

Mindfulness, the Gatekeeper

September 5, 2009

You look at the problems of the world, the things that cause a lot of suffering to the human race and the animals, and you can see that they all come down to greed, aversion, and delusion. It's because of these three things that we cause ourselves to suffer and we cause others to suffer. So if we're going to do anything to make the world a better place, we have to get rid of these things. But if you go around trying to get rid of other people's greed, aversion, and delusion, what are they going to say? They'll say, "Who are you to mess around in my mind?"

So you have to start with yourself first, because the training to get rid of greed, aversion, and delusion is something you have to do from within. If the Buddha had been able to figure out a way to get everybody free from suffering, that's what he would have done. But he realized that the only way to do that was to get each person to work on his or her own mind—because these three qualities give rise to unskillful behavior, and unskillful behavior tends to spark more of these qualities.

As you know if you've ever tried to teach anyone else a skill, there's only so much you can teach. You can teach the basics, but as for your student's becoming skillful, that's something he or she has to do independently. The student has to use his or her own powers of observation to become more sensitive and really want to develop the skill. You can't force a skill down somebody's throat, but you *can* become more skillful yourself. It has to be done from within.

This is why Ajaan Suwat used to say, "Each of us has only one person in the world," i.e., the one person we're responsible for. We're responsible for ourselves. We can't be responsible for other people's thoughts, words, and deeds, but we can be responsible for our own. This is why any training in which we become more responsible, more skillful, less harmful, is going to be good not only for us but also for the people around us. It all has to begin here.

In training the mind, there are three qualities we have to develop. This is why the word for meditation is developing: *bhavana*. The three qualities are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Our understanding the need for right effort starts with the recognition that there are skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind, and we have them all mixed together. The effort itself begins by generating desire to develop skillful qualities and to get rid of unskillful ones.

It's important that you focus on that quality of desire. It's not the case that all desires are bad or all desires are greed. The desire to be skillful is something to be encouraged. It's a part of the path.

Then you focus your intent based on that desire. You focus your persistence based on that desire in one of four ways: If you see that unskillful qualities have arisen, you try to get rid of them—see what you can do to get them out of the mind, get yourself past them so that you don't get sucked in by them. You do what you can to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. In other words, you might know that if you go into a particular situation, you tend to get angry, you tend to get upset, so you've got to prepare the mind ahead of time so that it doesn't get upset, doesn't get angry. Then on the skillful side, if something hasn't yet arisen, you try to give rise to it. If it has arisen, you try to develop it as far as you can go.

That's four duties altogether: to abandon unskillful qualities already there and to prevent new unskillful qualities from arising; and then to give rise to any skillful qualities that haven't arisen yet, and once they have arisen, to maintain and nourish them, bringing them to the fullness of their development. You've got to keep those four duties in mind.

These duties are not imposed from outside. It's not that we do them just because the Buddha said we have to do them. We do them because we want true peace of mind. We want true happiness, and these are the things required for that happiness. Nobody's forcing us to adopt these duties. But once we see that they're in our own best interest, we should take them to heart, keep them in mind, and then act on them. This is how mindfulness builds out of right effort.

Sometimes you hear mindfulness defined as accepting awareness, or nonjudgmental awareness, or wide-open acceptance of all things. But that's not the image the Buddha gave. The Buddha said that mindfulness is like a gatekeeper in a fortress, letting in only those who should be allowed in and keeping out those who shouldn't be allowed in. In other words, you remember those duties with regard to skillful and unskillful qualities. You keep them in mind in everything you do.

That's what mindfulness is all about. You're very selective. You've got some duties that you keep in mind. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, mindfulness gets based on any one of four things: either the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, or mental qualities in and of themselves.

Take, for instance, the body: You stay with the breath. As you're with the breath, it's not just the case that you watch any old breath coming in and any old breath coming out. The Buddha tells you to be sensitive to when the breath is long, when it's short, and to notice the effects that it has. He says to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. In those days, they talked about the breath as

part of what was called the wind element in the body. And the wind element spreads throughout the body, all down your legs, down your arms, throughout all the different organs of the body. It's the sense of energy that keeps the nervous system alive and active.

So when you breathe in and breathe out, be aware that there's energy filling your whole body. Sometimes it's flowing nicely; sometimes it's not. Try to be sensitive to that. Notice how the way you breathe affects that.

The next step is to calm that effect. In other words, if you see that you're breathing in a way that causes tightness or tension in the body, allow it to relax. Think of the breath permeating through all those tight areas, loosening them up, dissolving the tightness away, so that the effect of the breath in the body grows more and more calm. This can give rise to feelings of pleasure and rapture, so allow yourself to be sensitive to those.

This is where you move your frame of reference to feelings. Again, you're sensitive to the pleasure and the rapture, and then you begin to notice: How do these things have an effect on your mind?—the pleasure and rapture together with your perceptions of those feelings. Ideally, you want to get the mind in a state where it feels calm and at ease, so if you find certain ways of perceiving the breath or perceiving the pleasure or rapture to be disturbing, you let go of them. Try to find another way of perceiving these things that calms the mind.

In each case, what you're doing is sensitizing yourself to one aspect of your awareness. Notice the kind of impact it has on the body or on the mind, and then allow that impact to grow calm. In other words, you're getting more sensitive and you're applying this principle of skill. You're trying to be skillful in the way you breathe, skillful in the way you relate to the breath. You're not just watching things willy-nilly as they happen. You've got those duties in mind.

As you do this, the practice of right mindfulness begins to shade into the practice of right concentration. As the Buddha said, the themes of right concentration are the same as the themes of right mindfulness: the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves. The more skillfully you relate to the breath, the easier it is to get the mind into concentration. The more skillfully you relate to these feelings of pleasure and ease that can arise in the body through the breath, the easier it is to get into concentration.

In that same passage where the Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper, he compares right concentration to food. It's the food you store in your fortress that keeps your soldiers alive, keeps everything going, because without the food, everybody is going to die. You can have great fortress walls, which the Buddha says

are like discernment. You can have a moat, a road encircling the fortress to protect it—that's a sense of shame and compunction in terms of your behavior. You can have all of these good things in the fortress, but if there's no food, everybody dies.

You need the nourishment of right concentration to keep yourself fed on the path, to feed that gatekeeper as well, because if the gatekeeper is starving, he starts accepting bribes. In other words, you may see that there's an immediate pleasure that comes from giving in to unskillful mind states, and—if you're not getting any pleasure from your concentration, you're not getting any pleasure from your practice—you're going to give in to those unskillful mind states. The gatekeeper can't be trusted. He can come up with all sorts of justifications for letting unskillful things into the mind, allowing unskillful qualities to develop.

So these three factors of the meditation—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—strengthen one another. If you don't have a good gatekeeper, your defilements will come in and steal your food. If you don't have the food, the gatekeeper will become dishonest. The soldiers in the fortress here—the practice of right effort—won't be able to hold the fortress. You won't be able to keep the unskillful qualities out; you won't be able to develop skillful ones inside.

So remember: You've got duties as a meditator. Keep those duties in mind: That's the gatekeeper.

And then feed everybody: This is how the practice of right concentration gets strong and becomes a good solid basis for looking deeper into those qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion so that you can see where they come from. You're not going to understand them until you work against them. In other words, greed can be flowing through your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, and you don't notice it unless you put up some resistance. The same with aversion; the same with delusion.

Resistance: That's what right effort is all about. In the course of resisting the unskillful things in the mind, you begin to really understand them, and see all the subterfuges and other tricks they've been playing on you, to see where you gain some pleasure from them, but also to see where their drawbacks are.

When you see both sides clearly, you see that these unskillful mind states really do cause a lot of trouble—and they're not necessary. For so many of us, we think that greed is natural: How else are people going to live? Anger is natural. As for delusion, we don't even know it's there, of course, because that's the nature of delusion. It can't see itself. We take these things for granted and we keep on suffering.

But if you realize they're not necessary and there are alternatives, you can function in a different way. You can feed the mind in a different way that doesn't require greed. You can protect it in a different way that doesn't require aversion. And you can undercut your delusion by really looking carefully into what's skillful and what's not.

This is how you can begin to uproot the problems in the mind. Once you've uprooted yours, you become a good example to other people. When you've got experience in uprooting yours, you can give them advice. So it's not that you're the only one who benefits from this practice. In fact, this is the only way that the benefits work. If you haven't learned the skills of training the mind like this, there's no way you can help other people even feel inclined to master the skills, much less actually do them.

So this is where your primary responsibility lies. If there's any hope for the world, it lies right here.