

The Gatekeeper's Duties

October 15, 2023

It's good to start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill means a wish for happiness—a wish for true happiness if the goodwill is sincere. When you stop to think about where true happiness comes from, you realize that it has to come from your actions. This means that when you have genuine goodwill for yourself, you want to act in a skillful way. When you have goodwill for other people, you want them to act in a skillful way. So when you extend thoughts of goodwill to other people, it doesn't mean, "May you be happy doing whatever you're doing, good or bad." It means, "If you understand the causes for true happiness, please act on them. If you don't, may you come to an understanding and be willing and able to act on it." Of course, goodwill for yourself means the same thing.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to look into our minds and gain a sense of what's skillful and what's not skillful there. One of the images that the Buddha gives for mindfulness is of the gatekeeper of a fortress. The fortress is near the frontier of the kingdom, so there's always the possibility that enemies may try to slip in. So the gatekeeper has to learn how to recognize who's a friend, who's a foe, to keep out the foes and to allow the friends in. In the same way, mindfulness has to be selective. You learn how to recognize what's skillful and what's unskillful in the mind and then do your best to keep out the unskillful qualities and develop the skillful ones.

It's in this way that mindfulness develops concentration, because it's engaged in two types of activities. One is keeping track of something that's good and skillful, like the breath coming in and going out. You want to be with the breath just on its own terms. What does it feel like to be breathing right now? Where do you feel the breathing? You can feel it anywhere in the body. It's not the air coming in and out of the nose. After all, that air doesn't come in and go out without the energy in the body allowing it in, allowing it out. So where do you feel that energy? That's the breath. How does it move? Do you feel it in the shoulders, in the chest, in the abdomen? Try to stay with it as consistently as you can, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. That's the gatekeeper allowing the friends to come in.

As for the foes, the formula for mindfulness is that you also put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. What that means is that if any thoughts come up as to what you'd like out of the world or what you find upsetting in the

world, you just let them go. You don't have to engage in them, because you're trying to get the mind to stay with one thing. You're trying to develop concentration. After all, concentration is what the Buddha calls the heart of the path, and the duty with regard to all of the factors of the path is to develop them. So you don't just watch concentration come and go. You create the causes. Then you nurture those causes and maintain them, so that the concentration will last and the mind will have a good place to settle down. This means you want to pay full attention to the breath.

In addition to mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind, the Buddha also recommends that you bring the qualities of alertness and ardency to this. Alert to see what's actually going on: What's the breath like right now? What's your mind like right now? If there's anything that needs improvement, then you're ardent in trying to do it. Concentration has to provide a sense of ease if the mind is going to stay here. You ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel good right now? And experiment.

The breath is one of the factors of the body that you can change at will, so try changing it in different directions. Make it longer, make it shorter, faster or slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. See what rhythm and texture of breathing feels best for the body right now, so that you're not just forcing the mind to be here. You're trying to get it engaged, realizing that the way you breathe will have a good or bad impact on the body, and a good or bad impact on the mind. If the breath feels good and it feels like it's permeating throughout the body, it's going to be good for the whole body, and good for the whole mind as well.

The Pali word for mind, *citta*, can also mean heart. In other words, it covers both the part of the mind that analyzes things and understands them as well as the heart, the part that has its emotions, has its desires, that wants happiness. You're trying to train both of those together. The head gets trained to see what works in terms of cause and effect. The heart pushes you in the direction of what leads to the most reliable happiness, because we've been deceived, we've been mistreated by many of our past searches for happiness. Either we don't get the happiness we want, or we do get something that seems good, but then it abandons us.

So the heart's real desire is for a happiness it can trust. That's what we're looking for here: a happiness that's long-term, a happiness that harms nobody else. As your head will tell you, if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. So you want to look for a happiness that harms nobody at all. And you gain a better and better understanding of what that means. This way, the heart and the head work together, just as the breath and

the body work together. You want everything to come into a state of harmony right here, so that it feels good just sitting here, breathing in, breathing out. The mind can stay settled.

You may have heard that it's not good to stay in concentration because nothing happens. You don't get any insight. But that's not true. If you really work at maintaining your concentration, trying to get it to settle in more deeply, you're going to run into other aspects of the mind, because the mind is like a committee. When you decided to sit down and meditate just now, it wasn't the case that the whole mind went along. Enough of the mind went along to get you here. But there may be some parts that want to think about something else. So they're looking for their chance to slip off. But if you can provide them with a sense of well-being right here, you can ask them, "Where are you going? If you're looking for happiness, here's a nice pleasant sensation right here."

Then when the thoughts seem ready to go off again and again, you're less inclined to want to go with them. That's when you can analyze them. What are the stages by which the mind runs off to another topic and creates a whole other world and goes into that world? As the Buddha said, that process—which is based on clinging and craving—is what leads to suffering as it tries to create new worlds where you think you can find whatever pleasures you expect those worlds have to offer.

The way to get past and to undercut that tendency is to keep looking at the steps leading up to these thought worlds. And the best way to see that is when the mind is in concentration. It's not the case that you do concentration and then, after you stop doing concentration, you then do insight. It's more that you do concentration, and as you get better and better at it, you start seeing things you didn't see before, connections you didn't see before, ways in which you're adding unnecessary suffering to the heart and mind. You realize that you don't have to do those things. You can stop them. You can let them go.

That's the purpose of insight, to let go of the things that are causing suffering.

And this path is what enables you to do that. When the Buddha set out his four noble truths, he didn't say that life is suffering. He said simply that there are these four truths in life. There is suffering, and it's the clinging. There's the cause of suffering, which is the craving. There's also the end of suffering, which comes when craving is abandoned; and there's a path to the end of suffering. We're on the path. And the way the path works is that it doesn't attack suffering right at the suffering, it attacks it at the causes.

So you want to look for the desires that give rise to thought worlds in the mind, because those are the things that are giving rise to the suffering. It's like

coming into your house and seeing that it's flooded with water. If you simply bail out the water, bail out the water, without trying to find out where the water is coming from, you never come to the end of it. But if you look for the cause, it turns out to be a broken pipe. So you turn off the water main, fix the broken pipe, and then the flood of water will go away.

In other words, you attack the problem at the cause, not at the result. And this combination of insight and concentration is what allows you to see the causes and not feel any desire to go along with them. Without the pleasure of concentration, it's all too easy to say, "Well, this is the only pleasure I've got, so I'm going to go with it." But when you do have this alternative—a sense of well-being that can fill the whole body, where, as you breathe in, all the nerves, all the blood vessels participate in the breathing and it feels good—then you're less hungry for other pleasures. You're more and more able to step back from them and see them for what they are, how they actually do cause stress, they do cause suffering—and you don't have to cause that stress and suffering. You can let these things go.

So work on the mindfulness that leads to concentration. Then keep being mindful as you stay concentrated. In that way, your concentration leads to insight, and the insight leads to freedom. It's a good path to be on.