mind, you don’t just note it and let it go. You’re supposed to develop it. If something unskillful comes up, again, here your duty is to let it go. Interact with it. 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 reference to mental qualities. Origination here doesn’t mean just arising. It also 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 the mind that you wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. You begin to sit here allowing things to come and go and come and go. It’s like the scientist who goes out and just sits in the field without experimenting. 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 he can figure out exactly what’s going on out there, what are the causal relationships. So our experiment here is learning how to get the mind to settle down. You make that your goal, and then you try to figure out what’s working and what’s not working. On the side of the body, you look at what kind of breathing is easy to stay with, 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. 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. You can take what you’ve remembered from the Buddhist teachings and add to it with your experience. That’s how you’re stock of what’s available to mindfulness, and it begins to grow. And you get a better sense of what’s relative to any 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 wandering outside.

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