The Broader Context of Mindfulness

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 57:17

The title of tonight's talk is "Mindfulness is More Than Paying Attention," and this is partly in response to the popularization of mindfulness and the decontextualizing of mindfulness from its root tradition. There's been a flurry of articles from the Huffington Post and other places about "McMindfulness"—a critique of people like me who are teaching mindfulness in corporations and other institutions. There's this fear of the dumbing down of mindfulness, or the commercialization of mindfulness, or the commodification of mindfulness, which is all probable.

Western culture, capitalist culture tends to gobble up and spit out anything that it sees for its advantage, and mindfulness is no different than anything else. As you can see, there's a huge interest in mindfulness and a greater accessibility and reach—in schools and prisons and in business and in psychology and healthcare. This is wonderful because these practices of awareness are incredibly powerful, incredibly liberating, and help an enormous number of people work with their own minds and hearts and situations and suffering.

At the same time, whenever anything becomes mass marketed—mass produced, widely available—there's an inevitable chance for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, and people teaching who haven't really had thorough training. In this tradition, generally people only start teaching at the invitation of their teacher, and that usually has necessitated some substantive long-term relationship with the teacher—sometimes decades of practice. But of course, now you can just do an online course and then start teaching, or not even do an online course, just read a book.

So there are various fears, and rightly so, that the depth and the scope of the teaching, and the subtlety, is being missed. I'm not particularly speaking to that tonight, although I could go on a long rant. I'm just speaking to a piece of it—helping to remember the broader spectrum of the place that mindfulness is embedded within the tradition and within the teachings, and all the various concomitant related factors of mind that go to support this quality of mindful awareness that we are working to establish in our lives.

I'm going to thread throughout this talk my time up in the mountains. I'm an avid nature lover, backpacker, hiker, and so any excuse I get, I'll go outside. I hadn't been able to get to the mountains this year, mostly because of working and teaching. I figured this—we're in late September, sort of touch and go—might be the last chance to get up to the mountains and go camping before the snow and some of the roads close, including Tioga Pass up in Yosemite.

On the spur of the moment Friday morning, I decided to go camping for the weekend, backpacking. I threw my stuff in my backpack, somewhat hastily because I was eager to get up there before sunset. I got

to the park, got my wilderness permit, and hiked about two miles to this beautiful lake. It was just past the full moon, so I was camping underneath Mount Hoffman, a beautiful peak of about ten thousand eight hundred feet.

I thought I'd go for a full moon hike to the top because the moon was pretty bright. It was about a fifteen hundred-foot climb, but not too difficult—steep, but doable. I happened to bump into some young men who were out backpacking for the first time, and they got excited by this idea of a full moon hike, so a couple of them came along.

Not knowing how difficult the hike was, it was probably about ten o'clock at night, really windy and starting to get cold, close to freezing. We got about two-thirds of the way up when one of the men became really exhausted from his backpacking that day and said he was going to stop—why didn't we two go to the top? We made a plan, made sure he was warm and had food and was protected from the elements. The two of us continued to the top to see the stunning views. From the mountaintop, you could still see the burning fires from the Yosemite fire on the western side—quite stunning, mostly fading out but still smoking with little embers here and there.

Coming back down, we were having trouble locating our friend. We knew roughly where he was, but eventually we found him. He was really freaked out with the cold and was shaking. He'd never been out backpacking before, never really been out at ten thousand feet up a mountain, alone, hearing—and he lived in LA, so he wasn't quite used to the sounds. He was worried about bears and cougars and things like that. By the time we got to him, he was having a full-blown panic attack.

Fortunately, I'm quite familiar with panic attacks and know how to work with people when they're in panic. I sat him down, put my hands on his shoulders, looked him in the eyes, and said, "Look at me, look at me, breathe with me, breathe with me, just breathe." He started breathing slowly, and I told him to put his feet on the ground, push his feet on the ground, feel your feet, feel your breath. I had his friend sit behind him in a kind of bear hug.

I said, "Feel into your friend, feel into the warmth. Tell me something that you really long for."

He said, "My warm bed."

I said, "Okay, imagine you're in your warm bed. Breathe."

He started panicking again. "Breathe, breathe," I said, "calming down, calming down." After about half an hour, he slowly got to where he could stand. He started crawling down the mountain because he was afraid to stand, but eventually he gathered himself. It all worked out fine. We got him down, got him to bed, and all was good.

I thought, you never know when your practice is going to come in handy. We take for granted the practice of meditation and breathing, and yet in those kinds of situations, it's so profound.

When you actually get someone to just stay right here—look at me, stay here, this moment, this breath, feel your feet, you're here, you're surrounded by friends, breathe—and just this, over time that breath works through, cuts through, melts the fear and the anxiety.

So I went to visit him the next morning just to see how he was doing, and his friend said, "Wow, he was lucky to find someone like you on the mountain." I have other stories which I'll tell you later about backpacking where the situation was a little reversed, to my great humility. But that's for later.

As I mentioned earlier, the main association with mindfulness is attention. And it's true that an important component of mindfulness is attending—being attentive to what's here, being attentive to what's happening, knowing what's happening with clear awareness, clear attention. But it's not just about attention. We have to understand it in a broader context, because the Buddha was teaching it within the context of the Eightfold Path, within the context of a whole path of awakening.

So often—and I hear this again and again—the interpretation that many people have about mindfulness is that it leads to passivity. That we're watching, we're noticing, we're observing, we're being with, we're allowing, and we become a doormat, something non-responsive and non-acting. But for the Buddha, mindfulness was clearly in the context of a much more dynamic view of practice.

To give an example of this: that night after I put this guy to bed, I went to my camp spot. I had found this little ledge overlooking this beautiful valley, with Half Dome on one side and Mount Dana on the other—a beautiful 180-degree view. It was kind of a slightly precarious ledge, but I liked nice views and wanted to see the sunrise. So I decided not to sleep with my tent, even though it was a little cold.

I got my sleeping bag, but realized the zipper didn't work. I had a very flimsy old bag, so I sort of wrapped it around me like a blanket. But because it was windy, it didn't really work so well, so I was kind of freezing. But I was very attached to this morning view of the sunrise hitting Half Dome and all the various mountains that I like to see.

So I'd curl up, you know how you do when you're camping—you're hiding from every little air pocket and every little breeze that's coming in. I'd get little bits of sleep here and there, and then about three or four in the morning I was just—it was hopeless, just wind. And the thought came: just put your tent up. Just get in the tent! Ding! Right. Wise discernment leads to wise action.

And this is what the Buddha's teaching about. We see what's happening—in this case, my attachment to this view, to having this experience—and then get over it. It's not worth what's happening. You're freezing, you've got hypothermia. Go in your sleeping bag, go in your tent. So I did.

There are times when we can act on that discernment—many times, in fact. Much of the practice is about cultivating and discerning what brings about wholesome states of mind, what brings about happiness.

But of course there are many other times when we can't take action. The things that we're facing are out

of our control, beyond our means to influence in some way—whether it's a larger political or economic situation, or just a personal situation that's beyond our control.

I was hiking the next day on an eight-mile hike, wearing these really old hiking boots. I'm not really sounding like this great wilderness trip leader at this point, and you'll hear more as the trip goes on. I was wearing—this is the last time I wore these hiking boots—and I got innumerable blisters from my very comfortable, very worn-in boots that somehow didn't seem to protect from blisters.

In that situation, I was hiking from A to B, and I had to get to this camp to meet some people I was planned to be with. There was a lot of pain, a lot of physical pain. My ankle was playing out, my knee was playing out, the blisters were terrible. And nothing to do. I'm five miles down the trail. I put on as much moleskin and band-aids and whatever else I could find. And then you just deal with the pain, just like in life, right? Whether you have physical injury, chronic illness, you're grieving somebody—there's only so much we can do.

And then we draw on that capacity of equanimity that comes from the practice of mindfulness, the dedication of being with.

So practice has both sides, both ends of the spectrum. It does have this profound quality of being with, resting in being, allowing, resting in awareness and allowing things to be as they are. And there's also the dynamic element.

As I said, in the Buddhist teachings, in the Eightfold Path, mindfulness is embedded within the threefold way of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Mindfulness comes in the basket of meditation, supported by our efforts, supported by concentration. We develop this lucid awareness.

We use this capacity of mindfulness to understand karma—to understand how our actions bear fruit. When we practice, it bears fruit. When we don't practice, it bears fruit. When we're unskillful, when we're unkind, when we're self-centered, it has a certain kind of fruit. When we're generous, when we're kind, when we're caring, it has a different fruit entirely.

With wise understanding, meditation supports clarity of view. What brings happiness? Why am I suffering? Why am I here tonight? What's causing me to look inside myself? Why, with all the conditions I have in my life, am I unhappy? Why do I leave peace behind so easily?

Did anybody stay peaceful from when you woke up this morning until now? Anybody remain serenely at peace? No? Well, what's going on? Something's happening, and we want to get curious about it.

It's a beautiful day—an exquisite day. What rubs us? What takes away that sense of ease or well-being? We're well-fed, it's safe, it's a gorgeous day. But we suffer, tormenting ourselves with our fears and worries, our projections and anxieties, our self-worth issues. We might find ourselves worrying about whether Larry Ellison will win the America's Cup, feeling contraction or delight at the comeback—who

knows?

The point is to understand that our actions have consequences. I'm fascinated by the dialogue around Syria these past weeks, in contrast to the dialogue that happened post-9/11—or the lack of dialogue when going into Afghanistan—and the growing awareness around the consequences of those actions: bombing, killing innocent people. When we understand more deeply, there's greater discernment, wiser action. Hopefully, in this case, politically.

But the Buddha said there's right mindfulness and then there's wrong mindfulness, or more accurately, unwise attention. You might think, "What do you mean there's wrong mindfulness? I thought mindfulness was a good thing." What does it mean to have unwise mindfulness?

Unwise mindfulness would be using that attention in service of what causes suffering. We can all use our attention in skillful or unskillful ways, so we want to reflect on how we direct our awareness. Do we use it to manipulate or selfishly get what we want?

A thief, a burglar, is very attentive. Think of a pickpocket—probably more attentive than most of us in here, certainly more focused. But not necessarily mindful in the true sense. Mindfulness is really only used in the context of serving or supporting wellness of being.

When our attention is used for selfish means—in this case, thieving—it's not true mindfulness. This raises contentious questions around teaching mindfulness to the military. Do we want to create better snipers? More accurate marksmen? These questions are genuinely tricky.

A friend of mine, Richard Miller, teaches Yoga Nidra, which is very similar to mindfulness practice but from the yoga tradition, specifically from Kashmir Shaivism. He's developed a successful protocol to teach Yoga Nidra—a deep form of meditative relaxation—to veterans, especially combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to people preparing for active duty.

He once had a meeting with top brass at the Pentagon about his program. The research was showing very favorable results, so they were questioning him closely. They asked why he thought this would be beneficial for soldiers before going into active duty. His response was fascinating. He said—let me see if I can remember this accurately—"Would you rather..."

find out now whether someone can follow through with orders—in this case, orders to kill—would you rather find out they have the capacity to do that now or in the field? Because if they discover this in the field, they put their entire squadron at risk.

What he was essentially communicating was that when you teach people self-awareness, they can more accurately discern their capabilities and capacities. Actually, it becomes a life-saving practice for those people to know their own capacity. In the end, they adopted his programs.

Again, it's a very tricky area. Another piece of data he was using was that people in active service who had

some kind of contemplative practice demonstrated much better emotional self-regulation and were therefore much less likely to be emotionally reactive. So much bloodshed has been caused by people in active service who are traumatized and triggered, with so much fear running through them, acting out in ways that are incredibly harmful. The more people actually have the capacity to work with their own fear and anger, the less bloodshed occurs.

So it's complex territory. I don't know what the Buddha would say about this in the context of sammā-sati, or right mindfulness, but if you examine it through the lens of what relieves suffering—all beings are suffering, and people serving in active duty, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere, experience intense states of suffering. I'm not advocating a position one way or the other, but I offer this as a reflection.

Another example of someone practicing unwise mindfulness would be someone on the sociopathic spectrum who uses that skilled attention to manipulate others. What other examples can you think of that would involve utilizing this quality of attention in ways that fall into the category of unwise mindfulness?

"Advertising."

Right. Say more.

"People who are looking at how to capture your attention in various ways—they're very attentive."

Exactly. So advertising falls into that spectrum of using attention to cultivate more greed, desire, longing, or wanting. Advertising for Marlboros, for instance. What else? On a more personal level, what comes to mind?

"Trying to gain friendships for status."

Yes, trying to use that skilled attention for social gain.

"Influencing someone's will."

Can you say more about that?

"Oh, someone's will as in their estate—convincing them that I'm a really worthy cause for a bequest."

Right, there's considerable elder abuse around exactly that kind of manipulation.

"For seduction."

For seduction, yes. There's a whole spectrum of ways we can use our attention to get our own way, to be self-serving.

Now, from the other side of things—when mindful awareness is established, when you're feeling that sense of clarity, attentiveness, presence—call to mind a moment or situation. Maybe it was during our last

meditation, or perhaps right now, or a moment at work, with your family, or out in nature where you felt connected with a quality of mindful awareness.

Notice and reflect on what other qualities are present when you're in that place, when you're established in that clarity of awareness.

"Safety."

Safety. Do you mean you feel safe? Or that it feels safe in general? Like a safe refuge?

When mindfulness deepens, it creates a sanctuary where stories stop playing. The observation feels unfiltered and honest—safe from our own inner torments. This quality of safety that emerges is beautifully captured in the first metta phrase: "May I be safe from inner and outer harm." We find refuge from the mental constructions that usually capture our attention.

What other qualities arise when mindfulness is present? "I feel like I'm running on all cylinders," one practitioner shares. "You're in the zone," I respond. There's an aliveness, a sense of operating at full capacity. Time becomes fluid—you lose track of its linear progression and step into something more timeless.

Thinking becomes less dominant, and intuition emerges. There's a sense of accuracy in communication, as if words arise from a clearer source. The practitioner notices cohesion—things feeling in order both internally and in the outer environment. This is the capacity of clarity to perceive the natural harmony that's always present.

This sounds like homo sapiens sapiens—the self-knowing one, the knowing of the clarity itself. What's particularly fascinating is the absence of desire, or perhaps more precisely, the absence of identification with desire. When desire arises in mindfulness, it's seen clearly without the usual sense of "I want this" or "I must have that."

This points to a deeper level of freedom—not suppressing desire, but not being caught by it either. There's a happiness that comes from this peace with what is, an inner joy that doesn't depend on getting anything or going anywhere. It's the contentment of simply being present with whatever arises in awareness.

A sense of happiness and joy in being at peace with what is, not fighting with reality. There's a heartfulness in the quality of presence, a lightness.

As you're hearing these descriptions, we're evoking these qualities together in this room. I want you to notice what's getting stirred in your own body or being as people speak. We have both unique and shared collective experience here. Every time I hear something, I think, "Oh yes, I know that. That flavor's present sometimes. Oh yes, that too. Yes, that cohesion. Oh yes, that kindness. Yes, that's present as well."

What else emerges? In the sense of oneness, behavior seems spontaneous. There's a spontaneity and an

aliveness. Intuitiveness arises. Less delusion. There's more clarity, more wisdom.

This is what I love about the model of the Eightfold Path—the mindfulness and meditative qualities lead to wisdom and understanding. Why is it understanding? It's the wisdom of knowing what's true. Out of that understanding arises the movement into the world, into life, into action. We move so that what emerges from understanding becomes our motivation.

When we become clearer and understand that things have consequences, that we're connected, when we understand suffering and its causes, happiness and its causes, this changes our motivation. We want to move in ways that cause well-being, peace, kindness, clarity, and connection. This informs our actions—that motivation shapes how we act.

In the Eightfold Path, this becomes the practice of ethical conduct: acting in non-harming ways, speaking truthfully and kindly and harmoniously, choosing work and engaging with physical reality in ways that bring about life, generation, nourishment.

So much bigger than just attention, right? Buddhist psychology tells us that mindfulness gathers other wholesome qualities to it—whether clarity or kindness or cohesion or whatever else.

Someone raises a concern about mindfulness being used as control by parents or teachers, creating fear in children to "get the job done" but not supporting their wellbeing. This highlights that mindfulness is fundamentally about giving up controlling and allowing things to be. Out of that allowing comes wise parenting, wise teaching—not acting or ruling through fear.

Another person notices that mindfulness makes the five senses keener and sharper, especially smell, which can transport them back to moments in the past, binding whole experiences together. Yes, mindfulness does awaken and enliven the five senses in profound ways.

These are the more receptive, gathering qualities that mindfulness draws to itself. There's a quality of restraint that naturally arises—a restraint from that which leads to suffering. When mindfulness is established, there's greater capacity to pause and slow down before reacting, before we hit that "send" button on an email because someone has angered us. You know how easily we can feel slighted through email, through some misunderstanding or text. Perhaps the boss said something belittling—there are countless ways we can feel hurt through these communications.

It's the pause that matters—that moment before hitting send when we think, "Oh, maybe I should just breathe for a few minutes. Maybe I should let this sit in my outbox for half an hour and see how it feels. Maybe I should give myself twenty-four hours." And we look at it the next day and think, "God, what was I thinking? I can't believe I was going to send that—and I had 'reply all' on too!" That's always a disaster.

I actually received an email today from someone on a board I serve on. One person was talking about someone else in a very dismissive way, speaking as you might to a friend in a coffee shop, not through a

"reply all" email to the entire board. I was horrified. That was clearly a case of someone not being mindful in their speech, not practicing restraint. Consider the ripple of suffering that creates, especially if it gets back to the person being discussed.

Mindfulness also draws to it the quality of patience—a tremendously helpful quality. I unfortunately do a lot of flying to various teaching venues, and I find flying to be excellent practice. It's a parami practice—parami meaning perfection—a practice of patience. Whether it's the security lines or, in my case, always being seated in front of crying babies, that's become my practice. I've come to expect it now. When I see a couple of young families boarding, I think, "There are my teachers for this flight."

With mindfulness, there's that moment of recognition: "Ah, okay, this is the teacher for this trip. She's one year old and having trouble with the ear pressure changes." Without that awareness, it's just reactivity and suffering—misery, self-pity, blame, and anger.

Mindfulness also supports another key quality: non-identification. We're not so enmeshed and tied up with our stories, our narrative of "Oh, this is spoiling my flight. I was supposed to have a nice, peaceful ride to New York, and now it's terrible, and poor me..." We can still feel irritated or angry—that's okay. But when there's that quality of presence that can observe these emotions arising, we're not caught by them. They're just emotions playing themselves out, samskaras—habitual reactions and tendencies expressing themselves. And somehow, it's not so bothersome.

We might not choose to have a baby screaming for five hours, but I'm reminded of a story that always struck me. When Matt Damon won an Oscar—I think it was for *Good Will Hunting*—he was interviewed afterward and said something startling: "I hope I didn't hurt anybody to get this, because it's just not worth it."

Here's someone speaking about using mindfulness to get ahead, for social recognition, and he offers this beautiful example of non-identification. There's enough clarity in him not to be identified with this piece of brass or gold or whatever Oscars are made of. "I hope I didn't step on anybody to get this Oscar because it's not worth it."

Mindfulness also draws in equanimity, which relates to everything I've been speaking about. You can see how all these qualities are interconnected. It gives us capacity—like when I was hiking—to simply hang in with difficulties.

Sometimes, however, that discernment, that knowing, that equanimity, that clarity does require action.

Returning to my hiking story: I'd hiked about eight miles down the trail, and because it was a very hasty trip, I hadn't really checked the weather. It was sunny and I thought I'd get in before the snow, so I wasn't thinking about snow and rain. Remember it was really pouring with rain here on Saturday? Well, four hours later it gets to the mountains and usually turns to snow.

So it was about three in the afternoon and it started to drizzle. I was like, "Oh, it's pretty." I was sitting by a lake, watching all the hail making these patterns on the water, thinking how beautiful it was, being up in the mountains. Then I started walking and it continued to rain, getting gray and darker. I thought, "This isn't looking so good," but I continued anyway.

I had this very light windbreaker—not really waterproof. I mean, it's sort of waterproof, but not really. Nothing's waterproof after a while unless it's plastic. So I get to camp and I'm waiting for my friends to show up. I'm in the middle of nowhere with just me and one other guy, who ends up starting a fire in his tent to keep warm that night—a canvas tent, which was a whole other story.

It starts to rain heavily and my friend shows up. Someone had just told me that heavy snowfall was coming and it would drop down to twenty-four degrees, and we should get out because we might get snowed in. But it was another six miles with a backpack in pouring rain. I thought, "Nah."

This was a really great case of how to stay present and not let fear and anxiety make the decision. The fear would have had me hike out in the pouring rain, which would have been quite challenging. So I decided to stay with these two friends.

By that time, pretty much everything was wet—my gear, my down jacket, warm gear, sleeping bags damp. The tent I had was really a summer tent, very lightweight. It's a three-season tent, but not what you want in snow and rain. We ate and I started shivering, getting really cold because I had nothing warm. I only had down, which stays warm when wet, but it was wet.

I started thinking, "Well, the tables are really turned." The night before I was rescuing somebody having a panic attack, and now I was starting to get really anxious—mostly about not being able to get warm in my tent. It's a very unsatisfying feeling.

So I went to bed early, wrapped myself up, and I was just freezing and shaking. I had to put my wilderness tail between my legs. I got up, found my friends at this temporary tarp they'd rigged as a kitchen, and said, "I'm really cold, I need help." One of them gave me their down jacket, which helped calm my nervous system down a little bit. But I realized I couldn't sleep in my tent—it was so exposed to the elements and everything was damp.

So I had to sleep with them, all squashed into this little tent, which was very cozy. It was a three-person tent, so it was actually fine. But it was just a great lesson in humility and discernment and staying steady, thinking, "What's the wise decision?" If I'd let my ego self run the show, I would have stuck in my tent, toughed it out, frozen to death, gotten hypothermia, versus "Oh, what's the situation here? I'm cold. I'm wet. I can do something more creative about this."

In the end it turned out to be kind of a fun adventure. The tent was like a little igloo in the morning. Fortunately it wasn't too heavy a snowfall and it was actually very beautiful in the morning with clear sky. Everything was frozen, but we weren't. It was a beautiful day and a bear came sniffing around the

campsite. All's well that ends well. And I've now thrown my boots away and I'm doing a lot of shopping at REI.

I think of one of my favorite stories of the Buddha and an example of his—anyway, his life was very dynamic even though he was a meditator and mystic and teacher. He was very active in creating teachings and this body of students, traveling and walking the plains of northern India and the forests for forty-five years.

One story that I'm particularly fond of: he was from a kingdom—my Indian history is going to go out the window here—he mostly was living in the kingdom of Magadha, but he was born in a kingdom up north somewhere on the Nepalese border. These two kingdoms in northern India at the time of the Buddha were very feudal...

a lot of war, a lot of ongoing wars, a lot of bloodshed.

At some point during the Buddha's life after his enlightenment, he heard disturbing news. He had many students who were from the courts—princes and kings and queens—and he would often give advice and help resolve conflicts through diplomacy. The king of Magadha was particularly warlike, and he had decided to march to war against the kingdom where the Buddha was born, where many of his family and friends lived, many from the princely castes.

When the Buddha heard that the king was marching out with his army, he went and sat by an old dead tree by the roadside. As the king and his forces passed by, the king had the army stop, dismounted from his horse, went to the Buddha, and paid his respects. "Why are you sitting by this old dead tree?" he asked.

The Buddha replied, "This tree is in the land of my home. This is dear to me. And I sit here as a request to stop the bloodshed."

The king was so moved by the Buddha's presence and his wish that he ceased his march, turned back, and war was averted. The same scenario actually happened a second time, with similar circumstances, and again the Buddha sat by the roadside. That time, however, the king ignored the Buddha's wish and there was great bloodshed.

What strikes me about this story is that the Buddha wasn't just sitting around in the forest navel-gazing. That's not the point of mindfulness practice. The point is to take this practice out into the world—to use this clarity, awareness, discernment, compassion, and kindness to take steps that relieve suffering for ourselves, our loved ones, our community, our country, however and wherever it manifests.

The last story I'll share is a more contemporary example. My first Vipassana teacher, Christopher Titmuss, and I would study together every year in Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained his awakening. The temple there was a simple complex of old buildings and one large stupa.

One year, the Sri Lankan government—a Buddhist government—decided to take better care of the temple

and particularly the Bodhi tree, which was a descendant of the tree under which the Buddha was supposed to have attained enlightenment. In their good-hearted wishes to protect the tree, they erected a gold-plated fence around it, quite high and very incongruous to the idea of awakening and freedom—basically gold prison bars around the tree.

This was in Bihar, the poorest state in India, an area of incredible poverty. When you erect a million-dollar gold fence around a tree in such circumstances, what's going to happen? You're going to attract bandits who want to steal it. So they had to station a 24-hour armed guard at the temple to protect the gold. The whole thing was quite farcical.

Before they erected and inaugurated the fence, the Sri Lankan president came to visit and give his blessing, bringing the security that often accompanies such situations—military and guards everywhere. Christopher had been a lover of this particular village, the Buddha, and the people there, and was horrified by this development. He was determined to intervene, much as the Buddha had done, to say, "Please come to your senses and put that money toward building schools or hospitals, not a fence that people want to steal."

Despite the big procession and heavy military presence, Christopher somehow meandered his way through all the guards with their rifles and managed to stand right in front of the president. "Please," he said, "can you change your actions? Can you put this money to better use?"

He didn't get his way. But again, here's the principle of using clarity and discernment, of speaking one's truth and standing up to what's perceived as injustice or unskillfulness.

These are just some reflections as I wrap up here. Really, this is just the beginning of our conversation about how to understand mindfulness in a broader context—in the context of the Eightfold Path, and also in the context of how it leads to and supports wise action, wise engagement, wise discernment, which leads to moving more skillfully in the world.

A couple of reflections for you: In what ways does mindful awareness inform your actions? In what ways does your practice of mindfulness inform your actions? And second, what are you seeing with mindfulness that requires action that you are not taking? What are you discerning and yet not acting upon? Just reflections for the week.

Next week I'll be back here, and it will be the beginning of Earth Care Week. In our last International Buddhist Teacher Meeting, we had a session on climate change, and there was a strong desire in the community to begin speaking much more directly about the climate crisis.

No, we don't have those flyers yet.

So next week I'm going to give a talk about climate change and the Buddhist response to what's happening ecologically, and we'll have information and resources available. What the International Buddhist Teacher

Group decided to do was dedicate the first week in October to raising awareness around these issues and our response as a Buddhist community to the climate crisis. There will be information and handouts available next week.

So I hope you can come, and have a wonderful week. Blessings on your practice and your week.

Thank you.

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