



Dharma Gathering 2008

Guarding the mind

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Introduction

In our last essay we saw how mindfulness “serves” and “watches over” the mind through a reflexive understanding of awareness and its objects, and how satipaṭṭhāna, the establishments of mindfulness, constitute both an approach to meditation and a way of life. In this essay we will examine how mindfulness guards the mind and the practice of sense restraint. We will begin by looking at mindfulness in its role of guard.

Mindfulness as guard

Suppose, bhikkhu, a king had a frontier city [*paccantima nagara*] with strong ramparts, walls and arches, and with six gates. The gatekeeper posted there would be wise [*pañḍita*], experienced [*byatta*], and intelligent [*medhāvī*]; one who keeps out strangers [*aññātānaṃ nivāretā*] and admits acquaintances [*ñātānaṃ pavesetā*]. (Kimsukopama Sutta, Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta)

The Buddha explains that the city is the body, the six gates are the six sense fields and the gatekeeper is mindfulness. These images provide a picture of the practitioner and the practice. The city, the stage upon which the drama of awakening takes place, is the practitioner’s body, including its lord “sitting in the central square,” who is consciousness or awareness (*viññāṇa*). “Body” here is *saviññāṇakāya*, the “sentient body,” defined in our text as that which is sustained by nutriment and subject to death. Here we have a strong affirmation of the essential physicality of the human being.

Notice that this city is a “frontier” (*paccantima*) city, strongly defended. This is a city on the edge and expecting trouble. And perhaps planning to push the frontier deeper into enemy territory. Here we find the practice as war, a metaphor unfashionable in our times. The war is between the unwholesome (*akusala*) and the wholesome (*kusala*), and in the early stages it appears the unwholesome is winning. The frontier city’s function is to push back the unwholesome and win more territory for the wholesome.

The city is exposed to, and communicates with, the outside world through six gates. These are the six internal sense fields, the sensitivities of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The world beyond the city is made up of the six external sense fields of forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tangibles and phenomena known by the mind. What mediates between the city and the external world? The gatekeeper, who keeps watch at the six internal sense doors, checking the traffic to and from the city.

This gatekeeper is described as wise, experienced and intelligent. Her job is twofold. First, it is to hold back or refuse entrance to the aññata, the “unknown,” so “strangers.” Second, it is to allow to enter or usher in the ñāta, the “known” or “well-known” — acquaintances, or even friends.

Here we find that mindfulness is far more than mere awareness. The gatekeeper is not the silent, non-interfering witness of traffic; she is more like a traffic cop. Sometimes people assert mindfulness to be “non-judgemental,” saying that mindfulness does not judge but is simply aware. However, the gatekeeper of a fortress in a conflict zone is not of much use if she cheerfully admits a suicide bomber because she does not want to be “judgemental.” Mindfulness is associated with wisdom, experience and intelligence. It is associated with what can be learned, absorbed, over time. Mindfulness does not just witness, but actively assesses whoever is at the gate, admitting some and refusing admission to others. The job of mindfulness is to *recognise*, and recognition requires experience over time. During her first day on the job mindfulness cannot recognise anyone, and so will make mistakes by admitting those who should not be admitted and excluding those who should not be excluded. But mindfulness learns from experience over time, and becomes increasingly discerning and discriminating.

Recognition and perception are very close. Saññā, one of the five aggregates that make up the human being, is usually translated as “perception,” but could also be translated as “recognition.” Perception allows us to make sense of the world. For example, as I read these words there is a great deal of mental processing going on which translates visual marks seen on a page into concepts that make meaning in a mind. We are not normally aware of all this — we feel like we are simply reading. Yet we get a sense of how much training and work is involved in the simple act of reading when we learn a second language. Much of this underground work in our basic, everyday activities is done by perception. When perception does its work effectively, we don’t notice it. We simply assume we know what’s going on.

Perception, as unnoticed recognition, is largely responsible for creating what we take to be real. It presents us with a world that has meaning, which feels familiar, on the basis of habits of recognition that we have built up over time. Mindfulness is closely linked to perception, for both are aspects of memory. Mindfulness, we have seen, is the translation of the Pāli word *sati*, which literally means memory. Like perception, memory allows us to make sense of the world by recognising it from the past. This bed I woke up in is the same bed I fell asleep in last night. This person I woke up beside is the same person who came to bed with me last night. These thoughts I begin the day with are a continuation of the thoughts I was having yesterday. Recognised and remembered as familiar, my world makes sense to me.

But mindfulness as memory operates differently from perception. It is certainly founded on perception, and according to the Abhidhamma one of its immediate

causes is “strong perception” (*thira-sañña*).¹ This is the direct, face-to-face encounter with experience which generates mindfulness, as we have already discussed. Mindfulness *begins* with our normal, everyday encounters with the world, but made clear, sharp, by a direct and energetic encounter with this present experience. This encounter creates the possibility of cutting through the baggage of habitual associations that are a normal aspect of perception. In *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha suggests this with the formula describing the meditator “contemplating body *as* body ... mind *as* mind.” This sight is just this sight; these thoughts and judgements are just these thoughts and judgements. That’s all. Normally, perception takes the package of experience — sights, sounds, thoughts, emotions — and recognises them through their habitual associations as inherited from the past, containing little or nothing that is new, and so conditions us to react to this present experience habitually, without sensing the possibilities within it. Mindfulness implies an encounter that is so direct and clear that these habitual associations don’t have the opportunity to take over. They arise, of course, but can be recognised, remembered, as just associations, nothing else.

Mindfulness then continues to “remember” this encounter by returning again and again to its directness, extending and deepening the reflexivity associated with it. So we don’t just know the world; in mindfulness, we know *that* we know the world, which gives us the opportunity to understand *how* we know the world. When our habitual perceptions take over, they do so through forgetfulness. We forget, slip into habit. In this state we know, but don’t know that we know, and in losing touch with this reflexivity we find our ready-made habitual perceptions again defining reality for us. Then, we remember. Mindfulness returns, we remember that body is just body, mind is just mind, and we find ourselves in a world that is new, no longer the product of habit.

Mindfulness provides the foundation for judgement, for the gatekeeper’s job. The gatekeeper learns to recognise who to admit and who to refuse. This recognition is perception, but a perception reshaped, educated, by mindfulness. Both mindfulness and perception are based on memory, for it is memory which allows a judgement. And of course, we are always making judgements. Even the idea that we should *not* be making judgements is a judgement. Mindfulness allows the emergence of judgement partnered with wisdom, understanding, discernment. This is judgement that is more in tune with reality than our habitual judgements, the long-standing products of our delusion, and helps guard and serve the mind.

The cat

In recognising what comes and goes through the sense doors mindfulness learns to recognise what should and should not be engaged with. In this way mindfulness *guards* the city of the sentient body. The role of mindfulness as guard, and its link with the practice of sense restraint, is brought out in the Buddha’s simile of the cat,

¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed). *Abhidhammattha Sangaha. A comprehensive manual of Abhidhamma*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Edition, 2000: 86.

which was inspired by a bhikkhu at Sāvattḥī who was socialising with families excessively.

Bhikkhus, once upon a time a cat stood by an ally, drain or rubbish bin watching for a little mouse, thinking: “When this little mouse comes out for food, right there I will grab and eat it.” The mouse came out for food and the cat grabbed it and swallowed it hastily, without chewing. Then that little mouse ate through the cat’s intestines, and so the cat met with death [*maraṇampi nigacchi*] or deadly suffering [*maraṇamattampi dukkham*].

So too, some bhikkhu dresses in the morning and, taking bowl and robe, enters a village or town for alms with body, speech and mind unguarded [*arakkhita*], without setting up mindfulness [*anupatṭhitāya satiyā*], unrestrained in his sense faculties [*asaṃvutehi indriyehi*].

He sees women there lightly clad or lightly attired and obsession corrupts his heart [*rāgo cittaṃ anuddhamseti*]. With his heart corrupted by obsession he meets death or deadly suffering. For this, bhikkhus, is death in the Cultivated One’s discipline: that one gives up the training and returns to an inferior life. This is deadly suffering: that one commits a certain defiled offence of a kind that allows for rehabilitation.

Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves in this way: “We will enter a village or town for alms with body, speech, and mind guarded, with mindfulness set up, restrained in our sense faculties.” This is how you should train yourselves. (Bilāra Sutta, Opamma Saṃyutta)

What was the cat’s problem? He was highly focused and watchful over time, and so mindful, as he waited for the mouse. But what motivated him? What was the source of his effort and commitment? Clearly, it was what the Buddha called taṇhā, literally “thirst” but usually translated as “craving.” Craving refers to disordered desire, where the heart is driven by the urge to possess and become in order to fill a gap, an emptiness, imagined within itself. This drive is never satisfied, for no matter what we gain or who we think we are, we remain haunted by the sense of lack and inadequacy within us, and are driven to get more to fill the gap. We are constantly drinking, but our thirst is never satisfied.

Driven by craving, where was the cat’s awareness aimed? Beyond himself, on the external world, where he was driven to search for his own advantage. The mouse appears, and in his eagerness the cat swallows it hastily. Driven, blind to what is happening within, the cat makes a fatal error, and what he consumes consumes him. The cat was mindful, otherwise he could not have waited patiently and watchfully long enough to catch the mouse. But his mindfulness was wrong mindfulness (*micchā sati*) because it lacked balance and completion, lacking, as it did, the support of the other factors of the noble eightfold path.

The context of the teaching is a bhikkhu who is too close to families. The stage on which this moral drama is played out is the alms round. This is the time of day in which the bhikkhu must mingle with the lay world, be part of its give-and-take, and

the particular form that craving takes here is the tendency to be dragged back into that world. The bhikkhu who is too close to families is being seduced into the lay world of loss and gain, gratification and distress, all of it based on craving and the clinging (upādāna) that arises from craving. The example the Buddha gives is the visual pleasures of women, but while that is an obvious distraction (especially since it is likely that then, as now, most of the food provided to the bhikkhus came from women, so most of the lay contact the bhikkhus had was with women), it can be seen as short-hand for all the ways in which normal life can seduce a practitioner with its assumed status as the “real” world, that which can really satisfy.

The teaching of the alms round focuses on mindfulness in its role as guard, for lacking mindfulness the bhikkhu’s body, speech and mind are unguarded (arakkhita). Here we do not have a formal meditation practice — the bhikkhu is not sitting in samādhi under a tree in a forest — but mindfulness in the everyday life of the city. The cat was mindful of body to some degree, as he watched for his victim. But even within his body awareness he lacked the mindfulness to eat slowly and carefully. And certainly he had no awareness of what was driving him; no awareness of his heart and mind. He remained unguarded.

Guarded against what? For “guarding” implies an opposing force that offers danger, something to be prevented; not just watching, but watching for a purpose. Mindfulness has purpose, and this purpose helps define its nature. Mindfulness is not “value free,” it is based on a fundamental ethical decision of what is wholesome (kusala) and what is unwholesome (akusala), what brings benefit and what brings disadvantage. Mindfulness, in other words, cannot be separated from ethics, as mindfulness implies a specific *direction* to one’s watchfulness. Mindfulness is part of a greater project, summed up by the Buddha at the opening of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: “This way, the four establishments of mindfulness, is for the one purpose of purifying beings, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, destroying pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realising nibbāna.”

In the absence of any guard for the citta, the heart/ mind, “obsession corrupts his heart” (rāgo cittaṃ anuddhamseti). “Obsession” translates rāga, which is usually translated as “passion.” In this discourse, Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as “lust,” as our text has the bhikkhu wandering around being swamped by the sight of attractive women. Remembering that at the Buddha’s time, people were much more lightly dressed than in our culture, as shown by carvings dating to the Aśokan era. Rāga literally means “colour.” It indicates the colouring of the mind, like when in our anger we “see red,” and so it implies obsession, the inability to see beyond the object of desire. More than desire, it involves a state of emotional investment and fixation that is characterised by an inability to let go of the wanted object. In Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (*The sweet essence* M18) Mahā Kaccāna describes how obsession works:

What we feel, we perceive; what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we proliferate [*papañceti*]. Because of what we have proliferated, we are

harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation regarding past, future and present.

Central to this process is *papañca*, “proliferation,” where heart and mind spin out of control and create a sense of the self-within-his-world based on agitation, need and fantasy, rather than the firm groundedness of present-centred mindfulness. Notice how proliferating is stimulated by feeling (*vedanā*), which we shall be examining when we come to look at the relationship between mindfulness and insight.

Obsession “corrupts” the heart. The heart is colonised, occupied, not merely taken over but corrupted and degraded, removed from a higher purpose. The *bhikkhu* so corrupted faces “death or deadly suffering.” “Death” here is the surrender of the *brahmacariya*, the “highest life,” in favour of something inferior; abandoning the “discipline of the Cultivated One,” the Buddha, and returning to an inferior way of life. The highest life seeks to break free from the constraints and limitations of craving, the disordered and unconscious drives of the heart. To sink back into its assumed inevitability is to settle for something inferior. “Deadly suffering” refers to committing an offence against *vinaya*, the discipline, “of a kind that allows for rehabilitation.” These are the *saṅghādisesa* offences, the second most serious category of offences against the discipline.

The most serious offences are the four *pārājikas*, which entail “defeat” in the highest life. Commit one of these, and the *bhikkhu* is defeated; the penalty is expulsion. These are: to have sexual intercourse; to steal; to kill or encourage the killing of a human being; and to lie about any attainment “transcending the human.” Clearly the offence in the Buddha’s mind here is the first. The penalty for the 13 *saṅghādisesa* offences involves public confession to the community over a period of time, the time depending on how long it takes before the *bhikkhu* confessed his offence. The offences here would be the first five: masturbation; touching a woman with lustful intent; suggesting sex to a woman; inviting sex with a woman indirectly (e.g., by speaking of the virtues of sex with realised individuals such as himself); and acting as a go-between to help arrange sex with a woman.

The Buddha concludes his talk by saying, “Therefore, *bhikkhus*, you should train yourselves in this way: ‘We will enter a village or town for alms with body, speech, and mind guarded, with mindfulness set up, restrained in our sense faculties.’ This is how you should train yourselves.” Now we will look more closely at the practice of sense restraint, and its relationship to mindfulness.

Mindfulness and restraint

The teaching of sense restraint occurs in the context of the six sense fields, as we have seen in the simile of the frontier city. Mindfulness as guard is closely related to sense restraint (*indriya saṁvara*), as illustrated in the *Simile of the tortoise*.

Bhikkhus, once a tortoise was searching for food [*gocara-pasuta*] along the bank of a river in the evening, while a jackal was doing the same. When the tortoise saw

the jackal in the distance, searching for food, it drew its limbs and neck inside its shell and passed the time at ease, silent and still [*appossukko tuṅhībhūto saṅkasāyati*].

The jackal also saw the tortoise in the distance, searching for food. He approached and waited close by, thinking, “When the tortoise extends one or another of its limbs or neck I will grab it right there, pull it out, and eat it.” But because the tortoise did not extend any of its limbs or neck the jackal, failing to grab it, lost interest and departed.

So too, bhikkhus, Māra the Evil One is constantly and continually waiting close by you, thinking, “Perhaps I will grab him through the eye or through the ear ... or through the mind.” Therefore, bhikkhus, live guarding the doors of the sense faculties.

Having seen a form with the eye, do not grasp at its themes [*nimitta*] and features [*anubyañjana*]. Since, if you leave the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states [*pāpakā akusalā dhammā*] of desire [*abhijjhā*] and grief [*domanassa*] might invade you, practise the way of its restraint, guard the eye faculty, undertake the restraint of the eye faculty.

Having heard a sound with the ear ... Having smelt an odour with the nose ... Having savoured a taste with the tongue ... Having touched a tactile object with the body ... Having been aware of a phenomenon with the mind [*manasā dhammaṃ viññāya*], do not grasp at its themes and features. Since, if you leave the mind faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of desire and grief might invade you, practise the way of its restraint, guard the mind faculty, undertake the restraint of the mind faculty.

When, bhikkhus, you live guarding the doors of the sense faculties, Māra the Evil One, failing to grab you, will lose interest and depart, just as the jackal departed from the tortoise. (Kummopama Sutta, Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta)

The tortoise is “searching for food” (gocara-pasuta). Here we again meet the word gocara, literally a “cow’s (go) grazing area/ activity (cara).” Pasuta means “pursuing, doing,” so the tortoise is intent upon his gocara, “doing his own thing” and moving within his natural environment. The tortoise represents the bhikkhu, going about his normal, natural daily business. The Buddha, remember, spoke of satipaṭṭhāna as the gocara of his students, illustrating his message with the story of the hawk and the quail.

The jackal is also moving around in *his* natural environment. Unfortunately for the tortoise, in the jackal’s natural world a tortoise is dinner. The jackal is Māra, and Māra is also just doing his thing. Whatever motivates Māra he does not represent a disturbance of the natural order, of dharma. He is part of it, just like the bhikkhu. But because he *is* part of this natural order, the bhikkhu needs to be alert to his presence. He needs to be alert, guarded against the possibility of being seized and thrown into the world of death and limitations, the world defined by drivenness and delusion.

Noticing the jackal, the tortoise retreats into his shell where he passes the time “at ease, silent and still.” The tortoise’s sense of *ease* is central here. The tortoise is not paranoid, hiding away in fear and terror; rather, he is quietly enjoying himself, taking the opportunity to have some time out. The jackal is restless, driven by hunger, and impatient. He cannot wait forever for his dinner. The tortoise is patient precisely because he is *not* driven. He has nowhere to go, for his state of ease, silence and stillness is as much of his *gocara* as searching for food. So the tortoise can always outwait the jackal and emerge from his withdrawal without with any sense of having missed out while he was otherwise diverted, but refreshed and enlivened. The jackal, on the other hand, runs off feeling like he has wasted his time. When we are driven by craving, time spent without taking and possessing is time wasted — and there’s no time to waste in a world defined by craving, because in such a world productivity is everything.

The tortoise in his shell represents the practice of restraining the sense faculties (*indriya saṃvara*). This is a practice of not grasping at the “themes (*nimitta*) and features (*anubyañjana*)” of sense experience. *Nimitta*, here translated as “theme,” has a variety of meanings depending on context, but it always indicates something *added to* the experience rather than the directness of engagement itself, the “just-this-ness” (*tathatā*) of experience. The process of proliferation described by Mahā Kaccāna above is an example of grasping at themes and features. The mind is drawn by the most immediately apparent aspect of a sense object, which because the basis of a particular relationship with the experience. Once this theme is established, variations in the mind’s response occur as it chews over the detailed features (*anubyañjana*) found within the sense object.

When we get caught up in the themes and features of experience we open ourselves to “evil unwholesome states” (*pāpakā akusalā dhammā*) of “desire” (*abhijjhā*) and “grief” (*domanassa*). These states find their entry into a heart that is out of balance, as it grasps for some things and struggles to avoid others. Restraint, in contrast, implies balance, and the ease that balance brings.

The word for desire here is *abhijjhā*, which indicates a leaning towards the experience. Balance is lost, and the heart leans out towards something, to become involved in it. Grief is desire’s shadow. We find an echo of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* here, for when the Buddha speaks of practising *satipaṭṭhāna* he says, “Here a bhikkhu, surrendering desire [*abhijjhā*] and grief [*domanassa*] regarding the world, lives contemplating body as body ...” We find the same relationship with desire and its shadow in the establishments of mindfulness and in sense restraint. In both, mindfulness is central.

Let’s look at this process in the context of meditation practice. I am going about my everyday activities keeping awareness on the movements of body and mind, centred and at ease. Suddenly a thought arises. Awareness goes straight to it, focused on its content — something happened, or might happen, or is happening, that should not. Awareness recognises the theme (*nimitta*) of irritation, anger. Fascinated by this —

after all, this *definitely* should not be happening, should it? — the mind quickly builds up the narrative, filling in all the details, giving more reasons why I should be concerned by this. Awareness is occupied by the features (anubyañjana) of the sense experience.

The same process works with the other senses. Take seeing, for example. Have you noticed how when we see, visual awareness habitually goes out to an object, focusing on it — seizing it, as it were. Then, if there is something of interest in the object (nimitta), awareness searches it, filling out the details (anubyañjana) of both the object and our response to it. The more interesting the details, whether attractive or repulsive, the more invested we become in our experience, and, most importantly, what's in it for me. For this whole process is all about creating a sense of a self-within-her-world which is meaningful, which makes sense, somehow.

In contrast, how would sense restraint work in this instance? We would begin by staying grounded in the body, maintaining a general awareness of posture. From a clear sense of contact with the ground, lifting up through the body and being sensitive to balance and ease. Am I tense? Am I straining? Am I leaning out (*abhijjā*) towards something?

From there, bringing awareness to the eyes and ears. Take the eyes, for example. Normally visual awareness goes out to the object, taking hold of it, as it were, with the awareness. But in sense restraint, awareness stays with the sense sensitivity itself. In seeing, awareness stays with the eyes. The eyes are relaxed, and we allow ourselves to *receive* visual sense data. The ears are relaxed, and we allow ourselves to receive sounds. We keep awareness with the sensitivity of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and “minding,” and rather than going out to the sense object we allow the sense object to come to us. We are not trying to do anything with the object; rather, we are simply there for the experience of it. Not getting involved with our affective responses to the senses, but just allowing them to be. This awareness is not detailed and it's not trying to make something happen. It's simply allowing things to come to us — but remembering to be here for them when they arrive.

Sense restraint, like the establishments of mindfulness, develops a relationship with experience that seeks to stay with the purity and clarity of the encounter itself, rather than being caught up in our habitual responses. While sense restraint is presented early in the path, it is not a beginners' practice but a foundational practice, one that contains all other practices. Sense restraint can be seen at a mature level in the teaching to Bāhiya Dārucīriya:

Then, Bāhiya, here is how you should train:
 In the seen, there will be just the seen;
 In the heard, there will be just the heard;
 In the sensed, there will be just the sensed;
 In the known, there will be just the known.
 In this way you should train yourself.

When there is, for you, in the seen just the seen;
 In the heard, just the heard;
 In the sensed, just the sensed;
 In the known, just the known;
 Then you are not by that.
 When you are not by that,
 Then you are not there.
 When you are not there,
 Then you are neither here nor beyond, nor in between the two.
 Just this is the end of suffering. (Udāna 1.10)

The first part of the teaching concerns the practice of sense restraint, staying at the level of the received sense data. This practice makes possible the arising of the insight that we are not “by that.” We are not a product of what we project into sense experience. We are not “there,” identified with and limited by our projections. Not being “there,” we are not anywhere, living free from projections and identifications. “Just this is the end of suffering.”

The teaching to Bāhiya conveys the culmination of the path. Sense restraint, and the guarding function of mindfulness, is found at the beginning of the path. But it is just one path. The practice is essentially the same, from beginning to end. The difference is found in the practitioner, in the level of maturity we bring to our practice.

This brings us to the issue of the relationship between mindfulness and meditation, which we will examine in the next essay.