Mindfulness as Guarding the Heart/Mind (Part 2)

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In the good old days, when you actually had to go somewhere to give a talk, if you were speaking at a new place, you could cheerfully and confidently give the same talk you gave last week to another group, on the grounds that it was a different group of people. But when it's online, you just don't know—anybody could turn up. So this year, what I've been doing across a number of online talks for different groups is going through a series on mindfulness.

Last time at Melbourne Insight, I talked about establishing mindfulness. The idea here is that we're going through a series of discussions about mindfulness—the role of mindfulness, the nature of mindfulness—by looking at different ways in which the Buddha himself talks about it, taking up different images and expanding those.

Tonight we're going to look at mindfulness as guard: the function of mindfulness as guarding the mind or guarding the heart, the *citta*. This is important in part because it shows us the very clear link between the practice of mindfulness on the one hand and living an ethical life on the other.

We're starting with the image of the frontier city that the Buddha gives. This is taken from the Simile of the Parrot Tree, Saṃyutta Nikāya 35-45: "Suppose a king had a frontier city with strong ramparts, walls, and arches, and with six gates. A gatekeeper posted there would be wise, experienced, intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances."

This is the basic image. First, the Buddha explains that the city is the body. But of course, when the Buddha says body, he means the sentient body—the body that is aware, the body that feels. The city is the sentient body. The six gates are the six sense fields. And the gatekeeper is mindfulness.

These images provide a picture of the practitioner and her practice. You have the stage upon which the drama of practice and awakening takes place: this is the city, the sentient body, one's own sentient body. The Buddha points out that it includes the lord of the city who is, quote, "sitting in the central square." The lord represents awareness itself—awareness at the center, as the coordinating center of the city.

The city is the body, what the Buddha calls *saviññāṇakāya*. It's physical in that it is sustained by food and subject to death. It's psychological in that it is aware and subject to pain.

In these kinds of images the Buddha uses, one thing that comes out is his very strong affirmation of the essential physicality of the human being. I think this is really important for getting a sense of what the

Buddha is talking about—that his view of human nature, of the human being, is very strongly physical. This contrasts with the classical European tradition that tends to divide the human being into body on the one side, and then mind, and in fact on top of that even spirit, on the other. In that view, the center of the human being is in mind or spirit, not in body. The body is what we have to put up with in order to be fully human.

But for the Buddha, that's not the case. The body is at the very center, but it's the sentient body—the body which is aware, the body which feels.

When we come to practice meditation, for example, we do not do so just with the mind. We practice with the whole package: the physical mind, the sentient body. And of course, this is something obvious to every practitioner as soon as you sit down and try to meditate.

So this is the city. And it's a frontier city, strongly defended. In other words, this city is on the edge and it's expecting trouble. And perhaps it's planning to push the frontier deeper into enemy territory.

Here we find an image that fits in with the traditional way of talking about meditation practice as war. This is a metaphor very common in the traditions but very unfashionable for our time. We tend not to go for that—it's not very attractive, really.

In fact, one of my main teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, used to come up with this: "Meditation is war." At one time, when he was in Nepal teaching a group of practitioners, he was going on about this meditation-is-war image. When giving Dharma talks, especially when saying something he knew was controversial and would stir up the meditators, he would stop and ask for affirmation. I think he was just deliberately stirring the pot.

So he did this and zeroed in on one of the meditators, a woman, and said, "And what do you think? Do you think meditation is war? Do you agree?" He's doing this in a context where you never disagree with the Sayadaw. You don't do that. And her response came back: "Well, actually Sayadaw, to me meditation is more like a relationship."

There was a moment of silence in the hall. And then the Sayadaw says, "Yes, I think you're right about that." And then he moved on.

So this meditation-as-war doesn't quite fit, but it's very much traditional. To understand what it's getting at: the war is the war between the unwholesome and the wholesome, between the akusala and the kusala. In other words, it's fundamentally ethical in its nature. Sometimes in our practice, it appears that the unwholesome is winning. The job of the frontier city is to push back the unwholesome and win more territory for the wholesome, push back the akusala and win more territory for the kusala.

This brings us to the Buddha's approach to ethics, which we need to have a sense of—it's very different from our tradition. Western ethics is based fundamentally on the Ten Commandments. The important

thing isn't that there are ten of them; it's the fact that they are orders from above. Virtue or ethical behavior, an ethical life, is a life of obedience. We obey the commands and we're doing okay. We disobey the commands and we're not doing okay. And who decides what is right, what is wrong? Well, it's him upstairs who's giving the orders. It's not up to us.

But the Buddha's approach is very different because for him, there's no one upstairs who's in charge. Take, for example, the classical five precepts, the pañca sīla. Now, this word "precept" is actually not a very good translation of what the Buddha was getting at. Pañca sīla—sīla is ethics, pañca is five—so it's the fivefold ethics. But this system of ethics, which is the Buddha's basic teaching of ethics for laypeople, consists of five sikkhāpada. A sikkhāpada is not an order. It's a pada, a way or path. And pada, you notice, is essentially the same word as path. It's a path which involves sikkhā, and sikkhā is training. So these are paths of training, ways of training. They're not orders.

You cannot disobey a sikkhāpada, because it's not an order. If you decide to take up training—if you, I don't know, let's say you decide to take up meditation, just for a radical suggestion—let's say you decide, "I'm going to take this seriously. I'm going to meditate thirty minutes every day."

Let's say one day you think, "Oh, not today. Not today." So you don't do it. Now you've failed to fulfill your sikhāpada. Have you disobeyed anybody? No—you're just not fulfilling a commitment that you have made. And you might decide, "Well, this commitment's unreasonable. I'll change it. I'll change my training." It's a completely different approach. We're not talking about orders here. We're talking about how we train.

And of course, mindfulness is an aspect of this training. The Buddha's path is divided into the three trainings of ethics, meditation, and wisdom—sīla, samādhi, paññā. So sīla is the broad term that covers the whole area of ethics and morality.

Now, if we get down to it, what do we mean by ethics? What is it about? The concern of ethics is how we live. We could express this as saying that the central ethical question all humans face is: How shall I live? What do I do with this life?

Each of us has faced this question, and each of us has developed our own answer to it. The answer is how we are living now, how we are living today. This is our answer to this question.

This is a universal question, and this is how the Buddha himself talked about it. The way he puts it is: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term? If you're looking for this question, it's in the Lakkhaṇa Sutta, number thirty in the Dīgha Nikāya.

So you see that for the Buddha, the central question is all about how should we live—and in particular, how can we live well and happily over the long term. The key to this is discerning the difference between

the wholesome and the unwholesome, kusala and akusala.

Basically, something is kusala if, firstly, it's good in itself—something which is intrinsically good. For example, health. If you meet someone and they say, "How are you?" and you reply, "Oh, I'm doing very well. I'm very healthy," and the person responds, "What's so good about that?"—you would be puzzled. It's not quite computing, is it? Because it's obvious that health is a good thing. We don't have to justify why it's good. It's obviously good. It's an intrinsic good.

And kusala—one of its meanings is essentially health. That which is kusala is that which is healthy. So that which is good in itself, intrinsically good.

The other aspect of kusala is that which leads to a good result—that which is skillful. So often you get this translated as "skillful" and "unskillful" rather than "wholesome" and "unwholesome." This is taking the other meaning of kusala, which comes from the word kusha.

Kusha is a kind of grass that grows in Northern India and elsewhere. This grass is highly respected in the Indian yogic tradition as being very strong in positive prana. One of its uses is to weave mats for meditation that assist the yogi in their practice. The kusha grass is very sharp, so the people who handle it, who harvest it and weave it into various useful objects, have to be very skilled in working with this grass because it's very easy to injure yourself and very difficult to work. These people are very skilled. So kusala also means skillful, which carries the meaning that it leads to a good result.

Thus kusala is both inherently good—it's good within itself—and it has an instrumentalist value in that it leads to a good result. Akusala is the opposite. And you notice that in this quote, the Buddha is emphasizing the instrumentalist aspect: What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

So the ethical project is essentially this: How do I construct a life that enables me to live well and happily over the long term? This is the essence of the Buddhist project.

Hence, this brings us back to the frontier city. Now this city is exposed to the outside world through six gates. On the inner side of the gate are the six internal sense fields—the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. That is, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. On the other side of the gate, outside the city, is the world made up of the six external sense fields: forms, sounds, odors, tastes, tangibles, and phenomena known by the mind.

Now you notice that for the Buddha, mind is a sense. It's a sense because for the Buddha, a sense is a sensitivity. Each of the senses is a sensitivity to particular forms of data. The eyes, for example, are sensitive to light and form. Right now, light is falling upon my body. My hand doesn't know this. My hand doesn't know whether it's night or day, frankly. It doesn't know whether it's dark or light. But there are two parts of my eyes that are sensitive to light. These are the eyes. Equally, there are two parts of the body that are sensitive to sound—the ears. So each of the senses is a sensitivity to a particular form of data.

Mind is also a sensitivity. The data that the mind is sensitive to is not direct physical data, but the inner world of thoughts, perceptions, and so on. The mind also brings in the data from the five physical sense fields and then brings them together, creating a coherent world out of it.

So these are the six sense fields, and you'll notice that they are internal and external—what's happening inside the sentient body and what's happening outside the sentient body.

If we ask what mediates between these gates and the external world, between the external and the internal world, it's the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper keeps watch at all the six sense doors, checking the traffic to and from the city. That's their job.

Now the gatekeeper is described in this discourse as wise, experienced, and intelligent. Her job is twofold. The first part is to hold back or refuse entrance to the aññāta, the unknown or strangers. The second is to allow to enter, or even to welcome in, the ñāta, the known or the well-known—acquaintances, friends, and so on. These are the two aspects.

And you notice that the job involves far more than mere awareness. Mindfulness is more than just awareness. The gatekeeper is not a silent, non-interfering witness of the traffic. She's not like a CCTV.

She takes an active role in regulating the traffic. After all, this gatekeeper is a gatekeeper of a fortress in a conflict zone. And she's not really doing her job if she cheerfully admits a suicide bomber because she thinks her job is just to impartially witness whatever happens.

So sometimes people think that we should avoid all judgment when we practice meditation. Now certainly judgments can be dangerous, particularly when they're based on our habitual drives and delusions. But judgment in the sense of discernment is central to our practice.

This reminds me of a story, something I witnessed many years ago at Mahasi Center in Burma, where I was ordained. I was a bhikkhu practicing meditation along with other foreign bhikkhus, and we had our own small meditation hall, separated from the Burmese. There were hundreds of Burmese men, and first of all, men and women were always separate. As one teacher explained, men and women sharing a dance hall—fine. Sharing a meditation hall—no. So men and women have their own halls, which is actually very good for the women, because frankly, the atmosphere in the women's hall was always a lot better than the men's hall. But that's another story.

We were separated from the Burmese men because the Burmese were so delighted to see foreign meditators that every day at least one person would come up and say, "Oh, you're a foreigner! Where do you come from? So wonderful you've converted to Buddhism! Are you going to teach this when you go back?" Which was incredibly distracting. So we were segregated.

We had this little hall, and it was hot season. In the center of the ceiling there was a fan, and on the wall were the controls. One of the meditators was a rather eccentric senior Korean monk. When he would

come into the hall to practice, he would sit right under the fan and turn it on full blast. The fan would just pound down on him. He was in this gale, his robes flapping all over the place. The noise was horrendous. The wind for everybody else was horrendous. But he would just sit there and enter into some kind of samādhi. It was astonishing.

Now, one of the other meditators was a very sensitive chap who really didn't like this, and it got him quite agitated, this whole business of the gale. So one day he gets up, goes to the wall, and goes click, click, click, click, click—turns the controls down to one. Now the fan is just going very gently around and around in this nice breeze. Everybody's going, "Ah, this is good."

But sometime later, you can see the Korean monk come out of his samādhi, look around, get up, go over to the controls, and go boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—full blast again. He returns and sits there. After a while, the other monk gets up, goes across, click, click, click, turns it down, goes back. And this would continue. It continued for a number of days. But as time went by, the time gap between the two monks grew shorter and shorter until the inevitable happened.

One day, there they were, staring at each other at the controls. And at that point, the greatest scandal erupted at the Mahasi Center that ever happened when I was there: two monks in fisticuffs. It was a huge scandal. Sayadaw U Pandita was outraged.

The defense of the sensitive monk, who couldn't stand the noise—he was obviously influenced by the New Age—his defense to the Sayadaw was, "Honestly, Sayadaw, it wasn't me. I was just witnessing the experience."

But I'm afraid the Sayadaw did not accept this, and he got into serious trouble. U Pandita was applying the ethical principles of the gatekeeper to that particular situation.

So mindfulness is associated with wisdom, experience, intelligence.

In other words, mindfulness is associated with what can be learned, what can be absorbed over time. Mindfulness does not simply witness—it actively assesses whoever is at the gate, admits some, and refuses admission to others. The job of mindfulness is to recognize, and recognition requires experience gained over time.

Now, on her first day on the job, mindfulness cannot recognize anyone. She will make mistakes by admitting those who should not be admitted and excluding those who should not be excluded. But mindfulness learns from experience gained over time, and it becomes increasingly discerning and discriminating. This is recognition, which is a very important aspect of mindfulness.

Notice that recognition and perception are very, very close. So let's look at perception. In Pali, this is *saññā* , and it's extremely important in the Buddha's teaching. It's one of the five aggregates that make up our sense of self. Perception is what allows us to make sense of the world.

For example, let's say you're listening to a dharma talk unfold. Your mind is engaging in a great deal of complex mental processing, translating the sounds heard in your ears into meaning in your mind. It's also recognizing your response to this. Normally, we're not aware of all this processing—we feel like we're just listening. But we can get a sense of how much training and work is involved in the simple act of listening to someone speak when we learn a second language. If you've ever done this, you know how much work is involved in learning to recognize that this pattern of sounds represents this pattern of meaning.

Most of our normal everyday perception happens underground. We could say that when perception does its work effectively, we don't notice it. We simply assume that we know what's going on. So perception is recognition—and usually unnoticed recognition. It's largely responsible for creating what we take to be real, our habitual world. Perception presents us with a world that feels familiar, that makes sense, and it does this on the basis of habits of recognition that we have built up over time.

Mindfulness is closely linked to perception because both are aspects of memory. We talked about this in the last talk. Mindfulness is the standard translation of the Pali word *sati*, which literally means memory. It comes from the verb *sarati*, to remember. Memory, like perception, allows us to make sense of the world by recognizing it from the past. This bed I wake up in is the same bed I fell asleep in last night. These thoughts I begin the day with are a continuation of the thoughts I was having yesterday. My world makes sense to me when it's recognized and remembered as familiar.

But mindfulness as memory operates differently from perception. It's definitely close to perception. According to the Abhidhamma—the post-Buddha systematic philosophy and psychology of early Buddhism, very sophisticated, very intellectual—one of the immediate causes of mindfulness is a "strong perception." This refers to the direct, face-to-face encounter with experience that generates mindfulness, what we were discussing when we talked about establishing mindfulness and how the Buddha speaks about this.

Mindfulness begins with our normal everyday encounters with the world. But these encounters are made clear, made sharp, by a direct energetic encounter with present experience. This encounter creates the possibility of cutting through the baggage of habitual associations that are a normal aspect of perception. And this is because mindfulness as memory remembers the present, not the past.

The example I always like to give is the signs at railway stations that say, "Mind the gap." We're being asked to remember something—we're being asked to remember the gap between the train and the platform. But we're not being asked to remember it hours later when we're at home. We're being asked to remember it in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. We're being asked to remember the present.

Mindfulness and perception are similar in that they're both aspects of memory, but they differ because perception is based on memory of the past, while mindfulness is based on memory of the present. And we can feel this difference in our practice. Perception, for example, is stale. I know this.

I've been here before. I've seen this before. I've felt this before. I've thought this before. This is perception, and it has this quality of familiarity and staleness.

But mindfulness is fresh.

Those of you who have done meditation retreats know that practitioners engaged in sustained mindfulness practice often come to a point where they say the world appears as fresh and new. The sky seems bluer than before, the rain seems wetter, the plants seem greener, the creatures seem more alive. We recognize these things—we know we've seen and felt them before, we know this is the sky and those are the plants. But they are new. They are fresh, clear, absorbing. This sense of the newness of things is a flavor of mindfulness, because mindfulness is established firmly on the present rather than the past.

When mindfulness is relatively weak and perception dominates, our reactions and responses are the habitual responses we've built up over a long time. But when mindfulness dominates, our encounter with the world is so direct and clear that our habitual associations don't have the opportunity to take over. They still arise, of course, but they can be recognized, remembered as just associations—nothing else. Just habits—nothing else. Mindfulness continues to remember this encounter by returning again and again to its directness. This is what's happening right now.

And this widens our awareness. We don't just know the world; we know that we know the world. This gives us the opportunity to understand *how* we know the world.

When our habitual perceptions take over, they do so through forgetfulness. We forget and slip into habit, and we do this again and again in our meditation practice. In this state, we know, but we don't know that we know. We've lost touch with this understanding. When this happens, our ready-made habitual perceptions are again defining reality for us. Then we remember—oh, that's right, I'm meditating. Mindfulness returns. We remember that this experience now is just this experience now. Suddenly we find ourselves in a world that is new, not a product of habit.

Let's take an example. I'm tracking my meditation object—breathing or whatever it is—and then I slip into habitual thinking. When this happens, the thinking presents me with a world so familiar that I don't even think to question its reality. I don't even know that I'm thinking; I take it for granted to such a degree. Have you noticed that? When you slide into thinking during meditation, at first you don't know that you're thinking.

And then suddenly I realize that I'm thinking. This is where mindfulness kicks in with that realization: oh, this is what's happening. As a practitioner, I might actively acknowledge or note the thinking itself, perhaps even naming it: "thinking," or "a thought is just a thought." Now I'm not just thinking—I am aware of thinking. And I'm open to recognizing that this familiar world the thinking provides is a fiction, the product of a restless and driven mind.

When I realize this, it becomes easier to drop the thought and ground myself again on the felt flow of

experience. In other words, using our image, the gatekeeper has just decided to close the gate on this particular traveler. Mindfulness provides the foundation for the gatekeeper's judgment.

Mindfulness as gatekeeper takes this understanding of the thinking mind one step further. This is the ethical dimension.

I recognize that the thoughts which entangle me in an imagined world that I take to be real, the thoughts that break the continuity of awareness by plunging me into habitual mind-spin—these thoughts are unwholesome. They are akusala.

For example, if I'm having a hard time with the meditation practice, I might find myself slipping into the thought, "I can't do this. It's too hard. Others can do this, but I can't." These thoughts are feeding our sense of self, and they solidify us as someone defined by the past who can never move beyond that past. These are thoughts that do not move me along the path to awakening.

But what mindfulness gives us is the opportunity to recognize what's really going on. And there we have thoughts that represent this conceptual recognition of what's actually happening. For example: "Oh, I'm caught up in thinking again. Where was I before this happened?"

These thoughts are wholesome. They're wholesome because, first of all, they're closer to the actual felt reality of the present. And they're the product of mindfulness, energy, and investigation—not a solidified sense of self defined by the past. They lead me in a much more wholesome direction, a much better direction.

So it's the gatekeeper who's discerning all this. The gatekeeper makes the judgment, creates the distinction between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, as she learns to recognize who to admit and who to refuse. And this recognition is also perception, but it's perception reshaped, educated by mindfulness.

Now, both mindfulness and perception are based on memory, because it's memory which allows a judgment. And of course, strictly speaking, we're always making judgments. Even the idea that we should not be making judgments is itself a judgment.

So mindfulness allows the emergence of judgment partnered with wisdom, understanding, discernment. This is judgment—or we could say discernment—that is more in tune with reality than our habitual judgments, those long-standing products of our delusion. This discernment helps us guard and guide the mind.

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