Qualities that Support Mindfulness

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We're a little further downstream in our merging rivers. Still, it probably feels like separate streams to some extent, and that's okay. This is a natural process, much as the blending of two rivers is a natural process. It will happen. The nature of it is to blend, just as the nature of our coming together will be to find our community together.

Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness and explore it from the perspective of what the Buddha had to say, what the suttas have to say about how we establish mindfulness.

To start, I want to come at it from a more ordinary perspective, because in my sense of this quality of mindfulness, it is based on a very ordinary capacity of our minds. Just an ordinary capacity for us basically to know that we know, to be aware, to have a sense of presence or witnessing our experience. Other words that may evoke the sense of what we mean by mindfulness when we say "I'm mindful" or "be mindful": connected with experience, being with experience, feeling into experience. This is, I think, what we basically mean when we come at this word mindfulness.

And yet it's interesting, because the more I begin to touch into and really get the sense of right mindfulness—what the Buddha taught of right mindfulness—there seem to be some depths and nuances to this experience of mindfulness that go deeper and beyond these words.

I think it was really brilliant of the Buddha to recognize this very ordinary quality as being a really useful quality when cultivated from a particular perspective or with a particular intention. He recognized that this quality of mindfulness is just an ordinary capacity of our minds, just a part of how our minds function. It's not often talked about, but there are some references in the Pali Canon to wrong mindfulness. Mindfulness, in the Pali Canon at least, is pointed to as a more neutral quality that is informed by what we do with it, how we engage, what our intention is as we meet it, what our view is.

This is very much, to me, why right mindfulness is embedded in the Eightfold Path. It's informed by wise view, right view, right intention, and the ethical components of wise speech, action, and livelihood. It has this framing around it. I don't think the Buddha actually anywhere just said, "Be mindful." He did say "meditate" at times. But when he pointed to being mindful, he framed it with other qualities and other intentions. This is how we should establish mindfulness, he said. Very much he talked about establishing this quality of mindfulness.

The Satipatthana Sutta, the sutta on what is often translated as the four foundations of mindfulness, contains the main meditation instructions we have from the Pali Canon about mindfulness from the

Buddha, about meditation practice and mindfulness practice. That term Satipatthana—the *sati* means mindfulness, and the *patthana* piece means something like foundation, or something to stand on, or it could mean establishing. Bhikkhu Analayo really points to this translation of "the establishing of mindfulness" as what this sutta is pointing us to. How do we establish mindfulness? Meaning, how do we create the conditions for this state of right mindfulness to become established in our minds, stable, steady in our minds? That establishment of mindfulness creates the conditions for understanding—understanding how we struggle, how we suffer, how we get caught. That understanding creates the conditions for the mind to begin to let go of the ways that it suffers.

Sometimes people ask what wrong mindfulness might be. If we look at our simple definition of mindfulness—this knowing what's happening while it's happening, or being aware, being present—we can imagine a thief being very aware as they go through a house, taking care not to wake up the residents while they are stealing from that house. Very aware of every step, every move, how much noise they're making. In a way, present. Knowing what's happening while it's happening. And yet the intention behind that awareness is greed, or aversion if there's some motivation of anger or hostility towards the residents of the house. The motivation behind that presence of mind is not to understand suffering and its causes, but to get something. This is a very different effect or impact on the mind with a different motivation for this quality of knowing what's happening while it's happening.

One of my main teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, sometimes says, "Awareness alone is not enough." I think this is the kind of definition of awareness he's pointing to here—this just being aware of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. That's not enough, because we need a framing, we need an intention, we need a direction, we need a purpose for that mindfulness. If we are trying to head in the direction of freedom, we need an aim, we need a compass, we need a direction.

And so the Buddha points out that we need to cultivate this mindfulness from a particular perspective. One way to frame this very simply is that we need to know, recognize experience that's happening in the present moment *as* experience that's happening in the present moment.

That sounds like nothing. It sounds like, "Well, duh—isn't that what we're doing?" But actually, no. Usually we are not aware of experience in the present moment as, "Oh, this is the arising of frustration," or anger, or love, or confusion, or pain, or pleasant, or unpleasant. We're not simply aware of experience as, "This is what's arising in this moment." We are usually motivated to do something with it—often to get rid of the unpleasant, to hold on to the pleasant, to try to construct our experience to be the way we would like it to be. And so this perspective is not our usual perspective.

For instance, around reactive emotions—anger, confusion, frustration, hatred, pride, greed, this vast range of reactive relationships to the world—often we are not just aware, "Oh, what's happening right now is there's anger arising." We are usually turned toward, attending to, trying to figure out: "What do I need to do about what's happening in the world that's making me angry, so that I can fix it or change it?

How can I get somebody else to do something differently?"

This is essentially a turning. We can say that mindfulness is a turning from attending to the outer world to attending to this human experience. And there's an interface there. It's not that we ignore that we're seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. Not that we ignore that there's a content of a thought arising that has a particular feeling to it. But instead of following those sights, sounds, smells, instead of thinking about that thought, we turn and explore: What's it like to be smelling right now? What's it like to be seeing right now? What's it like to be feeling that feeling right now? What is it like to be a human being having this experience? That's a really simple way to look at this perspective that will support us to establish right mindfulness.

I want to say here—because it's easy for this understanding or teaching of turning towards inner experience and not emphasizing the outer experience, it's easy to think that means we're not supposed to act. That if something is happening in the world, all I'm supposed to do is notice how I feel about it and not do anything. And yet, there are many examples in the suttas of the Buddha acting in the face of injustice. Acting when the place where he lived, the kingdom where he lived and the neighboring kingdom, were going to have a water war. He went and stood out in the middle of the battlefield to try to stop that war. So taking action, but not from greed or aversion—rather from understanding that these actions out there in the world are creating so much pain, so much suffering, and being motivated from compassion and wisdom to act. That's my understanding, and so I just want to say that right at the very beginning, because it's so easy to misunderstand what the Buddha was pointing to here.

The Satipatthana Sutta offers a phrase that basically summarizes this establishment of mindfulness. The Buddha repeats it four times, once for each of the four foundations. He says: How does one establish mindfulness? And with each one it's: How does one establish mindfulness of the body? How does one establish mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, mindfulness of dhammas? He says, "One abides observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states, dhammas as dhammas"—and here dhammas we can understand as basically meaning phenomena, phenomena as phenomena. "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, free from desires and discontent for the world."

This sentence, this phrase, offers us a number of different perspectives, different qualities that will support this establishment of mindfulness that frees the mind, that creates the conditions for wisdom, understanding, release, and peace to result. And so I wanted to explore the words of this phrase and see what they evoke for us.

The first part of the phrase: "one abides observing." Abide. How does that word land? Abide. If I just drop that word right now—just abide in your experience. The word "abide" is related to "abode," which means home. So to me it evokes a quality of coming home, resting, maybe relaxing, because when we're at home often we can relax. Dwelling, which has a sense of stability. Maybe even contentment.

I love that word. I love that it is a translation of the Pali word there, which is related to *vihara*, as in *brahm a vihara*—divine abode. The mettā, karunā, muditā, upekkhā: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, those qualities that we'll be exploring in some of the afternoon sessions. So this abiding, maybe also resonating with those qualities of love.

And then "observing"—we know what observing means: to look at, to see.

The commentaries point to really connecting, repeatedly being with, a kind of being with experience. So it's perhaps a little more around continuity, but it's also around knowing what we are aware of. It's a connecting to what's present in our experience. Observing means knowing what's in the present moment.

These two together—one abides observing, abides observing the breath, abides observing the body as a body (that's the phrase that comes next)—this brings to me a sense of relaxed, receptive attention. Because "abides" has that relaxed quality, and yet it's also got this knowing what's there. So it's not just, "Oh yeah, I'm relaxed." It's not "the dude abides" here. That's not what we're talking about. There's this connection with what is happening in the present moment.

With each of the foundations, the Buddha points to observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings. Today I'm just going to explore "the body as a body," to give you a sense of perhaps what is being pointed to in this phrase.

My understanding of "observe the body as a body" is that the body is what we're exploring in this foundation. We're exploring physical contact, sight, sound, smells, touch also incorporated, included in body awareness. We're aware of the body, aware of the elements—the pressure, the hardness, the pulsing, the tingling. So we have this connection, we know, we're aware of the body.

And the encouragement: how are we aware of the body? We're aware of it *as a body*. Now this is pointing to what I talked about earlier—that we know present moment experience as present moment experience. This repetition of the phrase, "we recognize the body as a body"—not as *my* body, but *a* human body—brings in a little bit of wisdom here. We explore our experience of the body, and it brings in a kind of impersonal quality, the impersonal nature of the body. We know the body is simply a body. Not as me, as my body. Not through any identities around bodies that we might hold. Not through any views, opinions, or ideas we might have about the body. Just the actual experience of the body.

I think a lot of us carry some perspective around the body. We like certain parts of our body; we don't like other parts of our body, perhaps. But if we touch into and actually feel... so if there's some part of your body that you particularly like, that you like looking at, or that you think is something special—if you feel into that area right now, what the actual experience of that part of the body is, does it have anything really to like or not like about it?

Now, sometimes there may be painful experience or pleasant experience, and that's a different layer of liking and not liking. Often we like pleasant, don't like unpleasant—a layer of reactivity to pleasant and

unpleasant. But if we just have some concept around a certain part of our body, like the way our nose looks... We like the way our nose looks. We don't like the way our chin looks, looking in the mirror. But when I feel into my nose, there's nothing to look at there. It's just the feeling. And the chin too—there's just sensation. Nothing to like or not like about it. It's just experience.

So this pointing of "abide observing the body as a body" begins to direct us underneath our concepts, our opinions, our views of our body. It encourages us into that direct experience—knowing the experience as experience. To me it also points to a quality we often associate with mindfulness. We often say that mindfulness is a non-judgmental awareness. I think this aspect of knowing the body as a body brings a little bit of that in. It's encouraging a non-interfering awareness—just what's here, what's the actual experience.

I think it also points to a kind of allowing attitude towards our experience. At least for me, it begins to head in that direction. If I'm not all caught up in my views and opinions and ideas about what I'm experiencing, or about my body, this image, this body image—if I'm not caught up in that, and it's just the experience—there's a kind of, "Oh, this is just... this can be allowed. This experience is allowed."

This is an important aspect of my understanding of mindfulness: this allowing attitude towards our experience. It's an expression of kindness to ourselves.

We could call this kind of awareness kind attention, loving attention, loving awareness—bringing the brahmaviharas right together with mindfulness. They don't have to be so separate.

And also it's a pointer to allowing and opening to all aspects of our human experience, this whole framing of seeing our experience as this. What's arising in this moment is what's arising in this moment. No part left out. Nothing excluded. Nothing that mindfulness cannot meet. And nothing right or wrong around what's arising. It's just this is what's arising. This too can be known. This too can be felt into with this loving awareness, this allowing.

Sometimes I think about the word love in my own understanding, of where my mind was coming from before I really met the practice and began to understand connectedness at a deeper level. I think a lot of us, when we want love, we want to be seen by somebody. We want to be witnessed by somebody. We want to be accepted for just who we are. And we want to belong. We want to feel like we belong.

What this kind of attention towards our experience begins to do for us is to see ourselves more completely than anybody else possibly could. To allow and accept ourselves more fully than anybody else ever could—because they can't even see all the way down the way we can in our own minds. See the depths of how a particular pattern is structured from so much conditioning. And in a way, it feels like we begin to belong to ourselves. A very deep sense of belonging can come from this kind of attention.

So it's not always possible to say to ourselves, "Oh, this really painful memory and complex of emotions that have come up, dragged up from the nether reaches of our consciousness—oh, I'll just allow that."

That's not always possible. It doesn't feel like it's possible to just allow it. There's often a lot of feelings of "Ooh, I don't want to see that," or "Oh, that's too much, it's overwhelming," or resistance to seeing some of what's underneath some of our habits and patterns.

And so, rather than trying to change the resistance into non-resistance, what we might explore is seeing if we can broaden the container a little bit and say, "Can it be okay that resistance is here?" Maybe that can be allowed too. That's human experience too. This thing came up and I don't want to see it right now. Okay, not wanting to see. Not wanting to see, not wanting to feel—this is what's happening right now. Fear about seeing it is what's happening right now. Confusion about this messiness is what's happening right now. And maybe if we take a step back and have a little bit bigger container, there might be room in which we can allow it all. So there's some kind of reactivity, some kind of reaction to that, maybe some resistance to that. That whole big mess—that's what's happening. Can the whole mess of it be allowed, just as human experience? And that's bringing in that loving attention right there.

And sometimes we may at times also have to just recognize that what is arising is so powerful, so deeply conditioned, that it's like a huge wave, a tsunami of experience that's meeting a little trickle of mindfulness. And so the mindfulness is not quite able to really meet it without just being pulled into the whirlpool of it. I've had this happen in my experience many, many times.

And so at that point, what's loving and supportive for us is to see if we can find some way to—I call it change the channel—redirect the attention, pick something else. Just not repress it. Not say, "Hey, you can't be here." Sometimes I would have a conversation with myself and say, "Yeah, oh, I see you. Yeah, I see you're asking for attention. Wow, you are strong. Okay, I bow to you. You are so strong. And this is not the time. My mindfulness isn't strong enough yet. And so you can stay in the room with me."

But I'm going to put my attention on my feet right now. I'm going to take a walk right now. I'm going to go look at trees right now. Something to let the mind, help the mind come back into some balance after it's gotten swamped.

And these swamps, these waves, will arise. We all have our own particular versions of waves that will overwhelm us, and they will come. Sometimes they come as the mind settles, as the mindfulness gets stronger and the mind settles into deeper terrain. Sometimes these waves can come then, and so it's not a problem. It's not anything wrong. It's just what's arising. It's this human being experiencing overwhelm right now. And can that be held with some compassion, love, care?

So abide observing the body as a body. Relaxed, yet receptive. Attentive, allowing experience to be as it is. To me, this is the first part of this phrase.

The next word is *ardent*. To me, this brings in a quality of engagement. Ardency has a kind of heart quality to it. It's got an energetic quality, that word. It means some kind of connectedness—alert, diligent, engaged, wholehearted, heartfelt connection to experience. Those are the resonances for me with that

word ardent.

So it brings in a kind of commitment, our intention, our commitment to the practice. It also brings in this sense of persistence—staying with the practice, this gentle staying, staying with. It brings in continuity to me. This is a piece of what's being pointed to here. To establish mindfulness, we need to be attentive to our experience in a persistent way.

This area of persistence, I think, is where we can tend to grab on. "I'm going to pay attention to that breath. I'm going to be with this." And yet what's important is for us to recognize that we can only be present for a moment. And that's how much effort we need to make. How much effort does it take right now for you to be aware of the sensations of your hands? Contact of your feet on the ground? Contact of your hips against the chair, cushion, or bench? Usually it doesn't take a lot of work. Often when I name those, it's like, "Oh yeah, there's some sensation there." And so in a moment, for a moment, it doesn't take a lot of effort to connect.

What's your breath right now? In-breath or out-breath? Can you know that? It's not so hard for a half a breath to know that.

What is more challenging for us is to remember to keep doing it. And that's where we tend to grab. We sit down at the beginning of a sitting and think, "I'm going to stay present for the whole forty-five minutes." It's like we pick up the whole forty-five minutes at the first second of the sitting and bring all the effort we need to stay present for forty-five minutes in that first second. But all we can do is be present for that first second, that first half a second, that first quarter of a second—this moment. Be present for this. And then do it again. That light touch of effort. Just that little bit of effort. And then do it again. And again. And again. And again.

Hearing "again and again and again and again," sometimes our minds wilt. It's like, "Oh right, I have to do it again and again for forty-five minutes. I can't do that." But we can only do this moment. And so that sense of just a light touch, just this moment, just this moment.

So our ardency, our persistence, has a kind of really delicate flavor to it.

The next words: "fully aware, clearly comprehending." In this context, there are multiple uses of the word clear comprehension. One of the most familiar to us often is this teaching in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness—in the mindfulness of body—of comprehending bodily activities, daily activities. So there's a teaching where one knows, or one engages, clearly comprehending. When one is walking, one is fully aware that one is walking. When one is sitting or standing, one is fully aware that one is sitting or standing. That's the main way people know this phrase.

But there's another place where this phrase, "clearly comprehending"—*sampajañña* in the Pali—is defined as being that experiences are understood as they arise, persist, and pass away. That is clearly comprehending experience. An experience is seen to arise, then persisting or remaining present.

There are different levels at which we see experience remaining present. So sometimes it might be a sound that arises, and then it lingers. When we hit the bell, you know, you hit the bell and it lingers for a while—arise, persist, pass away. But then as you start hearing into the bell, you see that actually there's a rising and passing happening every single moment of that sound. And so we learn, we see more and more clearly just how little there is that's stable in our experience. There's nothing stable in our experience. Everything is arising and vanishing. Even as we see it arising, it's already vanishing.

So this is a pointing—again, this is a pointing to how do we pay attention? How do we pay attention to our experience? The Buddha is pointing us to attend to impermanence here. Noticing that experience changes. That to me is part of what this phrase means: notice that experience is impermanent.

The commentaries also point to bringing in understanding the purpose for which you're doing something—another meaning of "clearly comprehending"—that we know the why, the intention behind our actions. So that's another way to look at this, that we understand why we're engaged in what we're doing. Again, bringing in some wisdom.

The purpose that Buddha pointed to for our practice is freeing the mind from suffering. Understanding suffering, the first noble truth: there is suffering. The encouragement in terms of acting on that truth is not "there's suffering, figure out how to get rid of it," but rather, "oh, there's suffering—understand it." The understanding will allow the suffering to release through the understanding. So we don't do the release. There's a kind of wisdom that is developed as we just explore: What is this experience? What is this body experience? Can I allow it? Can the mind be with this? Noticing its impermanence.

You see something unpleasant arise. Our first movement... And this was actually shocking to me at one point. I was noticing painful experience in my body, and it was pretty painful. I was recognizing there was some aversion to it and noticing the aversion. Every now and then the aversion would fall away, and there was just pain—just a painful experience. And I noticed that the pain was kind of flashing in and out. It was sharp on and sharp off. Sharp on and sharp off. And as the mind was attending to that, noticing the impermanence of that pain, every off—there was space.

There was ease. And the aversion was essentially locking the pain on—creating the conditions for the mind only to see the pain when it was present. When the aversion fell away, there was more of a recognition: this is on-off, on-off, on-off. And that allowed the mind to be at ease with that coming and going experience.

So that ease didn't come because I decided to have ease. It came because of the understanding of both the impermanent nature of the pain, the fluctuating quality of it, but also the relationship of aversion to the increase in intensity of pain—and the uselessness of the aversion. In fact, the harm the aversion was doing to my mind.

"One abides, observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful." I spoke about mindfulness

before, so I won't revisit that here. The last phrase is: "free from desires and discontent for the world."

When I read this, I wondered: how do I do that part? How do I just sit down and say, "I'm going to be free from desires and discontent for the world"? That didn't seem possible. It wasn't like I could flip a switch and become equanimous. I felt like that's what I was doing—practicing so that this could unfold.

One way of understanding this phrase, as Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, is that the Pali verb has an active quality to it: "freeing oneself from." In his first book on Satipaṭṭhāna, he explained that his understanding of this phrase is that it describes an activity happening simultaneously with the practice of mindfulness—essentially the result of the practice. As we abide, observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, this frees us from desires and discontent. It's the process of freeing us. That's the activity happening. Freeing from desires and discontent for the world is something that comes along with the practice.

And yet there are times when we can consciously recognize certain desires—perhaps wanting to go get that cup of tea—and set them aside. We can recognize that following them might not be useful. So I'm not saying conscious setting aside is never possible. At times we can say, "That's coming up... I don't need to go there right now."

Another perspective on this phrase comes from a retreat I recently taught with my colleague Gil Fronsdal. We used this phrase as the subject for the entire week, doing a talk each evening on each word. You're getting the condensed version tonight.

When it was his night to discuss "freeing oneself from desires and discontent," Gil suggested that perhaps the operative part of the phrase was actually "for the world." The word *loka* sometimes refers to the world of our experience—both our internal world and the world out there. Gil pointed to how this might describe a shift from our habitual orientation of looking outward when something arises. Who's doing what? What can I fix out there? "That person is making me frustrated—they need to stop doing that thing in order for me to be okay."

Instead of attending to the situation or person that seems to be creating the response, we turn toward the human experience itself. Perhaps that's what this phrase refers to: stepping back from our habitual orientation toward figuring out what's happening out there, and turning toward this—looking at what this experience is, in connection with what's happening out there. It's not cutting ourselves off from what's happening externally. It's more like: that's happening out there. How does it affect this? What's happening here?

And so there's this kind of edge of our practice where it's not that we say, "Oh, that's happening out there, turn in here and ignore that." There's this edge of, "Oh, that's happening out there—what's happening here that's connected to that?" How is this being impacted, affected by the world? That's another way to look at this.

One abides. *Abide*. Sometimes I can just stop there. Abide. Kind of as a shorthand. *Abide*. Observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself, setting aside desires and discontent for the world. This sentence is enough to practice with. And so this phrase offers us the direction towards establishing right mindfulness.

I want to say something about the use of "right" and "wrong" here—right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. I understand right and wrong here, and the Pali is most accurately translated as right and wrong, though sometimes we say "wise and unwise," which seems more palatable for us. But in English we tend to give right and wrong an ethical dimension, like good and bad.

Let's think about another use of right and wrong—one that's simply in terms of directions. If somebody's giving you directions from point A to point B, and they've said turn right, turn left, turn right, turn left, and you turn right, turn right—you've made a wrong turn. There's nothing ethical about that. It's just not the direction you needed.

And so I think of wrong and right here as being based on the direction we are headed. What will help us get there is the right direction. The Buddha's saying go right, go left, go right, go left—whatever he's talking about—to get in that direction. And there are certain ways of being in this world that the Buddha said aren't going to get you there. In fact, they're going to take you into suffering. If you are acting from greed, aversion, and delusion, then greed, aversion, and delusion will be cultivated in your own experience. It will be cultivated in relationship to other people. When we are angry and put anger into the world, it tends to create anger in others, and then it rebounds. From the perspective of wanting to be free from anger, a different direction is useful. And so that's my understanding of why right and wrong.

Why is right mindfulness useful? I've talked about it, but I want to restate it. The way I understand this is that right mindfulness gives our minds an education about what leads to suffering, distress, unease, struggle—and what leads to happiness, ease, peace. As we explore that, our minds get more and more clear about this direction we're headed. It's a very natural feedback loop.

My sense is that as human beings we are pretty much designed to want to head towards well-being. And yet our minds have got many layers of confusion and delusion that are clouding the direction, clouding the clarity of what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. Right mindfulness begins to clear that path, clear those clouds, that fog of delusion, and helps us to understand: oh yes, that leads to suffering. As the mind begins to understand what leads to suffering, because our system wants to head toward well-being, the mind begins to understand and reorient in a new direction.

My colleague Gil Fronsdal says that wise mindfulness helps us connect with a biological imperative towards freedom—that essentially our system wants to move in the direction of well-being. And yet we find ourselves caught over and over again doing the things that keep us away from it, because we're not in a situation of letting our mind fully understand itself. As we come into wise mindfulness, right mindfulness, our minds begin to fully understand themselves and will begin to reorient in the direction of

peace, of freedom.

So let's just sit for a moment. Abide. Abide. Observing experience as experience. Ardent. Fully aware.

And mindful. Setting aside desires and discontent for the world.

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