Unpacking Right Mindfulness

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As I was leaving my house this evening to come over here, I met somebody coming in who said I might want to go the long way around because there was a fire truck blocking the road. So I went the long way around, and there were fire trucks blocking the other end too. I went back, checked it out, found a way to get through, and I apologize for being delayed this evening. It added some alertness to the system.

What I'd like to talk about this evening is mindfulness. From the perspective of what we're doing here, what we're practicing, mindfulness can be described quite simply as knowing what's happening while it's happening, or as being present, aware, or connected to experience. Often our language for mindfulness includes the language of seeing, as Joseph mentioned this morning. And yet it can be helpful to recognize that mindfulness also includes a feeling into experience, a connected nature of experience, a meeting of experience.

The mindfulness of our practice is based on or related to a very ordinary quality of mind—this simple capacity of our minds to know what's happening while it's happening, this capacity to be self-reflective, to know what's happening in the present moment. We can know that we know. As human beings, we have this ability, and yet we're often not really consciously aware of it, this knowing that we know, this function or capacity of our minds. We take it for granted. It seems so ordinary that we don't really notice it.

I think it was actually one of the aspects of the brilliancy of the Buddha to highlight this quality and recognize that it's an important quality, a really helpful quality, particularly when it's cultivated and explored in a particular way. In the Satipatthana Sutta, he framed mindfulness with particular qualities, other qualities that accompany it to make it right mindfulness.

If we were to ask someone who has never encountered mindfulness as a practice, somebody who's dealing with a reactive emotion or in a reactive state—somebody's angry and we ask them, "Do you know you're angry?"—they're going to look at us kind of funny. "Well, yeah, of course I know I'm angry." So it's not just the knowing of what we are experiencing that makes mindfulness right mindfulness.

Right mindfulness includes a perspective that, in the case of a reactive emotion such as anger, has us interested and curious about turning towards the experience of the emotion, rather than being interested in what we're angry about. It's recognizing what's happening as an experience in the present moment, knowing that it is an experience in the present moment, as opposed to believing something about it, believing something needs to happen about it.

In the case of anger, for instance, we recognize that anger is something happening in the mind. It's related

to something happening in the world, probably, often related to something happening out there in our world of experience. But not necessarily dependent on that. By that I mean that the same thing could be happening and we might not be angry about it.

This is really one of the key turnings of the mind around suffering, one of the turnings of the mind around our practice—recognizing that what's happening in the world can't directly make us react in a certain way. There's stuff happening in the world and it comes in and it's processed through our minds and bodies. It's a process within our minds and bodies that creates the reactivity.

This is really good news, actually, because it means there can be some possibility of changing our experience. If it were entirely a locked-in fact that something happens in the world and we respond with reactivity, there would be no hope. But with the recognition that it's not just what's out there—there's something happening out there and there's something happening inside that's creating the reactivity—as we turn towards the experience of anger, we start to learn this. We start to see the contribution that our own minds are making towards our inner experience, towards our reactivities.

Now, this doesn't mean that we're not discerning about taking action. Mindfulness, this turning towards our experience, doesn't mean that we simply don't do anything. Mindfulness brings along the qualities of discernment as well. This right mindfulness brings along the discernment that allows us to respond appropriately, from compassion, with metta, when circumstances require it in the world—when circumstances of injustice, for instance, or things happening that need intervention. There are definitely things in the world that need intervention, and yet we don't need to be angry there. In fact, we can turn towards compassion in that response.

The Buddha didn't just sit. He was very active in the world. At one point, there's a story that war was fomenting in the area where he lived, and he actually went and stood on the battlefield and told people, "Stop. What are you doing?" And while he was standing there, the war stopped. There is this place for compassionate action, and yet it comes because we know our own contribution.

And so, you know, simply being aware, simply knowing what our experience is—yes, I'm angry, yes, I'm reactive—is not quite enough. We need a shift of perspective that helps us to see more deeply, more clearly. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya says awareness alone is not enough. By this he means that we need to have a particular perspective, a particular way of observing experience, for it to lead to freedom, for it to lead to wisdom.

And so the Buddha recommended that we cultivate right mindfulness, wise mindfulness. The key definition of wise mindfulness is the four establishments of mindfulness—the central sutta the Buddha taught around the practice of mindfulness. It includes four areas of establishing, exploring our experience to establish this quality of wise mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of mind states, and of dhammas—experience, relationship. That last one is complex to describe in a few words, so I won't try at this moment, and I'm sure we'll talk about it as we go through these weeks.

In that sutta, the Buddha actually lays out a definition of mindfulness. He repeats this definition for each of the foundations. Here it is from the foundation of the body: "How does one practice right mindfulness? One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

That's a package of qualities, things that come together to make right mindfulness. I'd like to unpack this a little bit and explore with you some of these words and my own investigation of how these qualities support right mindfulness.

The first part: "One abides contemplating the body as a body." Those first two words—"one abides contemplating." The word "abides" I like; it has a very lovely, settled-back quality to it. As you sit here, just think about what it means to abide in the body, abide knowing the body as a body. How does that land? How does it resonate?

The quality for me that it connects with—or set of qualities it connects with—is resting, easeful, connected, a receptive quality of meeting or being with experience. I had a workshop with a few people and was exploring this word with them in a very interactive way. I said, "So what does this quality make you think of?" One person raised their hand and said, "The dude abides." Which is apparently from a movie, The Big Lebowski. But it kind of captures that sense—the dude abides. We can be the dude abiding in our experience. It does generate that quality of restfulness.

And so the Buddha brings in this quality from the beginning. It's the first word he brings in for wise mindfulness: abiding.

"Contemplating" has a meaning of observing, to look at repeatedly, to closely connect with experience. The commentaries apparently connect this with contemplating or observing experience from a particular perspective—the perspective of impermanent, unreliable, and not-self. This aspect of the definition also brings in some sense of what direction we're headed in terms of what we're looking at. Whatever we're exploring, whatever we're recognizing in experience, it will be impermanent. We can recognize that aspect of experience as an important aspect to highlight in what we understand and what we know.

These two words together—"abides contemplating"—to me bring a sense of relaxed, open, receptive, close meeting of experience. They bring together both a relaxation and an interest. "Contemplating" carries that quality of looking, being with, meeting, closely knowing experience. This is an important balance for us.

And what is it that we abide contemplating? We abide contemplating the body as a body—or, for the other foundations, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states, or dhammas, experience as experience.

This also, I think, brings in another aspect of wisdom into the definition. What makes mindfulness wise mindfulness is not only what we look at, but how we look at it. There's not only the what, but the how we are observing.

Observing the body as a body—what does that mean? I like that particular framing of the translation, "observing the body as a body." Sometimes it's translated as "observing the body in and of itself." The body as a body, to me, evokes the sense of knowing the body as simply a body. We connect with our experience of body very much personally. We connect to it as I, me, my body.

And this is pointing to a more simple recognition, just as the instruction from this morning: there is a body. There is a body. It's a framing, a different kind of framing of our meeting of experience than our usual way of meeting experience.

The commentaries—and I used that word a minute ago and didn't really explain what commentaries are—there's a whole collection of texts, words that were attributed primarily to the Buddha. There's a stack of those books. And then there's a whole other set of books that are people who have read those books, thought about them, and made a lot of notes about them. A particular set of those books, written early in the common era from the time of the death of the Buddha up until about 500 in the common era, is a collection of people who looked at the text and made comments on them. This is the collection of works called the commentaries.

So the commentaries, in looking at this phrase, also looked at this and said, "What the heck does this mean?" They explored and thought about it and looked at various places in the suttas that might help them understand it. And they came to the following understanding: that the repetition of "body as a body" indicates that there's a need to precisely determine the object of contemplation and isolate it from objects with which it might be confused. This is paraphrased from a translation of one of the commentaries.

So isolating the experience of the body, separating it from other experience that we might conflate or confuse with the experience of the body. I'll give you an example of how this might happen.

Right now, put your attention into your hand. Just let your attention rest in your hand and feel into the experience. Be with the experience of the hand. It can help to close your eyes with this. Just notice sensations. You might notice pulsing or tingling or vibration, stiffness, coolness or warmth.

And now, open your eyes and look at your hand and think about it as a hand and what hands do. They reach, they grab. What happens to the experience of hand? What happens to the experience? For me, at least, when I do that there's a distance from the immediacy of the actual experience that I was with just a moment ago. Some of you may have noticed something like that.

This is often how we relate to our bodies—through the ideas about them. With the hand, what our hands do, we look at our hand, we think about it, we have an idea of hand, and we relate to hand through that idea rather than through direct experience. This is a way that the experience of body is conflated or confused with an idea about body or a concept about body.

So this is a beginning to tease apart. We can start to drop below the level of concept into direct experience. Not to say that we get rid of concept—concept is actually an incredibly useful way to navigate the world. If

I had to come in here every time and remember, "Right, these are people out there and those are mats and this is a floor and I walk on the floor and those are walls and I don't walk through walls"—if I had to think about that every time I walked into a room, it would take a lot of processing power. As it is, I walk in and I meet the world a lot through concepts.

And yet there's a big doorway there, when we are relating to the world through concept, for confusion to enter. Because we're not meeting direct experience; we're meeting our idea about what's happening. And that's where our reactivity can very often enter into the equation.

So meeting the body as a body helps us to connect with the actual experience of the body and begin to tease apart the actual experience of body from other experiences—feelings, thoughts, ideas. It's so easy for us to conflate or mix together various experiences and confuse them with each other. The practice of mindfulness helps us to tease them apart.

I think that this aspect of seeing the body as a body also brings in a sense of a non-interfering mindfulness. One knows this experience as an experience. This is a body. There is a body. I don't know if some of you were playing with that today, but it does have that power of kind of cutting through some of those ideas about the body. It's just: this is a body. There is a body. So it helps to bring in that non-interfering awareness.

The next word in this definition is *ardent*, sometimes translated as diligent. So one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, with ardency. The word ardency in English brings in a sense of wholeheartedness.

I like that aspect of that word, wholeheartedness, because it brings our heart into the equation of mindfulness and not just our minds. Ardency has a quality of persistence, of effort, and yet with this wholeheartedness, it's not just about dragging our minds around. It's about bringing our whole being to this exploration of meeting experience. I think it brings a heartfelt interest and curiosity and connection to this practice of mindfulness.

So this is a place where balanced and sustained effort is included in the equation. This is some of what Joseph talked about this morning—this balance between relaxation and alertness. And I think there are several places where this comes into the definition. With ardency, we are including this quality of wholeheartedness, and yet remembering it's balanced by this abiding. We dwell ardently. We abide with our whole heart. Abiding with our whole heart. This is not the "more or less mindful" that Joseph talks about.

There is an art to this aspect of meditation—how we bring our effort is really the art of meditation. It's something we each have to explore. And it's never just one thing either. It's not like you get it and then forevermore have it, because it is an art. It's completely responsive to the state of your heart and mind, the state of what's happening in the world. It's a dance of how we bring our effort and meet experience. At

times there's more of a sense of real commitment and meeting. And at other times it's more relaxed and settled back and just receiving.

I find in my own practice that this dance is really helped by a light touch of effort in the moment. The effort in mindfulness practice isn't about gripping or holding or trying or pushing. I think we sometimes, when we sit down or enter into a period of meditation—at least I know I, when I was early in my practice, I'd sit down for a forty-five-minute sitting and it would be like, "Okay, mindful for forty-five minutes." I'd pick up the whole forty-five minutes in the first second and try to generate the energy to be present for the entire sitting in that first moment of the meditation. But mindfulness doesn't work that way. The effort doesn't work that way. It's more of a light touch in this moment, which can be a light touch in this moment.

Right now—Joseph pointed to this this morning—right now, feel the sensation of your hand. Feel the sensation of your hips touching the chair or cushion or bench. Feel the sensation of your lips touching each other. How much effort does it take? How hard is it? As I name each experience, very often the mind is right there. It's not like it takes a dragging of the mind. It's not got that quality; it's much lighter of a touch. So the effort in mindfulness practice isn't so much about gripping or holding on, but it's that light touch again and again and again. That's where the effort is—to keep the light touch going. It's the persistence that really is the effort, a gentle persistence of light touch.

There's a game that people from all over the world, apparently as long back as we have records of people doing things, have played. Kids have played with hoops—round hoops rolled along with a stick. I think you all know what I'm talking about. You put a hoop on its end and then you tap on the hoop to keep it rolling. The game is to see how long can you keep it rolling.

If you were going to play this game, you wouldn't take the stick and give the hoop a big whack. You would lose the hoop, and there's very little control you have with that big whack. Instead, you give it a gentle tap, just enough so that you can keep up with it as you walk beside or run beside the hoop. And you can tune which direction it's going. If it's falling a little bit one way, you give it another gentle tap. With these gentle taps, a momentum gets going with the hoop.

Our mindfulness is very like that. As the momentum develops with the hoop, you might be able to run alongside or be right next to it and not give it a tap for a little while, just watch it roll because it's got some momentum. And then give it another little tap or two as it begins to wobble.

Again, as we practice with our mindfulness, we start with a gentle persistence. Moment after moment, light touch, light touch, light touch. And with that light touch, a momentum of mindfulness develops. Then we can kind of back off a little bit with the conscious doing of that effort and allow the momentum of mindfulness to simply receive experience, to know what's happening.

This exploration around effort—this light touch of effort and this gentle persistence—is going to be a lot of

the practice. We will fall off on one side; we'll get a little bit tight around the effort, working a little too hard. We'll recognize that and back off a little. Then we'll go off on the other side, getting a little dazed and wandering off in spaced-out land. We'll realize that and add a little bit more intentionality.

I understand that with airplanes, when they're flying somewhere, there's a radar signal they're tracking. Apparently they're almost never right on that signal. They're always falling a little off to one side and then correcting back, a little off to the other side and then correcting back. Our practice is kind of like that too around effort. We don't just get it right. It's a continual dance of meeting the conditions and understanding an appropriate level of gentle persistence.

I find playfulness to be a really helpful quality around the practice as a whole. To not feel like it has to be done right. Be willing to experiment. Be willing to play. Play with how you're using effort. Sometimes I've sat in the hall feeling fairly present, and I thought, "Yeah, it feels pretty present. Let me see, am I making more effort than I need to?" So I explored whether I could let go of some effort. I noticed there could be some letting go and relaxing. "Oh wow, I wonder how much effort I can let go of." I could let go of an awful lot that I didn't even know was happening. And at some point the mind started to wander. "Okay, maybe that's a little too far. Let's come back, bring a little more intentionality." So be willing to play.

The next piece of the phrase—clearly comprehending, fully aware—has many different aspects, different ways it's described or defined in the Buddha's teachings. The one we're perhaps most familiar with is the section in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta sometimes called the domain of full awareness or clear comprehension. It talks about meeting experience—all experience. It describes being mindful while reaching and bending your arms, while going to and fro, while walking, while standing, while speaking, while remaining silent, while urinating, while defecating. All day long. That's one aspect of this quality of clear comprehension: the aspect of all the time. Mindfulness is all the time.

So that gentle persistence—we just keep with that. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says the practice is like running a marathon, so you need to pace yourself. That light touch of effort, moment after moment, is doable all day long. A squeezing down, a forcing into—the mind gets exhausted. Recognizing that is important. Continuity is a big aspect of wise mindfulness.

Another aspect of this word "clear comprehension" and what it brings into the definition of wise mindfulness is a clear comprehension of impermanence. There's a definition in one place in the suttas that says, "And how does one abide with clear comprehension? One understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, remain present, and pass away." So there's a clear connection of clear comprehension with the understanding of impermanence.

Now, that particular definition doesn't mention the body. It talks about being mindful of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away. And yet in that text, it also brings in mindfulness of the body. What does it mean to have these two together? There's no clear definition in the text, but as I practice with it, the way I explore this is that it brings in a broader frame for our mindfulness

practice. When we're observing the body, it allows us to have a broader context for our experience.

Like, as we're observing the body, we may be observing some particular experience—a pain, for instance. That pain will come with feelings, with thoughts and perceptions. This is again the teasing apart of bodily experience from mental experience. There's a pain in the knee, and there's an unpleasant experience, and there are thoughts about the pain in the knee, and there are probably perceptions about it—what it means, what we need to do about it. So while we are experiencing the body, I think part of this is exploring what our relationship to that experience actually is. Clearly recognizing not only the experience of the body but the related mental experience that comes along with it. And to know that too as impermanent. To recognize unpleasant experience as unpleasant experience arising, persisting, passing away. To recognize thoughts about that pain as thoughts arising in the mind.

This is another aspect of clear comprehension. I really think of clear comprehension as being a real exploration of how we bring wisdom to our practice of mindfulness. It makes our mindfulness wise mindfulness.

The commentaries bring in another angle. They say that when we are clearly comprehending our experience, we really understand the purpose for which we're doing something. We understand the purpose for our mindfulness while we are mindful. The main purpose that the Buddha put out for wise mindfulness is to understand suffering. And so this is part of our exploration—understanding dukkha, understanding suffering. This again brings in wisdom.

There's a factor, a quality called wise attention, that's said to be the support for wise mindfulness. Wise attention is defined in the texts with certain statements. It says: one understands this is suffering; one understands this is the cause of suffering; one understands this is the end of suffering; and one understands this is the way leading to the end of suffering.

When I first heard that or reflected on it, I didn't quite understand what it was. I thought it was just stating the Four Noble Truths, which is what those four things are related to. But then I read it a little more closely. What I see is that wise attention is directing us to a particular perspective on understanding our experience. Whatever we are experiencing in the present moment can be understood as either suffering, the origin of suffering, the end of suffering, or qualities and supports leading us to the end of suffering. It's a framework through which we can understand whatever is happening in our experience. I may give a talk in more detail on this later in the retreat. But again, it's pointing our mindfulness towards understanding our experience in terms of what suffering is, how it's caused, what the contribution is in our own hearts and minds towards the experience of suffering, and how it might come to an end. Wise mindfulness is pointing the way to the ending of suffering.

The next word is mindful. "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." And since I've talked about mindfulness earlier, I'll just move to "free from desires and discontent for the world."

You might think that's a funny thing. It's like, well, I'm doing this practice in order to free myself from desires and discontents. If I have to start there, is there any hope? How do I start there?

Well, fortunately, there are some aspects of the teachings that say you can set them aside temporarily. And there's another even more hopeful side to this. Bhikkhu Anālayo points out that the word translated from the Pali there can be understood in the active tense. So it might mean setting aside greed and distress for the world, freeing oneself from greed and distress for the world—essentially happening simultaneously with the whole process.

In my experience, that's very much what happens with mindfulness. We might be able at times to set aside our frustrations, our confusions, and just consciously put them to the side. And yet much of what we meet on this path is our reactivity. So to me, this brings in a sense of how we are meeting experience. Can we bring a non-judgmental, non-reactive mindfulness to reactivity? It's a step back, in a way.

There's that shift of perspective that we become familiar with as we practice. We're caught in something like anger, and we recognize: oh, this is just anger.

This is something that can be explored with mindfulness. And while the anger doesn't necessarily vanish in that moment, there is a way in which we can hold that anger in a larger container—a container that has some ease to it.

This brings a sense of how we are relating to what's happening. What's our relationship to our experience? In freeing ourselves from desires and discontent, can we bring in that perspective, recognizing that this is the direction we're headed? If we can bring in that sense—that anger can be observed like anything else—we're headed in the direction of freeing ourselves from reactivity, because we may no longer be quite so caught by that state.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya gives this definition for wise attitude: a way of observing experience that allows us to feel at ease with whatever is happening. And I'll add: including difficulty, including reactivity.

This perspective of wise attitude—as best we can, to be non-reactive to what's happening—this is the container in which mindfulness has its magic. Carol used that phrase last night, that mindfulness is like magic. It has the power, when we turn with attention to reactive states of mind, unwholesome states of mind, and are mindful of them with that non-reactive wise attitude, to create the conditions for those states to become less and less in our experience.

And when we turn with attention to our wholesome states—states of compassion, of love, of generosity, of mindfulness, of concentration, of ease, of peace—when we notice those with mindfulness, with this wise attention of knowing "this is peace," "this is generosity," it creates the conditions for those to appear more frequently.

This wise attitude is where the magic is. And we will see ourselves without wise attitude. Then can we

recognize: can I be okay with that too?

This creates a staged process—this purification of the mind, this becoming free of desires and discontents. We see certain ways that we're caught, and we can step back from those. Hidden in that, there may be other ways that we're caught, and we step back from those. It happens in stages. It's not one big poof and you're suddenly enlightened. I used to think that's what was going to happen. I really thought that during my first few retreats. I kept waiting for some big lights and flashes or something, and after that I'd forever be happy. It's much more slow, much more gradual, and much more real than that. It's very much right in our lives that we wake up.

So: one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world. This is right mindfulness.

It brings together both what we are experiencing—in this case, the body. The Four Foundations bring in the breadth of everything, of all experience. All experience that arises can be known with wise mindfulness. Nothing is outside the terrain of wise mindfulness, of what can be known with wise mindfulness. The body as a body, feelings as feelings, and so forth—what we pay attention to.

And very much, wise mindfulness includes *how* we pay attention: with a balanced effort, a light touch, an ease to our effort. Abiding. Resting. Meeting. Wholehearted, persistent, non-judgmental, non-reactive. Ease with experience—to see and understand our minds and our hearts. To recognize the impermanent nature, which has the power—the seeing of the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature—which is the power that mindfulness gives us: to see clearly.

Mindfulness has that power to help us see deeply into experience, into the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. And that seeing deeply releases holding in the mind, deeply frees us from the ways that we are caught and struggle.

Some of this may need to be taken on faith or trust. And yet you're all here for six weeks or three months, and you will all come to understand how this works for you. That's where the freedom comes—seeing it in your own minds.

There's a statement in the Dhammapada, one of the collections of poems of the Buddha, something along the lines of: you have to practice for yourself. The Buddhas simply point the way.

Wise mindfulness is the very heart of how we practice for ourselves.

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