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Mindfulness as a Spiritual Power
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I'd like to reflect on why mindfulness is considered to be a spiritual power.

Mindfulness is the embarkation point of a path. This is where many of us begin. It's the point where we begin to walk a path, to have a sense of direction rooted in aspirations and values.

For anything to change at all, mindfulness is needed. It is central to the process of awakening, central to the process of transformation.

In my understanding, this word *sati*, which we translate as mindfulness, is the most frequently used word in the early discourses. It gives us a sense of why it is given so much significance to be awake, to be present.

Probably the more accurate translation of this word *sati* is a present moment recollection. It has connotations of remembering. In this case, as the Buddha used the word mindfulness or *sati*, what was being remembered was not historical events, but remembering this present moment experience.

I personally think of this remembering as a wider landscape. Remembering what we value. Remembering the teaching. Remembering the direction. Remembering our own aspirations.

The best way of understanding *sati*, or mindfulness, is through some of the similes that we find woven into the early teachings. When we look at these similes and the images that are used, we understand what a finely nuanced word *sati* is. That there's no one word that captures it.

This is something that the early translators struggled with, to find one word that captured this spectrum of nuance that is held within this word, *sati*. So the early translators borrowed this word mindfulness from the Gospels.

I'd like to touch on some of these similes, some of these images, and the reason why it is important to know these nuances or these different aspects of mindfulness.

In different moments of experience in our life, it might be helpful to foreground one of these aspects of mindfulness over the others.

If I'm in a place of being very confused, muddled, it might be helpful to draw on this aspect of

mindfulness which is concerned with investigation.

If I'm feeling very overwhelmed by impulse or by habit patterns, it might in that moment be helpful for me to draw upon this element of mindfulness which is more about being protected, protective awareness.

If I was to find myself in the midst of feeling very contracted, very closed down, it might be helpful for me to draw upon the aspect of mindfulness that is more concerned with spaciousness, with holding the big picture, with not seizing upon particulars or details, a more inclusive awareness.

Some of these images, some of these similes you might be familiar with.

The Watchtower

The Buddha likens sati to a person standing on an elevated watchtower, and having an overview of the panorama that surrounds them, that they are in the midst of, without ceasing upon any particular aspect of that panorama.

So it gives a sense of this spaciousness, this inclusivity, the non-preferential awareness.

The Child

Another of the images is of a parent cradling their sick or ailing child with tenderness and care. This particular simile speaks to the qualitative tone of mindfulness: there's this sense of befriending, of being a friend to, of caring. It is also found very much in the teaching of mettā, of boundless friendliness, which the Buddha actually names as a sati, a mindfulness.

The Farmer at the Plow

Another of the images that is used is of a farmer plowing a field, knowing just the right amount of weight and pressure to put upon the plow if the seeds were to thrive.

The Gatekeeper

Another of the very powerful images is a wise gatekeeper, standing at the gates of a city. The role of the gatekeeper is to welcome all of the visitors who intend to serve the wellbeing of the city and its inhabitants, and to recognize—but not entertain—the visitors who turn up at the gates who seek to undermine the wellbeing of the city and its inhabitants.

This element of sati—this protective awareness—is really drawing upon the quality of discernment: knowing what is helpful and what is unhelpful, what to feed and to nourish, and what not to entertain.

It draws upon that discernment that says, "Ah, these visitors will lead to the end of affliction. These visitors will lead to the furthering of affliction."

I think many of us learn in the development of mindfulness how to be the wise gatekeeper of our own hearts and minds: knowing what to welcome and to nourish and foster, and knowing what not to welcome. This element of discernment is the bridge between seeing and responding. Without this element of discernment, mindfulness can become something very passive: just watching, just observing. So discernment, in that sense, draws viriya into the foreground.

It draws action, response, and energy into the foreground. This discernment knows how to acknowledge something but not to welcome it.

This is not a defensive mindfulness, it is a protective mindfulness. There's a huge difference between those two words.

A defensive awareness does not want to see something. A protective awareness is quite willing and knows it is needed to acknowledge and see what is present, but it has a discernment that the unwholesome does not need to be fed, knowing that whatever we feed will grow.

The Surgeon's Probe

There's an image which is quite important of a surgeon. Someone comes to the surgeon having been wounded by an arrow, looking for help from the surgeon.

A good surgeon is not immediately going to bring out an instrument to amputate the arm. A good surgeon will probe the wound, will palpate the wound, in order to ascertain the nature of the wound, in order to make a diagnosis and to be able to offer a prognosis, a course of treatment.

This is the job of mindfulness. This is the work of mindfulness that investigates, that palpates experience to know what is actually happening, to know what is needed, to know the prognosis, and to be able to respond appropriately.

Disentangling From a Thicket of Thorns

One of the images that is used in portraying this field of mindfulness is of a person trying to extricate themselves from a thicket of thorns. If you've ever been caught in a thicket of thorns, you know that the very worst thing you can do is to try to yank yourself out of it. You might have to carefully pick the thorns out of your clothes so as not to rip your clothing or rip your skin.

This image describes an element of sati that is really about carefulness, attention to detail,

circumspection, in order to extricate ourselves from these cycles of reactivity and these patterns of creating distress.

Balancing a Bowl of Oil on One's Head

Another important image is of a person walking through a crowded marketplace, carrying on their heads a bowl of oil and being followed by someone with a sword who threatens to cut off their head should any of the oil be spilled.

It sounds a rather ominous image, but I think it really describes the carefulness and the mindfulness that we need as we navigate our way through this world. That we're grounded in the body, rooted in the body, present wholeheartedly within the body of the moment, as that body moves through a world of conditions, a world of events, and a world of experiences.

The Sturdy Post

Another of the images is of a strong post hammered into the ground. To the post are tied six wild animals that represent the five traditional sense doors and the sense door of the mind.

The strong post in the ground represents mindfulness, sati. These wild animals on the end of the leads are intent on escape, intent on foraging through familiar pathways, heedless of what they are doing.

In this image, the post—the mindfulness—that anchors these wild animals until they begin to quiet and soften and tame represents an element of mindfulness which is concerned with restraint.

It's knowing the habit patterns, the reactions that don't serve us well; knowing when they arise and knowing that we don't have to enact all of those habit patterns in every moment. That we may have choices to begin to calm those patterns of reactivity, those impulses, those compulsions in a way that is skillful and caring.

The Cow Herder

Another important image is of a person herding their cows. A good cow herder knows that when crops are just beginning to grow it's not a good plan to allow their cows to wander through those fields of sprouting crops. So, they collect and gather their cows together and keep them where they're nourished and where they're safe.

But the same cow herder, in another moment, may know that the crops have been harvested. Then the cow herder can sit back under the tree, spacious, relaxed and allow their cows to roam in the fields, knowing that they will do no harm.