Qualities of Mindfulness

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So as Philip said last night, we'll be exploring the Satipatthana Sutta with you for these first days of the retreat. In the beginning of that text, the sutta offers a pretty succinct definition of what mindfulness is. This definition, which I'll read to you in just a few moments, takes a few sentences to describe what the basics of the mindfulness practice are. I think of the rest of the sutta as being an exposition on these few sentences. It really sets up in a few words what the Buddha means by mindfulness practice—what we attend to and how we attend to it. So that's the piece I'm going to look at: what might be called the definition of mindfulness, where the Buddha begins this sutta.

But to start, I want to explore a little bit what we think of as mindfulness conventionally. We might use words like being present, being aware, being with, witnessing, awareness, observing. One that I sometimes use as a working definition is knowing what is happening while it's happening—just that simple kind of awareness of what's happening while it's happening.

This quality of mindfulness that the Buddha points to as being crucial for our understanding of our hearts and minds is based on a pretty ordinary quality in our minds. It's based on a human capacity that we have: just this simple capacity to know that we know, this self-reflective capacity of our minds. We can be aware of ourselves; we can know ourselves. But this simple capacity is not what the Buddha meant by wise mindfulness. It's the basis of this quality of wise mindfulness, but wise mindfulness uses that quality of knowing ourselves while aiming the interest of exploration in a particular way—being curious about experience happening in the present moment as experience happening in the present moment.

That may sound like nothing. What's the difference between that and just being aware of what's happening in the present moment? Here's an example to tease this apart. A thief walking through a house may be very aware of exactly what they are doing, aware of every step, every movement, especially if there's somebody in the house that they don't want to wake up. They may be very aware of what they're doing in the present moment. But the aim of that awareness is greed. The aim of that awareness is not, "Oh, what does it feel like to take a step?" It's not, "What is the experience of wanting this thing?"

So that's the difference I'm pointing to: the interest in experience in the present moment as experience in the present moment. What is the experience of taking a step? What is the experience of feeling an emotion? This is beginning to point at what the Buddha meant by wise mindfulness, by right mindfulness.

The suttas actually do point to, in a few places, the wrong Eightfold Path. It's not a widely used phrase, but the suttas mention that we don't want to be on the wrong Eightfold Path, motivated by wrong view, leading to wrong intention, leading to wrong speech, action, and livelihood, to wrong effort and wrong

mindfulness and wrong concentration. So in the suttas, it's pretty clear that mindfulness is a kind of neutral quality that can be aimed one way or another depending on what's going on in our minds. The Buddha pointed to this quality as being crucial, but aimed in a particular way—aimed at this interest of exploring our human experience.

It's worth cultivating this awareness from a particular perspective. For example, with reactive emotions like anger or frustration or irritation, what it means to be mindful in this way is to be curious about what the experience of anger is in the present moment. What is it like?

Not "What do I do with this?" or "What do I need to change about this?" But just really connecting to what is this experience. What is the human experience of irritation, anger, frustration? Turning towards the experience and experiencing it from the inside—Philip used the phrase "felt sense." With our reactive emotions, we can explore what's the felt sense of this experience, curious about that.

That's a very different experience than having a reactive emotion and acting on it. Very different. And you all know this difference. You've felt this difference. And yet there are times that our emotions do point to—or a component of our emotions is—a kind of discernment that something needs to be changed in the world.

What I'd like to suggest is that this practice of being curious about what's happening in the present moment, turning inward to explore that reactivity—anger, for instance—exploring that experience, may be connected to witnessing injustice in the world. I don't believe the teachings simply say, "Oh yes, just notice that you're angry about this and just notice this is what's happening in the world." Because there are so many places where the teachings point to action following out of compassion.

As we explore and see what's happening in the world, our mindfulness begins to tease apart the discernment of what's happening from the reactivity about it. When the reactivity falls away and the discernment remains, there's room for other things to arise with that discernment—like compassion and wisdom and patience and kindness and generosity. Action out of wisdom instead of out of greed or aversion or confusion.

This exploration of being aware and curious about our experience as experience opens the doorway for more responsiveness to experience as opposed to reactivity. That's a piece of this perspective the Buddha is pointing to: this curiosity revealing, opening us to freedom, wisdom, compassion, and love. The emotions of the brahmavihāras and the wisdom of understanding suffering are really joined together. They're like two sides of a coin. The more clear the discernment, the more availability and room for the arising of these wholesome, responsive emotions.

So this phrase I'd like to explore with you begins to unpack what the Buddha means by wise mindfulness. All translations carry a kind of interpretation to them, and I have chosen a particular translation that I resonate with—the words have a flavor of what resonates for me in this teaching.

This phrase at the beginning of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta reads: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world."

That phrase is repeated four times, with "body as a body" replaced by "feelings as feelings," "mind states as mind states," and "dhammas as dhammas"—phenomena as phenomena. This fourth foundation of observing the dhammas is a little complex to explain, so I'll set that aside for now. In this exploration, I'll just use the first phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world."

These words the Buddha puts together—each one adds a slight perspective on what he is encouraging us to observe and how he is encouraging us to observe it. The phrase points to both the "what" we are exploring and the "how."

The first word: abides. This word really resonates for me. What does it evoke? Abide. The word in Pali is *vi harati*, which means to dwell, to live. "Abide" is a fitting translation. It evokes a sense of being at home, resting, contentment, perhaps a sense of intimacy, a familiarity of being with, connected. Abide.

Sometimes words can be very evocative for us. They carry many associations, and when we bring a word into our mind, we may find that just bringing in that word—abide—

Maybe there's a kind of collecting or settling or gathering.

Abide.

So this word brings in a quality of rest, of receptivity—that receptive quality to the practice.

The second word, *observes*. "Abides observing." This brings in a little bit more directedness, a kind of connection. The word *anupassati* is said to mean to look closely at, to observe repeatedly, to closely observe, to see closely. And so we're not just abiding—like, "Oh yeah, let's just chill." We abide connected, close, intimate with. There's a strong sense of meeting the experience.

So there's a relaxed, receptive connection. Those two together.

I like the phrase "being with myself." That phrase helps me to land with experience. Can I be with this? Can I be with this?

So we abide observing the body as a body. I want to linger with this phrase for a little while. The body *as* a body. Feelings *as* feelings. Mind states *as* mind states.

This is pointing to what I said earlier—that we are curious about our experience in the present moment *as* experience in the present moment. The body is what we explore; *as* a body is how we explore it. It's a body. It's a human body.

This phrase brings in an aspect of wisdom, bringing in some of the wise mindfulness, bringing in some of

the wisdom to the way we observe. Exploring the body as a body. Exploring perhaps some of the impersonal nature of the body. There is a body, this is a body. Not *my* body—*a* body. Not as a person or an identity we might hold.

And also I think it points to noticing the body in and of itself. Not our ideas about it, our thoughts about it, our opinions about it, our agendas about it—but just the body as it is. Pointing to what we might call bare attention. Just the body as a body.

This particular exploration helps us to disentangle some very common ways that we get caught up. Views about our body. Opinions about our body. Sometimes, almost below the surface, we are relating to our experience through these views and opinions and ideas, rather than through just the connection of: well, what is this experience of the body?

So this kind of exploration begins to help us tease apart what is the physical side of experience from what are our views and opinions, our feelings, the mental aspect. We are really starting to explore the body as the physicality of the body—the actual experience, the felt experience. As Philip was mentioning, the felt sense in the moment. When he used the phrase "real-time awareness" of the body, of the breath—that connection with experience.

I think this phrase also encourages a non-interfering awareness. The interference in awareness often comes in through our views and ideas and opinions. Agendas of meditation. How we want the body to be, how we want to be paying attention to it. This is encouraging us to just notice—well, let's set those aside, or notice perhaps that they're there.

We're not trying to stop those things from happening so much, but just noticing: can I know that those opinions and views are there, those agendas, but see—can I actually connect with what's actually here? What are the sensations happening?

Philip talked about exploring pain in that way yesterday. The sense of the actual sensations of maybe hardness and sparking and burning and pulling and twisting, versus frustration and dislike and anger and all of the emotional responses to that. When we overlay the emotional responses onto the physical sensation, often it kind of solidifies, and we're not so much seeing the actual body as a body, the experience as experience.

And so this kind of exploration begins to help us be curious about a non-interfering awareness.

Just attuned to this experience as experience.

We might think of this non-interfering awareness as the wisdom side—a kind of equanimity, just observing things as they are. And yet that very activity, if we can open to this part of it, we could also use the word *allowing*. We are allowing the experience to be as it is. Just allowing it to be. Allowing all aspects of our experience to be present as human experience.

This brings in the perspective of kindness and care and love. In a way, we could say that the mindfulness we bring to that curiosity is a loving attention—a kind attention, friendly, caring awareness. This allowing quality is intimately connected with this loving attention.

I was speaking earlier about wisdom and the brahmaviharas—the love and compassion and sympathetic joy—being like two sides of a coin. As we explore experience in this way, allowing ourselves to be just as we are, this is the very definition of love. When we want or are looking for love from somebody else, isn't that what we want? For them to allow us to be exactly as we are? To be accepted for who we are? Allowed to be? That's what we're exploring doing for ourselves.

Last night we talked about belonging as community. This is an inner belonging. The Buddha didn't use these words, but the effect of this practice is that we more and more allow all the parts of ourselves to belong. And paradoxically, that allowing transforms things. Parts of ourselves that tend to be twisted up in knots, tight and contorted and constricted—those begin to loosen. Greed, aversion, delusion begins to weaken and just fall apart. Transform, really.

So this allowing aspect—the body is a body, just allowing the body to be a body and being curious about that—this allowing is about recognizing that what is happening is already happening.

I like the word *allowing* as opposed to *acceptance*, at least in my mind. You may not have the same perspective with the word accepting, but when I say accepting to myself, I feel like I have to agree with it. If I'm going to accept something, then I have to sign up for it. I can't disagree with it. But allowing is about acknowledging that what is here is here. You don't have to agree or disagree with it. It's just stating the truth: this is what's here. And so allowing is connected intimately with truth. This is what is here. We might as well allow it because it's already here.

That allowing then opens us to a more skillful response instead of a reactive response. And so we hold this possibility of allowing what is here to be here.

But I don't know about you—a lot of times I find the mind is in resistance to what's here. And so sometimes we have to take a step bigger. If there's a sense of "no, it's not okay for this to be here"—I see that it's here, but my mind is rebelling against this, this is not okay—then can we allow *that*? This is here and I don't like it. That's what's happening. It's like making the container a little bigger to include the resistance itself.

Can we allow the not allowing? Our minds can do this.

Creating a bigger container.

So we abide. Abide observing the body as a body, body in and of itself. Maybe the breath in and of itself. Maybe sensations in the body in and of themselves. Maybe the broader sense—there is a body. One abides observing the body as a body.

Ardent—the next word, *ardent*. This word brings in some energy, wholeheartedness, diligence, connection, alertness, heartfelt interest. Ardent maybe even has the quality of the word "heart" in a way—ardency, heartfelt connection to. To me, this brings in some of the sense of committing, standing here. The phrase of Satipatthana that Philip talked about: standing close to what mindfulness stands close to. This is that kind of commitment to, "Yes, I'm going to be with experience." It brings in a quality of energy, of commitment, of persistence, of effort. This word brings these in—continuity, ardency, staying connected with our experience.

So this brings in the importance of that staying connected moment after moment. We will emphasize continuity a lot during this time together. It is such an important part of our practice. And in a month-long like this, we really get the opportunity to cultivate mindfulness everywhere, even in our rooms. When we go in and close the door and it's like, "Nobody's looking, I don't have to practice anymore." You can get through maybe a five-day or ten-day retreat kind of on-off the cushion. A retreat of this length, it's so much easier, actually, when we just sign up. Just sign up. You'll forget—of course you'll forget. You'll close the door to your room and you'll forget. At some point, though, you'll remember. And just reconnect at that moment. Like Winnie said, to have that moment be a celebration. I don't remember exactly the word she used, but it's positive reinforcement. Oh, I'm back. I'm back. Here again. Aware again. Awareness is back.

So that ardency isn't about trying to force ourselves to stay mindful all the time, but is more that intention to stay connected. And that intention to recognize when mindfulness returns.

In this definition, we have both *abiding* and *ardent*. So these two are kind of balancing each other in a way—both dwelling and ardent. Dwelling gives that sense of resting, stepping back, relaxing, receiving, receptive, at home. Ardency carries more a sense of engagement.

What does it mean to hold both of these? Relaxation and alertness are not opposites. They can come together in a moment, right now. How hard is it for you to be aware of the sensations of your hands, wherever they are, however they are? Just the naming of that. Do they kind of pop into your awareness? Often, if you're listening, if you heard me, often that moment—just for a moment—it's pretty easy. You just notice that sensation.

It's kind of the level of effort or energy we need. It's not hard to be mindful for a moment. What is hard, what's harder, where we tend to get tied up in knots, is in sustaining that mindfulness.

We tend to try to pick up a whole bunch of moments, thinking to ourselves, "Okay, I'm sitting down for 45 minutes. I'm going to be present for all 45 minutes." And it's almost like we pick up the whole sitting in that first two seconds and try to bring in the effort in that first two seconds to stay present for the entire sitting. Well, our minds don't quite work like that.

We can be present for a moment, a split second. Just enough effort to be present for a moment. And then

do it again. Just enough for the next moment. Half a breath at a time. Just enough effort to be there for half a breath. That's all you need to do. Those thoughts about the other 700 breaths in this 45-minute sitting—let them go. Just this half breath, that's all you need. And then at the end of that half breath, do another half breath. It's almost like hand over hand, a little bit of pulling yourself along with the lightest touch of effort.

We can do this in the walking too. At certain points in my practice, I found that when the mind was kind of scattered, I didn't want to try to force myself to be mindful even for one walking path. I would pick a spot on the ground—that little spot there, that leaf on the ground that's about two feet in front of me. "Can I make it to that spot? Can I make it to that leaf?" Lifting, moving. Yep, made it. "Okay, how about the next one? Can I make it to that spot?" Just enough effort.

"Small moments, many times," Joseph says a lot. Small moments, many times. That level of effort can be both relaxed and engaged—that way of practicing.

And the thought will come in: half a breath, an in-breath, "only 27 more days." And that thought will bring in some heaviness. That's what's happened. Notice that as idea. That's not what's actually in the direct experience of the body. That's a thought in the mind with a kind of resistance or a picking up of that. Although sometimes it can be, "Oh, 27 more days—yes!" But just notice that.

So this light touch of effort, moment after moment.

"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware." The next phrase: *fully aware*. This phrase translates the Pali *sampajañña*, which is often translated as "clear comprehension." The place many of us first hear about this word, this teaching, is in the first foundation of mindfulness. There's a section on being fully aware in all activities, and I think Eugene is going to talk about this in a couple of days—though I don't want to promise that; talks can change. But this is the way we often think about it: fully aware while walking, while going and coming, while bending and stretching. So the term "full awareness" is used there.

In this particular context, I've done some research about the word, and there are a lot of different contexts in which this particular phrase—"clearly comprehending" or "full awareness"—is used. I'll just bring in two in particular that I think begin to point to what the Buddha is wanting us to explore here at this point in the instructions.

There are some places where the phrase "clearly comprehending" or "full awareness" is pointing to recognizing when what is arising is skillful and helpful, and when what is arising is unskillful and unhelpful.

There's a place in the suttas where it talks about when a hindrance is arising, one is fully aware the hindrance is arising. This is not about being lost in the hindrance, but it's also not about judging the fact that the hindrance is there. It's about recognizing: the hindrance is a hindrance. This is something that

catches the mind, and we feel this in the way the hindrance expresses itself. The felt sense of a hindrance—those manifestations of greed, aversion, and delusion—tends to be constricted. Our system understands this is not helpful. This distinction is pointed to in certain places in the suttas around clear comprehension: understanding the body as a body, clearly comprehending when the views, the ideas, the states arising in connection with what's happening in the body are helpful and when they're not.

Another definition of clearly comprehending points to recognizing the impermanent nature of experience. The phrase in one particular text says one exercises full awareness when experience is understood as it arises, as it persists, and as it passes away. This is pointed to specifically regarding thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, but I think we can also include physical sensations—noticing, knowing physical sensations as arising, persisting, passing away. Noticing the impermanent nature of every aspect of our experience.

This brings in some of the wisdom the Buddha is pointing to. The distinction between what's skillful and what's unskillful represents an almost ethical dimension of the teachings. What's unskillful takes us into suffering. What's helpful takes us away from suffering. Beginning to distinguish these two, having a clear awareness of when the mind is caught by unskillful states, creates the conditions for learning. As we witness these unskillful states, the system begins to understand them as constricted, as unhelpful.

We are fortunate in a way: when our human system gets information about what is not helpful, it actually wants to move in the direction of ease, of well-being. But we've been so fundamentally confused about what leads us in that direction—really fundamentally confused. Partly because we're caught by the views and ideas embedded in those unhelpful states. We're caught by the view embedded in aversion that says, "I need to get rid of this thing in order to be okay." Caught by that view, we buy into some possibility of being okay at some point in the future when we get rid of this thing. And we are not noticing that right now, in the present moment, the experience of aversion is already painful, already not well-being.

The reactive states are willing to give up well-being here and now for the possibility of well-being in the future—the idea of well-being in the future. But as our organism begins to get more accurate information about what is actually happening, recognizing that this aversion is happening in the present moment, and this is what aversion feels like as a human experience, our system begins to recognize: no, that's not well-being. And it's like our system begins to find its way, to navigate its way to letting that go.

On the other side, with the wholesome qualities, the helpful qualities, our system understands them right as they are seen, as they are witnessed. When we feel the experience of patience, of loving-kindness, of compassion, of wisdom, when our minds taste equanimity, our system understands in the moment: yes, this is well-being. We may even be experiencing a reactive emotion with some balance of mind—a container of equanimity holding aversion, for instance. If we are really connected to that container of equanimity, we will feel the well-being of that, even as the reactivity is still there, still being unwound.

It's been quite a surprise for me in my practice. I've worked a lot around anger, self-hatred, aversion—those states were very strongly conditioned in my life. And when I began to be able to feel

delighted, thinking, "Oh, I'm seeing anger again! Wow, that's so cool!"—that was a different relationship to anger. This is possible with this perspective of mindfulness the Buddha is encouraging us to cultivate.

"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful." I talked about mindfulness earlier, so I won't go into that word again. The last section reads: "freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world." Often this phrase is translated as something like "free from desires and discontent for the world," and that, at least in my mind, set up a problem—as if desires and discontent meant I couldn't practice this mindfulness as the Buddha was instructing. I took some comfort from the fact that the list of hindrances is found in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, where it says when the hindrances are arising, one knows the hindrances are arising. In the foundation of mindfulness of mind states, it says one is aware: when aversion is arising, one knows aversion is arising; when non-aversion is arising, one knows non-aversion is arising.

And to me, that points to the fact that this statement, this part of the phrase, can't mean that we have completely freed ourselves from desire and discontent just to begin. Because there's this encouragement to notice desires and discontent with mindfulness.

Bhikkhu Anālayo offered what was an aha moment for me. He pointed out that the Pali verb being translated as "free from" has an active quality to it—what we call a gerund in English, with the "-ing" ending. It's an activity. It's happening.

So we could think about this part of the phrase as describing what happens as we do this practice. This exploration of abiding, observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful—it creates the conditions for the mind to become free from desires and discontent. It frees the mind from... it's the process of freeing the mind that is part of this practice.

And that speaks to what I was saying earlier about holding reactivity with equanimity. Right in there, we can sometimes even watch the freeing happen. Sometimes we just kind of watch something go on for a while, then we lose interest and go off to pay attention to something else, and later we realize, "Oh, that thing I was so caught up in before—it's gone." So we see that it goes away. But sometimes we actually get to see it disappearing. We witness this freeing from, witness a kind of release from our greed, aversion, confusion.

One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world.

If any of those words particularly land for you, let yourself rest with them. *Abide.* Being with. *Observing.* Body as a body. Body in and of itself. *Engaged, ardent, wholehearted.* Fully aware. *Mindful.* Aware. Present.

This is our work, our practice. The results come in their own time. We practice for the sake of practicing, for the sake of observing the body as a body. And the learning, the understanding, comes along with that curiosity and interest. We don't get to decide, as Philip said yesterday—we don't get to decide when we

have our insights.

We can stay connected with a light touch, moment after moment. This in-breath. This out-breath.

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