

2006-06-25 Contrasting Mindfulness and Concentration

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SPEAKERS

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One of the most common questions that I get receive has to do about the difference between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. And, and the very kind of simple I often give an answer. So try to answer it in various kind of logical ways as best I can. And, you know, the most simple answer is that mindfulness has to do with a clear knowing of what's going on. And concentration has to do with kind of a clear, pointed or composed focus, absorption in what we're paying attention to. But this question of the difference between concentration and mindfulness is something that the Buddha also has had to address. And he often addressed it by using imagery, kind of similes, analogies for these two. And I thought I would share some of these images, imagery that the Buddha used for these two different practices. Maybe in sharing them to you maybe try to I don't know, doing a guided meditations probably not right but maybe there's if you listen to the ideas, the imagery and take them in maybe you can get a kind of visceral feel for this. And as we do this when we do is actually contrast your skill set to see the contrast between mindfulness and concentration. If you look at the teachings of the Buddha, around mindfulness and concentration, he has a variety of verbs he uses to describe the action, the activity that you do when you concentrate activity do when you're mindful. And one of the most common words they uses for mindfulness has a variety of herbs that have the word seeing it to see. And for the concentration, he uses often the verb to touch. So seeing and touching, so we have two different practice One, two more, you know different modes of being right, you can touch something, you know, something through touch, and you can see something, notice something through your eyes. So the two different modes of knowing two different modes of being in the world seeing and touching. One in a sense is more can be so as being more bodily and the other maybe a little more mental. But it doesn't make a sharp distinction between body and mind. But there's usually concentration practices associated with the body more, these extra ages, touching, touching practice. And so many people think of concentration is just a mental thing when pointed focus. And, and mindfulness is more associated with the mind because has to do with

knowing. Concentration practice has more to do with relaxation. And people associate concentration with relaxation. And they do it to get relaxed. And mindfulness practice has more to do with clarity, developing clarity. So again, there's a contrast. Another contrast is that concentration practices tend to produce experiences of unity or experiences of, of oneness. Whereas mindfulness practice in its maturity tends to create experience of independence or freedom. So the difference between you know, unity or oneness and freedom or independence. So that's kind of the background. So here isn't an image or analogy. Similarly for concentration practice, adopted a little bit for modern life cycling. So I want to give you this so I'm going to take you then hopefully, if I do this well, on a little journey, modest journey, I'm not going to. So first and imagine that you're working with clay but you went to the store and you bought dry powdered clay. So it's all the waters been taken out as powder. And so you take this powdered clay and you put it in a nice basin and just powder very soft, feel soft texture of it, which feels very dry. And then you take some water and start sprinkling some water into the dry clay. And then as this clay gets stolen moist you start needing the clay until the clay starts hanging together, the dust decays are staying together and you have a moist clay and you needed really well so that the moisture you don't have too much moisture so it's dripping and oozing out. But just enough moisture so that it's well permeated saturated, filled with pervading with moisture, right you kind of doing a ton of working into pervaded. So that's the image now and imagine some time in your life who you felt degree of, maybe kind of calm delight. This really kind of delighted with kind of like a calm way maybe when nice walk in from the hills and a nice lunch and you kind of stand and retreat and he was very nice and you felt physically, you felt certain kind of delight and joy in your body. And that joy and delight, permeates and spreads and fills and pervades and saturates your whole body with a moisture of delight. isn't a nice image. And so this is the image one image for concentration practice. They get asked to do with your body and has to do with taking when castration gets kind of strong. There's a feeling of the light that can happen and that's very physical and it can saturate and spread throughout your being there as your physical being. So no part of your body is not touched. By that delight, the idea the image of moisture, or water is one that's used a lot for concentration practice. And, and so maybe you can think of a simple, you know, Western, Western symbolic ideas of water. I don't know if those are meant to be associated with this in the Buddhist teachings, but the idea of being dry versus Devi wet, if you're tense, then you're dry. And the more stress you have, the drier you are. And, and, in fact, you've kind of feel some parts of your dead body can kind of kind of dead and numb if you really have a lot of tension and stress. And as the realization practice and letting go practice construction has a lot to do with letting go and relaxing. And as we like, so it's not just about focusing, I'm going to be one pointed here, you know, like a gun or whatever laser, but rather has a lot to do with relaxing and softening and relaxing and relaxing into a state and as happens in a relaxation state, then the body gets moist, moist with delight. We think of that image. Like it's, you're ready for this ready for that. Okay, now I'm going to give you a different image. And this is an image for mindfulness. You're a shepherd or a cow herder. And early in the season when the crops were growing, it required a lot of attention to stay right close to the cows or the goats, whatever, make sure they need the neighbor's crops, you know, your crops, read through the rice is growing there and make sure they only ate the weeds and then to kind of, you know, be very, very concerned and very kind of involved. But after the harvest, there's all this stubble on the fields and you know, everything's been harvested off the field.

Then you can just sit against the tree And you still have to keep an eye on the cows. So the goats, make sure they don't wander off too far. But you don't have to ride them so closely and make sure they don't eat within I suppose to eat, you can just let them kind of have free rein and you can just be there relaxed and just watch under the shade and just watch you know, my cows and the goats eat up there and you know, falling asleep but you're there. So, being like a, like a shepherd or a goat herder, the cow herder, who, who after the harvest, relaxed at ease up against the tree to put very, you know, kind of get survey eggs really seeing what's there because you know that the shepherd has to see what's there. You can't use your eyes. You can't just kind of sit and close your eyes and bask in some wonderful you know, warm spring day. You have to you have to be attentive, but the idea of mindfulness is very relaxed, ease attention, that kind of is there present for what's going on. It's not nice to hear For that gonna go up against an oak tree someplace and just watch your cows. And so what you would have to do you prefer to rather be the wet clay? Or would you rather be the goat herder? up against the tree after the harvest? Which image is the most appealing to these foreign images? They don't work. No one's saying anything. No comment. A wet goat herder. Good, that's great. Okay, so now another image, another image for concentration. Imagine a A wonderful kind of mountain clear mountain like it's a very hot day. So the water is just refreshing, just very refreshing water. And there's no streams that are going into this lake, and it doesn't rain hardly at all there. So the only place for this for the water come in is underground spring that comes into that link. And the underground temperature that underground springs just refreshing temperature, just really great temperature. Maybe it's been hot lately. So as you can imagine what's like to kind of be in a wonderful nice refreshing lake. And that's refreshing spring water comes up from the bottom of the lake in flows and moves like this wonderful current goes up and around and kind of moves out into the lake feels like you feel the kind of currents. So this is kind of wonderful, refreshing, you know, currents moving through you. So this is another image for certain states of concentration. That is certain kind of joy, no different than delight, certain kind of joy. Happiness can kind of welling up again in the body. So it's something you touch with your body. And it feels like it's kind of like some currents moving through you kind of feeling upwelling feeling of delight of energy of refreshment and it pervades. It feels it saturates your whole body so that no part of your body is not touched by that refreshing feeling of joy. We think of that a little bit better than being clay, lump of clay. Okay, and now mindfulness. You've been involved in the hustle and bustle of life and traffic and all these things. And you managed to get away from it and you go up on a nice kind of nice, somewhat high health. And from the hilltop, you look down upon the city and observe it all and you feel yourself quite independent from the hustle and bustle and busy as always people kind of driving the cars and honking at each other and running around and the rush hour traffic and wheeling and dealing, you know all the requirements of life and social complexities and you just kind of up there and you kind of have it all above it all on this wonderful hilltop of a great view and only you see the busyness of life below but you also see the vastness of the plains of the mountain ranges in the distance and the ocean are one side and great view kind of see it all great overview. And in that great overview of being not in the middle of congestion and traffic. You see kind of maybe the beauty in the specialness of life and, and, and, but you'd really clearly feel like kind of a little bit so independent and free. From at all, but also seeing this great, beautiful panorama. So that's an image for mindfulness. One is sometimes a mountain top right hilltop looking down. Sometimes the

Buddha use the image of being up in a high tower, above everything but looking down having some bird's eye view. And one friend of mine uses the image of being an eagle. You know, high of soaring high up is Eagles view Eagles perspective, it can look down and see everything below. So that's an image for mindfulness. So which would you prefer to be the upswell upwelling spring in the lake? Or do you rather kind of have this kind of independence of being up and above and just kind of great equanimity, of seeing out and seeing what's their preference or your other your spring that's up on a high mount. Who wouldn't want that? Yeah, central Yeah. Nice. And, and the other one who seems to be a little aloof, which may be can steal a look keep coming kind of kind of maybe unfriendly even a little bit if you kind of removed from everything but yes first one has sense of connectedness. So the first one seems connected and the second one seems aloof and how do you how do you stay connected? Good. Sometimes when this concentration practice people get very connected to themselves, but then essentially, you know, they're like eyes are shut. That's very internal that This this point Okay, so now in other image for concentration and so again you know the fact that's been warm lately maybe helps with this because in ancient India it was often hot, quite hot. I've been to the plains of northern India, this time of year and boy, it's a hot thing day. And, and so again the image has to do with water and has to do with a lake. And again, the water has a very refreshing temperature very clean, beautiful water. And, and now imagine that there's lotuses in this lake blue, white and red lotuses lotus flowers. But apparently for some lotus flowers they get they get born in the lake and the water that comes to come up out of the ground, I guess. And they, they grow and they nourish and they get They grow and they develop and even a minor theme flower but that everything the whole FLOTUS happens underwater. Some odo lotuses actually don't break the surface of the water. So because of that the whole Lotus plant is that underground, submerged Lotus. No part of the lotus is not touched. Again the word touched is being used is not no part of Lotus not touched by the cool refreshment of that lake. Now and this time the lake the water is quiet and still in calm. Remember the first time like there's upwelling current, which felt good, but it's also kind of kind of active and kind of a thrill or something. And now the water is really peaceful and still has a sense of peacefulness and quiet and calm and no part of the lake. No part of the lotus is not touched by the refreshing but calm and still water. So sometimes in incomes conservation practice the sense of the thrill Or the upwelling feeling of joy settles out, calms down. And it's replaced by a feeling of well being or happiness that feels quite, you know, calm or deep, more deeply satisfying enjoy or delight. And then as the practice develops, one possibility is that it begins to pervade and fit the Buddha uses all these words pervade and feels and saturates the body, so that no part of the body is not touched by that happiness. So, that's concentration. Now, mindfulness. Mindfulness is so imagine that you're you are in a, kind of an ancient world, the old world, they often had cities that had, you know, fortifications had walls around it and had a gate. And in order to get into the city, you have to go through the gate. And so they had a gatekeeper and the gate keeper would see who came and said, Well, you know, I don't think you should be in this town. You know, you look like a Murat marauding Hun. We don't want times here. So that's what they're all their weapons and ready for looting. So you can't come Thank you or see someone else's all I know you come to me and come in you live here, see, please come in. And some people come with messages for the king or the queen. And they say, Oh, this is the direct, most direct route to find the Royal chambers and you can bring your message. And so the gatekeeper has this

ability to stay there, notice what comes in and out. And then to make choices about what was allowed to come in and what has to stay out. So this is an A analogy for being mindful to have this ability to see and be present. Again, the gatekeeper sees what's there. Be present to see what's going on in your experience. To know what experience has taken away experience, take legal leave alone. But more importantly, to notice inside of ourselves, what thoughts, what intentions, what urges are appropriate to act on, and what intentions what impulses, perhaps we just let go. Now. So this ability to kind of be there at the gate, be there kind of a juncture between action, activity and non activity, to be able to decide how we're going to act. And as the most refined levels, it's not just simply acting with our body and our speech, but also how we're going to act with our thoughts with our mind. Many people don't think of the mind as something that we have much choice over. But in fact, the mind is another mental activity, just another activity, that you can have choice over as you can with anything else. So Oh, no, I'm not going to follow that train of thought that's not useful or that particular inclination of feeling, work or let go about or something. So the ability to see and to make and to be engaged Keep your see what's there to be at the interface between action and non action and decide what you're going to do and what you're not going to do. So which you prefer? You prefer to kind of speak kind of just resting in that wonderful Lake, calm, peaceful, still saturated and filled with, you know, none part of us not touched with happiness. Or would you rather be a gatekeeper who may be able to make wise choices? Your answer to this might have something to do with the kind of choices you've made, like, like some of you who you know, maybe have made such bad choices. Gee, you know, the pleasure thing was good, but, you know, I wish I'd been a gatekeeper back then. You know, but some of you may have made any bad choices lately. So, so, you know, that's not really that's not really, you know, you can identify him. So, okay, we have one more of this simile so imagine that again it's really hot underneath degree weather or something really hot weather. But there's a really clear clean, refreshing lake and you get to go in it and go poke delightful dip. You go in there just long enough that you feel just refreshed and satisfied. And just everything just gives you a you know, settled out, peace out. And then you go and shore and you wrap yourself in a soft cotton, white, clean, pure sheet. Soft, impure clean, may be new or something and you wrap yourself completely up in it. So no part of your body is not touched by the clean white kind of sense of being contained or held by this nice, nice sheet. This is also an analogy for concentration practice a deeper level of concentration and what we've talked about so far, actually, each of these images I'm giving you a concentration practice represents evening stages of concentration. And so now now this deepest stage as a feeling of being completely cleansed and clean, and refreshed for being in the pond, and then you kind of cover yourself, you're kind of enveloped in a nice wonderful way of by this nice feeling of, of equanimity and peace and purity. So it's a pure purity and equanimity. But to know part of your body, just like when covered up with this cloth, no part of your body is not touched by the cloth. So when you have this sense of equanimity, of peace of serenity, where there's no more kind of strong happiness or strong joy, just a delightful sense of purity and equanimity, and sense of mindfulness is there is no part of your body's not touched with that. That's the image for deeper level of concentration. Okay. So please do that to prop yourself up nicely with your equanimity. Now, for mindfulness, imagine that either you're a surgeon, or you're someone who needs some kind of surgery. And so the surgeon is going to, she's going to do her job well first comes to their hands and kind of begins probing a little bit in the

area of the body where the surgery is going to happen. probing and testing, finding out what's they're really getting to studying, it's kind of getting a feel for what's their feeling like, where they were, the thing is, whatever needs to be done, or where the bones are and where the muscles are and where the cut needs to be as careful probing to find out to gather information, to understand something, so that when the time comes to actually do the surgery, there's enough understanding of the geography of the body there that you can actually do a careful and good job. In other parts of this image, but you know, so what would you rather have a surgeon who just sits there wrapped very peacefully, probably, you know, you know, or a surgeon who actually has the ability to actually get in there and touch and feel and probe and gather information and has, you know, years of experience to really know, what is their kind of sense? What would you prefer? Are you sure you want a surgeon who really probes so mindfulness has is like a as one function mindfulness is a probe to kind of put or put ourselves there really feel and explore really sense to discover what's there, what's happening there, what's, what's going on, in our life, really kind of alpha kind of presence and mindfulness, what's really happening here, whereas you sit there and veloped in a cloth, or you know, you're not really finding anything out. It's nice, it's very satisfying, but you're not really learning anything. Similar to this a little bit similar to this in of the probe surgeon probing is that of a farmer plowing. In order to grow committed to conventional situations of farming, in order to grow a crop, you have to first plow the field. And you have to prepare the field. And once the fields been opened up and prepared, then you can sow the seeds. So mindfulness as a as a little bit like the plow, that prepares the soil, for something to grow something to develop something to happen. And so the, the mindfulness is a plow, that creates the soil, for the ground for wisdom to grow. So the mindfulness is there to kind of see what's there kind of like the probe, you know, there's putting your finger on, someone's not going to teach you much, but you have to kind of use your wisdom, your understanding and your discernment to really understand and develop wisdom. So the same thing with mindfulness, mindfulness kind of pairs the ground if you're present and connected to your experience, and seeing Carefully then that prepares that prepares the ground for something to occur. And that's the arising of wisdom. And one of the functions of mindfulness practice is to is to create the conditions for the rising wisdom. There's some wisdom that can come with concentration practice, but not a lot and not enough to set a person free. So it can be very satisfying to be like a you know, moist lump of clay or you know, wonderful mountain mountain lake or kind of wonderful upwelling spring water just feel so delightful and you're so unified and connected to yourself. It's so great or wonderful to be this calm. We lotuses in the calm lake or, you know, all these images, but as wonderful as they are, and sometimes people will take those being ultimates and this is the great I got it, this must be enlightenment. They are not the conditions are there for cultivation of deep wisdom that liberates a person that frees a person. So these are two different practices. They're often understood as two different practices. And the Buddha taught both. So it isn't what you know, we didn't say you have to choose between one or the other, or the you know, it was very clearly recognized that the mindfulness practice is what brings the wisdom that leads to freedom. But that concentration practice also as a very honored and important place in the Buddhist teachings. So then the one interesting, interesting, interesting question is how do they work together? And they can work together a variety of different ways. And they can work differently for different people. Some people will develop concentration practice first and develop this wonderful states that

can happen. That's what they often need. Those wonderful states of unity and flowing, joy and delight, are very healing and correct. Provide a sense of well being, that can be very, very helpful and healing for people and create a kind of deep kind of sense of well being the next easier to handle what mindfulness sees. So wisdom kind of is very kind of deep, why seeing a mindfulness sometimes can be a little bit difficult for people. And so it helps a lot if you have a deep sense of well being that allows you to see. So some people will cultivate concentration first. Some people will cultivate mindfulness first. And, and there's a good argument to be made that the Buddha taught that you would practice mindfulness, first, certain degree of mindfulness. Until you mindfulness became established and strong enough that the mindfulness would help you move into these states of concentration. And then you could switch into concentration practices for a while. And so you could start with up to a concentration first and mindfulness mindfulness, percent concentration, or you can some ways try to do them too. Hold them together. So like two horses on pulling a wagon, they both work together. And so you're developing both strong concentration strong mindfulness simultaneously. And some of these deep states of well being that can roll up happen the same time as being able to continue to see very deeply what your experiences what's happening here. So, one has to do with more with touching and other more with seeing, I can imagine that there are people because of their personal dispositions will prefer one over the other one seems so right. And the others feels so wrong. Or, you know, for whatever reasons or due to poor wine, you know, that, you know, I don't want to be aloof, you know, or distant, you know, up in the mountains. I want to be right there in the middle of it all feeling a sensuality. Well, that's what I want. In fact, people who are really sensual in nature, so I think sometimes sometimes we'll have an easier time with concentration practice because it can be very sensual. It's very bodily, unless you get too attached, unless you're trying too much. If you get too attached, you can't do it. It has a lot to do with relaxing and letting go. And different people, you know, it's kind of like there's personality types. And there are certain minds that gravitate more towards the mindfulness. And other minds, they gravitate more towards a concentration. And some people, you teach the mindfulness, and they'll get concentrated. That's just what kind of what happens are the people you see some concentration and they get mindful, because that's what the mind the mind works. And some people are kind of in the middle, most people are in the middle and it can go either direction, deliver whatever they're instructed to do, whatever the practice they're doing, takes them. Part of the function of concentration, if consideration is very important as a partner to mindfulness sooner, because if in order for mindfulness to do the deep work that that leads to liberation, it needs to be coupled with the ability to, to be very concentrated, to be very focused, very centered very, to be able to be that probe that really gets in there. Like Connect surgeon has to be very concentrated to really get all the information that's there. And so, cultivating some concentration is very, very helpful for mindfulness. In the classic system that we have at spirit rock. The idea is that concentration is supposed to be developed simultaneously together with mindfulness. And that works relatively well. There are other schools of practice where concentration practice is to first and then a person switches to mindfulness practice once the concentration is strong enough. Then one more I like to give another analogy that the Buddha taught and it has to do with acrobats. These two Acrobat Acrobat then the acrobats assistant apprentice, we're going to do some acrobatic tricks and the Acrobat said to the assistant You know, they're gonna climb today assistance in the climb up, climb and climb up on my

shoulders and it's, you know, stand on your hands and hold you up, you know, we'll use tricks on each other. And the and the Acrobat says, Assistant, and watch carefully over me. And then we won't have any problems, just you know, and the system says, No, no, no. You watch carefully over yourself. And I'll watch carefully over myself and therefore we won't have any problems. So they had to still this disagreement. So they went to the Buddha. And, and Buddha said, we're going to use this as an analogy and said, That's right. If you if you watch over yourself and watch your own balance and everything, then you know, you know you can just keep your balance and do what's right and, and the other person that's responsible for their balance. And you can find your way together just right. So in the same way, when practicing mindfulness, it's very important to be mindful over oneself and find one's own balance, and then having our own balance, then we can help other people. But if we don't have our own balance first, then it's dangerous to help other people, then you both might fall to director bets. So the idea of both of being mindful for yourself is not just simply something is supposed to be selfish, but creates again, the conditions the soil the ground, to be able to be helpful towards others, which is a very important element in the Buddhist tradition is also to be helpful. And how helpful Can you be the most helpful you can be? Quite another analogy if you kind of Oh, this is a dirty, slimy, quick scent analogy of water rights. If you you and a friend get caught in quicksand and need to get out of the quicksand. You know, just kind of quicksand every time you push down, you know, to get some, get some get some leverage to get put up, you can sink deeper down, right? So he's Oh, I'll help you then. So you take your friend and you're gonna pull your friend out, then you only sink in deeper and then you friends well wait I'll help you. pulls in you get their friends things deeper, it kind of drowned together that way doesn't work. What you need to do, one of you needs to get up on dry land. And then from dry land, you can get your hand in and help pull the other person up. So, again, what how is it that we can be most helpful and most helpful is to somehow get ourselves on dry land, get safe, get free, and then from that place of freedom, then we can offer the most help for someone else. And so the goal in Buddhism and classic Buddhism is To become free, is to become liberated. And in becoming liberated, then be able to offer that to someone else. And if you try to help other people first, then there is a danger in the quicksand danger to people who are both in quicksand, they're going to sink. So the ultimate, you know, so that and so mindfulness is the practice that leads to liberation. But it's helpful if you couple it with concentration practice, to develop a sense of well being developed as healing develop a sense of connectedness, but don't confuse the Unity experience the Oneness experience of concentration as being the end of the road. Don't settle for that. But at some point, also be willing to look more carefully, be relaxed and looking be like a cow herder. You know, be very relaxed. from people. practicing mindfulness is a huge training, to learn how to be relaxed and at ease in looking at what we're looking at. And also develop some sense of independence. As we look, we're not caught by what's there. We're independent, we're free from what we look at, we're looking really there but we're free from like reppin a tower looking down, we're not caught and everything and then use your mindfulness to probe carefully and look carefully you'd be like a gatekeeper decides what to act on what not to act on, and act in such ways that supports your spiritual life. And then be like a probe, you know, it looks more deeply or like a plow, that creates a condition for the rising of wisdom and freedom. And if you do that work, create the soil and allow the rising of wisdom and it gets time for liberation. Then the instructions is goes back to the same kind of

language is used for concentration, practice, touch, liberation, liberation, some of us touch, so again, it's not something you you know, again, they did being removed and separate is not quite there. for liberation, if you ever touch liberation, or more dramatically plunge into it. dive into it. Like you would like the concentration practice your dive into that cool like. So that's the image to the head. So does that answer the question there's a difference between mindfulness and concentration in different way. So may both wings be a support to you. May you both plunged into those wonderful pools. And now you'd be dry and dry gatekeeper. Are they good? goats, goats, goats herder. So, the wet goats herder Thank you very much.