Qualities of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 46:28

Tonight I want to talk about the qualities of mindfulness. In Pali the word is *sati*, which I might use throughout the talk, because mindfulness is a fairly specific quality of mind. We've been talking about it a lot and we will continue to do so because it's the linchpin of our practice here.

I want to speak about it specifically because the qualities of mindfulness are something we can experience very directly when we're paying attention. My hope is to help us get more familiar with what these qualities of *sati* are so that we can recognize them when they're present and also understand that they can be developed. This isn't something we just hope falls from the sky by the grace of God. In my own practice, I find it helpful to explore and investigate these qualities.

The Buddha said once that *sati*, mindfulness, is the greatest protection we have in life—and it's the only protection we need in life. In a very obvious way, we can see that *sati* is a protection in our mind from being completely overwhelmed by the forces of greed, of hatred or aversion, of delusion. These disturbances of the mind and heart—*kilesas*, torments of the mind, defilements, all these different words.

Most of us know this, at least on a very obvious level. We know that when we're really consumed by anger or by wanting, we can't see a situation clearly. We're not protected.

I've seen this just in the last couple of days here. Several people have come to see me—and probably there are just as many others that I'm not seeing—who find themselves in some situation where they're either really angry at someone here or really wanting something very badly. They'll have this incredible string of machinations to go through to acquire something, and there's a sense of, "Is this a little out of balance? Is this really accurate? Am I getting carried away here?"

I think that's the beginning of wisdom. We know our perception of what's going on is really distorted. We can't trust it. We're being overwhelmed at that point by greed or hatred or confusion. Mindfulness can protect us from this.

We start to become aware of these distortions when we're really gripped by them. That's the first step to knowing actuality—to know that our perception is really distorted. But these disturbances work on many, many more subtle levels than this in our experience.

Joseph has spoken of this factor of perception in our experience, the recognition quality of what's happening that's present in each moment. The noting practice is in fact a function of this perception, its ability to recognize. When the qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion—in all their many ramifications, I'm not naming them all, but we all know them well enough—when they're arising in the mind, even in

very subtle ways, those qualities act as filters on our perception. When perception occurs, we're actually not able to perceive correctly what the experience is. Then our responses and reactions are based on this incorrect, confused perception. It just goes from one confusion and difficulty to the next, and we wonder why things don't seem to work.

My favorite example of this comes from a book called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* by Daniel Goleman. He gives examples of scientific psychological experiments that were carried out looking at how our perception can be so biased or distorted, how things can actually be shut out of conscious perception.

Let me begin with how aversion works. Aversion is simply that movement of the mind, of the attention, away from something that's unpleasant, difficult, terrorizing, excruciatingly painful, or just very mildly unpleasant. That movement filters our perception.

There are examples of ways the mind seems to block conscious knowing or even conscious perception of stimuli that are actually or potentially threatening, painful, or fearful. The first example he gives is from last century, of someone who was being mauled by a lion. This person was conscious throughout the experience and lived through it, reporting afterwards that obviously his body was really being ripped apart, but he was not in touch with being in pain. The speculation is that somehow it's a survival mechanism of our body—if he'd been overcome with the pain and the shock of that, he probably never would have been able to maintain presence of mind to get away.

The book continues theorizing that this defense mechanism might also work with stimuli that are not actually physically painful or threatening, but that are emotionally threatening or anxiety-producing, or only possibly anxiety-producing.

The experiment I remember involved subjects looking at a series of different pictures and then having to later remember and recount what the different pictures were. At the same time, the researchers had some device that could measure very precisely where the person's eyeball looked, so they could tell if they'd looked at the whole picture or if they'd avoided certain parts.

The one I remember is a picture where part of it would be completely neutral—like some guy sitting there reading a newspaper—and then the other half would be completely out of context with that. In this case, it was something sexually suggestive and really out of context with the rest of the picture. People for whom that was threatening or anxiety-provoking, when later recounting the pictures, wouldn't remember that part at all. They would only remember the man reading the newspaper.

But even more interesting, the researchers could measure that somehow their eyes had known not to even look at that half of the picture. This is really deeply conditioned. And so, of course, our perception is skewed.

It's distorted. And sometimes this might be necessary—repressing memories of things like childhood

trauma when you have to continue in the situation and it would be literally unbearable. But we do it so many times when it's not necessary, like looking at a picture that's going to bring up a little anxiety.

The same with the tendency of mind of grasping, of moving toward. It gives us a sense of tunnel vision. Expectations of what we want tend to keep the mind from perceiving stimuli or experience that is outside of that or in the way. For this experiment, they showed subjects a four-minute video of a very fast basketball game—the ball passing back and forth between people a lot. The assignment was to count very precisely how many times the ball was passed. That was all that was said. And in the middle of this, apparently a woman dressed in white with a white parasol sauntered across the middle of the basketball court. Nobody commented on it when recounting how many times the ball was passed. When they were told about it, they were shocked. They couldn't believe it had happened. And then when they showed the video, of course you couldn't miss it. "How could I have ever not seen that?"

How often has that happened in our meditation? It's like, "Oh, right—wanting. How could I not see that was wanting?" It hits you in the face.

This skewing of our perception of reality—this is what we call delusion. And things don't work. No wonder we're out of touch. We are out of touch. We don't know what's happening half the time, but we think we do. We have these huge blind spots in our perception, in our idea of what our experience really is. Selective memory, selective perception, unconscious choosing of what to notice and what not to notice.

There's aversion—avoidance, denial of anything that's potentially painful or threatening to our worldview, which we might not even be aware of. Outright denial. There's the wanting mind—how greed gives us tunnel vision. We only see what we want or need and discount or avoid other things. And then there's identification—the sense of identifying with any part or moment of our experience as me, as a solid, lasting, unchanging I. Perhaps the most insidious of these qualities.

For example, we identify with the idea, "I am stupid." And then we proceed to only acknowledge any perception that fits that idea and to completely discount any perception that doesn't. I do it myself. Ten people will come up and say, "Oh, you did such and so really well." And I think, "No, they're stupid. They don't know. They didn't listen." The eleventh person comes and says, "That stank." And I go, "Yeah, you're really right."

We do this a lot. Delusion. Filtering, skewing our perception, which then colors and skews our whole experience of reality. This is suffering.

And this is where the power of sati, the power of mindfulness, comes in. It's an amazingly powerful force for cutting through this ability we have to avoid and deceive ourselves. Through cultivating this quality of mindfulness, what happens as we work with it is the light of awareness, of acknowledgment—it begins to shine equally on whatever object, whatever experience is arising into our consciousness at any given moment. We're not discriminating: "I'll pick some, maybe I'll pay attention to that. No, no, no, I won't pay

attention to that one. Ignore it." We just begin to shine the light of mindfulness equally on whatever happens to be arising, without choice.

And this then begins to include even the filters. In some ways, that's why after we've been sitting as long as we have now, sometimes things seem worse. Because what you're seeing is greed and aversion and confusion. You think, "God, I'm so much worse than when I started." But it's because the mindfulness, sati, is getting stronger.

And we're seeing what we previously didn't even know was there. Previously unattended experiences are now being received with this equal, non-discriminating quality of sati, and they begin to come into awareness. We're not so driven to deny and avoid painful things, or to desperately hold on to the pleasant. And a little bit at least, this to-ing and fro-ing of the mind and heart begins to be calmed down.

This drive, this to-ing and fro-ing, is the source of our conflict. And we all have moments—I'm sure you must have all had at least one moment in the two weeks that we've been doing intensive practice now—where this to-ing and fro-ing just for a moment ceases. And instead of having our perception colored with confusion, aversion, wanting, it's just clear. The stillness, the peace that is more our real nature is allowed to shine forth. It becomes apparent.

And thus, it's not always some spectacular moment. It's those times when you're just sitting there drinking a cup of tea, and suddenly that's all. It's just totally the lifting, or the sensation, or the taste. And later, in retrospect, you think, "That was the most wonderful cup of tea." There was nothing different about that cup of tea. It was that in that moment there was no wanting it to continue, no aversion, just total presence. Mindfulness was strong, that clarity of no delusion. Appreciating the exquisiteness of the trees today, but not wanting it to continue, just seeing it clearly.

Those moments are moments when our perception of presence is not so distorted, when mindfulness is stronger, and the sense of the stillness, the peace that is what we are, is more apparent.

These disturbances, these distortions—greed, hatred, delusion—they're really strong. They're also impermanent. Without sati, we tend to take them for granted. We don't even notice them. We think, "Well, this is the way it is." We think that's who we are. And it's not.

When we bring our fullness of attention to the experience, then we begin to find that what we assume to be true is not necessarily so. And sati is the quality of mind that does this, that lets us come face to face, as it were, with direct experience, and to know it for what it really is. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master and poet, said once that to have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter. That's what mindfulness is—a direct encounter with each moment of experience.

So what are these qualities of mindfulness, this observing power? It's much more than a kind of vague, general sense of awareness that we sometimes can think of it as. There are a few qualities I want to talk about, and hopefully, as I talk about them, see if you can really feel it experientially, what the quality of

energetic experience is that I'm describing. Because at different moments, we've all experienced it. Rather than filing it away in the mind as another idea—"Oh, let me remember these four qualities of mindfulness"—forget it. That won't help. But just sit and let it come in and see if you can feel or recognize any of these qualities in your experience.

So the first is that sati is a very alert, active quality of attention. It's very energetic, but the energy springs not from a driving, grim force, but from interest—a really deep interest. And we're all capable of a very precise, sustained quality of interest. When you go to the movies, there's a certain quality of interest, unless it's really a lousy movie. There's a sense of not knowing what's going to happen in the next moment, even if it's not a suspense movie, but even more if it is. And so we're really present just to be there and see what happens in the next moment. And we can all do that for a period of an hour or two hours.

And it's the same in our life. We don't know what's going to happen in the next moment. When you sit down to sit, you have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment of sitting, or the next moment of walking. I often, when I'm on retreat, sit down and go, "Okay, what's the show going to be this time?" Who knows? And so, can we bring the same quality of interest to our life process that we can bring to a movie?

I was in San Francisco during the Super Bowl last year. For those of you from out of the country, this is this big American football playoff when for some reason the whole country has to stop and watch this game for three hours. And San Francisco was where one of the teams was from.

I have a lot of friends there, and everybody I knew—and everyone I didn't know—stopped and watched this game. So I watched it too. And the quality of interest and attention was unbelievable. Every single move. It was not a pure interest; it was definitely tainted with expectation and greed. It was not undiscriminating. But it was very powerful.

And I thought later, why can't we bring Super Bowl mind to our life? Why is our life so boring while what Joe Montana throws a football around is so fascinating? We have the ability, but are we willing? Are we interested enough to use it?

When we have that interest, then this alert quality, this energetic quality of mindfulness is present without forcing. We have this alert attention that moves without discrimination or hesitation.

This might sound kind of technical, but it's actually the way one can sometimes experience noting something. It's as if an experience arises into our consciousness—a sensation, a sound, a thought, whatever—and immediately the knowing mind rises up to meet it. Immediately the knowing mind moves to that sensation, that sound, notes it, and really sinks into it, knows it for what it is. There's no hesitation, and there's no discrimination. There's a sensation, immediately the knowing mind arises, it's as if it moves to it, notes it, sinks into it, becomes it. "Oh, there's throbbing, throbbing"—and just really with it.

We don't hesitate: "Oh, should I note this? I don't know, I don't like it so much, I'll wait till a nicer sensation

comes along." That doesn't really work, because that moment of hesitation, of discrimination, is of course the moment when the distortions can come flooding in. If we hesitate, it's usually because something is a little unpleasant, threatening, or we're clinging possibly—there's wanting going on, there's something more pleasant going on. "This calm is so nice. And if I notice that pain, it might get worse and then the calm will go away. So we'll just pretend it's not there and stay with the calm. Calm, calm, calm." You're noting calm in a total state of tension. It doesn't work to hesitate or discriminate.

So mindfulness has this active quality of the knowing mind springing up and coming to meet whatever it is without time to hesitate or think about it. You can see from this that this alert quality of sati needs energy. We can't just kind of settle back thinking, "Well, something will happen and then the mindfulness will come—oh yeah, that sensation." It doesn't last too long. It tends to peter out.

I've spoken before about the Eightfold Path, how it's divided into three segments: one segment dealing with wisdom, one segment dealing with morality, and the last three-part segment is called the samadhi group or the concentration group. Those are the factors of right effort or energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These three qualities—energy, mindfulness, concentration—work together. So I want to give an example of how the energy supports and sustains the mindfulness.

The classic example they give—you can tell this comes from Asia—is throwing a stone at a wet mud wall. To throw the stone, to aim it and really throw it hard enough to connect with the wall, takes a certain amount of effort. It takes energy. Otherwise, there's never any connection that's going to happen, or you just miss it altogether. That's the effort. That's the energy factor. Then sati, the mindfulness, is like that stone hitting the wall and really hitting it squarely, directly, and sinking into it—clearly meeting the wall, knowing it. It's not a superficial quality. It doesn't just kind of hit the wall and glance off. It really sinks in, it knows it for what it is. Then with the help of enough energy to really reach the wall and the mindfulness to meet it, sink in, know it for what it is, the stone can stay stuck in the wet mud for a long period of time—and that's the concentration.

So you see how the three all work together and need to be balanced together. They support and strengthen one another. Sati needs this active quality of energy.

But in my own practice, I've found it important not to mistake effort for sati—that sometimes when I'm not quite knowing what's happening, there's a sense of just push, push, push and the mindfulness will get stronger. You can push, but you could be pushing in the wrong direction too. The mindfulness is: we need enough energy to reach what's happening, but the mindfulness is meeting and really knowing what it is that's happening.

So that brings me to the next quality of sati, which is that it knows what's actually happening—the bare experience—as opposed to all our concepts and interpretations and ideas about what's happening. And again, we all know this. That's what we're all trying to do. It just can be quite insidious, how a concept or interpretation can get so bound up, so tied up into the experience that we keep mistaking the

interpretation for the bare experience.

A very simple example: someone is following the breath, rise and fall, rise and fall, and it's tight and unpleasant. And the idea, the interpretation, starts up: "I'm such a rigid, controlling, tight person." And it's believed, identified with, and it becomes inseparable in one's mind from the sensation of the tightness of the breath. When we confuse the two like this, we're taking "I'm a rigid, controlling person" to be the actuality of the experience. When we're confusing the interpretation with the actual experience, that's where these skewed perceptions begin to arise. In this case, the whole experience is colored with identification and aversion. We're losing touch with reality again.

Each breath then strengthens the concept. "Oh, I'm so rigid and controlling. I can't do anything about it. I'm so ungenerous." That gives rise to more aversion, which, unseen, gives rise to more proliferation of thought—memories of how rigid and controlling we've been in our whole life, how we'll continue to be in the future—more resistance, more aversion. Pretty soon the whole thing is set in concrete and breathing becomes a torment. And we all do this in many ways.

It's right here, right when we're in such a place like this—even before we get there too, but once we're in it—that mindfulness is really such a powerful protection. When I was writing this earlier, I had a conceptual idea that this is true, and just before, walking outside, some things started going on in my mind—feeling nervous, thinking about something else, not noticing the trees, feeling tightness. And suddenly I realized: yes, sati is our strongest protection.

Because what one does is, in that moment of sati, coming out of all the "this means that" and "I feel like this" and "what about this," just dropping into the bare experience. Tightness. Hearing. Walking. Aversion. Thinking. In that moment of our conscious, knowing mind coming together directly with the experience—whatever it is, with the tight breath, with the sensation of tightness, with the aversion, with the unpleasantness, with the thought—mindfulness brings us face to face with that experience, just as it is.

And it's such a strong protection, the sati, because in that moment of coming into direct contact, really sinking into the sensation of tightness in the breath, in that one moment there's no room for overpowering greed or aversion or confusion to come up and overwhelm us. The attention and the arising experience are connected. They're really closely sinking into one another, and there's not room for all these disturbances to come in. This we can actually experience over and over and over. It's incredibly powerful—simply knowing and being with the bare experience.

Like just before, when I was walking over here from next door, what I just described: I was kind of knowing, "Oh, the trees are pretty, the wind is blowing, this is a lovely night, I'm feeling tension"—just all the kilesas starting to expand. And in that moment of connecting with tightness, the whole thing just drops away. There's just a sense of tightness and the knowing of it, and there's not a problem. It's unpleasant and the knowing of it, and it's not a problem. It just cuts through all that proliferation and distortion. That's why such moments—when we're just with the breath, or we've been fighting a pain the whole sitting and

suddenly we're just with it and there's not a problem—are so fulfilling. Because again, that distortion, that clouding of our perception, is not there. There's no conflict.

This is what we call a moment of purification of the mind. Often we talk about this as a path of purification—a purification because in that moment, and a moment is quick, admittedly, but in that moment these disturbances of greed, hatred, and delusion are not arising in that moment of mindfulness, of close connection with what's going on. In the next moment, they may arise again. But in this moment, they're not. And that is a very powerful moment. It's breaking the momentum of the delusion, the identification, the anger. It might not seem like much, and often it's no big deal of an experience to say, "Okay, big deal."

I had a moment of mindfulness and the rest of the day I was lost in confusion. Big deal. I'm going to do this for three months.

But it is powerful. It is a very powerful moment. Don't underestimate it. It's a moment of purification. It's a moment where instead of strengthening the power of anger, the power of confusion by just feeding into it, we're cutting. That momentum is being cut right there. And what is being strengthened and conditioned is the power of mindfulness.

It's been said that a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom. Just a moment. But it's also true that each moment that is conditioned by sati is the cause for succeeding moments of mindfulness to arise. And in fact, mindfulness is the strongest cause for mindfulness to arise. So each moment is slowly building on each preceding moment. And it's a very powerful conditioning force.

It's like Sharon talked about getting wet in the fog the other morning. We don't really notice it when it's happening. It's like filling a bucket drop by drop, and it seems to take forever if what we're looking at is wanting to get to the top. But this is why we emphasize continuity so much—because each moment of mindfulness has a real power of purification, of clarity, of deconditioning the distortions. And it has a real power of bringing us into the next moment of mindfulness, the next moment of mindfulness. And so the continuity is the very important aspect of this practice.

Sayadaw U Pandita once gave the example of trying to use a piece of brass for a mirror. You look at it and it's all cloudy and you can't really see much of anything. So you start rubbing it and rubbing it and rubbing it. And each rub doesn't seem to do much at all. But eventually you can really see yourself quite clearly in it. You couldn't ever really point to where in the process it changed. But each rub is setting the conditions for the next one and the next one and the next one. And it's all a process of deepening purification and clarity.

It's also interesting to notice, in working with continuity, that in some ways I find it a huge relief. Not thinking about it—thinking about it is an incredible burden. If you think about being continuous every moment of the day, it's like, forget it. But the actual doing of it, I find in many ways to be an incredible

relief. Because the doing of it doesn't mean "I'm going to be continuously mindful if it kills me for this next seventy-three minutes." The doing of it means, what's happening right now? Oh, tightness, releasing, lifting, drinking, washing. Whatever is happening, that's what we wake up and bring our attention back to.

And it's a relief because it takes away any sense of pressure that I've got to hurry and get through this and get to something more important. If eating is just as important as washing, is just as important as sitting, then all I have to do is be willing to bring my total attention and presence to this particular moment, whatever it is. It doesn't matter. And in some ways that takes away a sense of "I've got to really get there in the sitting, because the sitting is what it's all about." Turning the doorknob is just as important.

You start to see that it's the direct knowing, this quality of sati, that's important—not what the experience is that we're knowing. And for me, that took away a huge sense of striving to get some special experience so that then my meditation was okay. It takes it down to: Can I just be totally connected, bring the sati to bear to really face this experience of touching? And that's all.

I watched on a retreat once what happened—it was really kind of interesting. I guess I was in a mellow place because I didn't get into too much self-judging. I observed what happened when I had been quite continuous, and then what happened when I just kind of let it up. I remember clearly I was sitting in my room looking at a tree outside, looking at the leaves. I was very mindful. I was noting the seeing and the mind's reactions and the pleasantness and the liking. It was all very quiet. No big deal. And then, just sort of—I can't remember if I did it on purpose or not—I let up. I said, okay, I'll just take a break.

No noting, just being here. And it was a very peaceful experience because I was quite present. Within—I want to say like a minute, but I think it was more like a second—of not being particularly mindful, not in a striving way but just that willingness to be present, wanting and desire and aversion and opinions just came rushing in. It was really fascinating. A little disheartening. But just to see how when that connection isn't there, how mindfulness is such a protection. When there starts to be that space between the knowing mind and what's happening, the most conditioned things come in: "Oh, I like this, those leaves are nice, I'm kind of hungry, I think I'll go for a walk, what am I doing here? Oh, right, noting." And it was gone again. Really interesting.

The last really important quality: none of this is or can really be done through repression or forcing. Mindfulness does not function from repression or from forcing. It's energetic, yes, but it's not intense, tense striving.

If everything I've been saying sounds all very clear-cut, nice and clean—a lot of our experience isn't going to be like this. I am talking about these qualities to get us a sense of being familiar with them, as possibilities, as understanding the nature of sati, to recognize its energy, not to use it to beat ourselves up because every moment isn't this strong, face-to-face, alert, active attention and connecting. Often it won't be. And that's when this next quality is really important to bring in.

The quality that sati is totally non-violent, totally non-manipulative. It has nothing to do with trying to change experience or make it be a certain way or judge it. It's that completely allowing and accepting quality of mind—almost like a quality of mettā with whatever is arising. The quality that helps me most, and I'm just trying to use different words to invoke it, is a quality of spaciousness. This huge, wide spaciousness that directly acknowledges whatever is arising in our experience but is also totally spacious with whatever's arising.

The sense I got last night going outside with the beautiful, almost full moon, a couple of stars—that is an experience, very clear, very present. But the quality of all the space of the sky around it, acknowledging and holding that experience, almost as if cradling it. Yet there's no sense of, "Well, let's hold on. We don't want the moon to set." It doesn't make any sense. There's no sense of, "Oh, we don't like the moon, we wish it would go away and the sun would come back." In that quality of spaciousness, it can cradle and appreciate whatever comes and also let it go.

This is the other quality of sati that can balance the active, energetic quality. Yes, we really meet the experience, but with this wide, all-embracing spaciousness. The whole range of experiences can come and go, and it's not a problem. If we think we know what good practice looks like or what it should look like, and we don't notice this, then it's really hard to be spacious and allow any experience that doesn't fit that to really be met with mindfulness and spaciousness—to let it come, let it be present, let it go, and be there fully for it. With the spaciousness of the sky, there is no special experience to have. There's only the ability to be fully present, actively knowing it just for what it is, and letting it go.

So sati, our greatest protection, protects us from heedlessness—basically walking through life like we're asleep, not knowing what we're doing, performing unskillful acts, hurting ourselves or others from heedlessness, from not knowing what's going on. It protects us through purifying our mind, through moments of freedom from the distortions of greed, of aversion, of delusion. Sati weakens the power of these unwholesome mental states while it strengthens the power of seeing clearly.

Through the ability of sati to know deeply what is happening, just as it is, without discriminating in a superficial way, really deeply knowing—it lets us see and know the truth of any moment for ourselves, from our own experience, clear experience of the reality of this moment. A moment that's free from the distortions of these confusions, these disturbances of mind—that is a moment that is the condition for liberating insight and compassion to arise. Insight and compassion both arise from the direct knowing of reality in this moment.

Once we understand, once we know the truth for ourselves of who we are, what we are, what's the reality of this moment—to me that's the greatest protection of all. Because what we know for ourselves, nothing and no one can take away from us. No one can come and say, "That's not true." It doesn't matter. We know.

It's our own experience. No one else can give it to us either.

I'll close with a quotation by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was speaking about the day of liberation from the prison camps in Russia:

"The day of liberation—as if it were possible to liberate anyone who has not first become liberated in their own soul. Or as if it were possible to take away the freedom of anyone who is."

Let's sit for a few minutes.

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