

Mindfulness as Refuge, Pasture, and Ancestral Homeland

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So good morning again and good afternoon. Good day to all of you and coming down here today on Mother's Day in United States. Happy Mother's Day to all who are mothers. Express our gratitude to them and appreciation in coming down here today. I was thinking or thinking about this talk, what I was talking about. I had one thing in mind.

But when I sat down to meditate and was sitting here now with you, I think that I'm still kind of very much in the middle of the current retreat that I'm teaching, and there is a very different feeling inside of being settled, tender, open. So I'm in a different mood, maybe, than I usually am when I come down to teach. So I want to share some of the things I said on the retreat, but it's mostly an excuse to say these things, to try to express something that expresses something tender, or caring, or loving, or something that'll be warm, subtleness, even contentment that I happen to be feeling now. And it's closely connected to the practice of mindfulness, of *sati*. Some of you know that these days, after many years of study and practice, that I actually prefer to translate *sati*, the Buddhist word that's translated as mindfulness.

Most commonly, I prefer to translate it as awareness, and awareness is always something that's occurring in the present moment, even though it might be directed towards thinking about the future and the past. Awareness itself is really always. It's almost coterminous with the present. Our experience of the present is coterminous with our ability to be aware. Here we are aware. And as the Buddha talked about this awareness, the *sati* is mindfulness in some really wonderful terms.

Sometimes he talked about it as a refuge, sometimes he talks about it as a pasture, and sometimes he talks about it as an ancestral homeland. And I think of these, but you know, especially a refuge always has these connotations, like a nature refuge is a place, a pasture is a

place, an ancestral homeland is a place, and you feel, I see often in the teachings of the Buddha, this sense that the practice and the references for the practice are very localized, very grounded in the location that we're in. There's languages of being, root standing, of being in a place. There's not kind of a vague ambiguity about just being aware, just open, aware, but there's a sense, real sense of being maybe grounded, connected, localized here. So one of the ways he talks about *sati* awareness being a refuge, it's kind of interesting teaching where someone comes to the Buddha and says that something like, There are these five senses seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching the tactile sense.

And these things are the sense perception that we have, this ability to sense and experience the world through these five sense doors. Do they have a refuge? And the Buddha answers, Yes, the mind is their refuge. I think one of things he is pointing to in this teaching is that it's explicit that each of these sense doors has a different domain, a different pasture. That eyesight goes in, sense goes out, and what it takes in, what it experiences is sight objects. Ears take in or experience hearing objects, sound objects.

And so far, for the other senses, they each have their pasture where they graze, where they pick up things and experience things, and the pasture of each one is distinct. So that the pasture of sight objects is not experienced as sight objects by the ear. The ear hears what is heard. The noise of the sounds that the ear hears is a different pasture, different domain, different realm, in a sense, than what the eyes see, or what smells, or what tastes, or what body touches. There's some kind of distinct way these senses work. Each of them is very distinct from each other.

But the mind is the refuge. The mind is what gathers all these together and holds them together. Mind sees and experiences and knows. Mind knows the experience of each one. So it's like the clearing house or the repository where all these five senses come together. The person is talking to the Buddha then asks, What is the refuge for the mind?

And the Buddha says, The refuge for the mind is awareness, is *sati* mindfulness, that the mind, taken together, knows all the stuff. If not, the mind is partly a place of recognition, of understanding, of a comprehension, of a central clearing house, a reconstruction of a reality maker. In the sense that we take in all the sense data and it gets reconstructed in the mind, hopefully often accurately enough to represent what's out there. But this mind that's working and doing, what is its refuge? Where is it safe? Where is it protected?

Where does it rest in? It can rest in awareness. And this idea that we be awareness creates safety or refuge or protection for the mind. We know what the mind is up to through being aware, and so we can be wiser by what we do. But the idea that there's a refuge for it, that's

support for it. And what's nice about this idea that awareness is a refuge for the mind?

It doesn't posit a self, me, myself, and mine, which is me, myself, and mine. And the "I" is all a product, a product of the activities of the mind. And there is something that's beyond in the mind, part of the mind, a kind of awareness that holds it all. The person then asks the Buddha, What's the refuge for awareness? And the Buddha answers, It's liberation, freedom, a deep letting go that somehow awareness itself is supported and protected by our capacity to let go, be open, be non-contentious, be non-contracted, to be free, the kind of expansiveness or limitlessness of freedom of awareness. And then the person asks the Buddha, Well, does freedom itself have a refuge?

Saraṇa patisaraṇa is the word in Pāli, and the Buddha says that liberation has *nibbāna* as a refuge. And I translate *nibbāna* or *vāna* by the word, by the English idea of release. So becoming free is protected by being released, by continuing to open to release, to free. The release that leaves us with an absence of clinging and *nibbāna* is maybe best understood as that absence. The absence of clinging is not a thing. So the mind has *sati* awareness as its refuge.

We learn to rest in awareness, trust, deep trust of being aware of what's happening. And that's a refuge of protection. That *sati* is protected by liberation, by releasing our clinging. And that release, that liberation, is protected by really appreciating the absence of clinging. The person then asks the Buddha, and does *nibbāna*, this absence of release, have a refuge. And the Buddha says, Now you've gone beyond the realm of questions, beyond what can be answered appropriately.

So the idea that it's a refuge, mindfulness awareness is a refuge. *Sati* is a refuge. Elsewhere, the Buddha talks about *sati* being a pasture, and the word for pasture is a *gocara*. Go is the Pāli word for cow. The Indo-European languages, there's a continuity, the connection. They all have the same root, and something as central, as important, that historically, until recently, for human culture, as the cow.

Some words don't change much. And so in English we have cow, and Norwegian is cow, and in Pāli go. I think these words are deeply related. I kind of love this family connection, and *chara* probably is related to our word chariot. It means to go or to wander, and where the cows wander, where the cows go. Now, if you ever spend much time with cows, when cows wander their grazing, they go to where the grazing land is, and they are constantly grazing and grazing.

Unless they are sleeping, chewing their cud. And so the word *gocara*, then, is usually trans-

lated, sometimes translated into English as pasture. Sometimes it's called for other animals. The *gocara* of different animals is their feeding grounds, where they go to feed. So when the Buddha says that, he says explicitly that the four foundations of mindfulness—mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feeling tones, mindfulness of the mind states, and mindfulness of the dynamics, inner dynamics of clinging and freedom—that these are the pasture for practitioners. So not only is it a place where we can be, if we really want to delve into the world of practice, then we want to stay on the pasture.

We want to stay in the place where the practice is, and to know what the pasture is allows us to graze there, allows us to be fed there, to be nourished by it. And certain ways of being with our experience provides us with a contact with reality that can be nourishing and deepening and settling and unifying. And other ways of being in contact with reality are fragmenting, dispersing, contracting, and far from nourishing, maybe even the opposite—stressful. So if we say that we're sitting in meditation, and we're filled with anger about something, or fear about something, and we're thinking about that. We're thinking about how this person said X, and I should have said Y, and I'm going to get back on that person or that person's no good after talk to other people and, you know, and just kind of reviewing the story. That's stressful.

That's kind of not nourishing way of thinking. So we ask ourselves, Where is the pasture at this moment? The pasture is the direct, immediate experience of our anger or fear or whatever it might be, as is experienced through the body. So it's not a denial of anger or fear or happiness or anything, but rather where is the place we can be with that experience, so that instead of being stressed and de-nourished, unnourished by it, we get nourished in some deep, important way to feel it, experience it in an embodied way, and then are not lost in the story. Experience the feeling tone of it, pleasant or unpleasant. We all feel and sense and take in the mind state as operating.

When you have these preoccupations, that lends itself to a pasture, to a grazing, to a nourishment that's supported for us. Or pay attention to the ways in which we're caught and clinging to something, and to where the freedom from it is. So here we have this idea of pasture, of being nourished, in being fed. And then the final kind of one I want to talk about today is this idea of the ancestral homeland. And here again, the Buddha says that the four foundations of mindfulness, so *sati* awareness, four foundations for awareness, is our ancestral homeland. I don't know what associations you have with this.

But I love this idea. It's like it's our home, the place where we're from. And when we're there, like not just a house that's our home, but the very land that we're home in, maybe safe in or

grounded in, or this is where the roots are in. I meant to say, I don't know, now, maybe eight years ago, I went back to a place where I grew up in Italy, lived there for five years, and hadn't been back for maybe fifty years or a long, long time. And it was quite something to be back at that kind of childhood home, ancestral home, in a sense. And as soon as I got to some of the places I was familiar with—the smell and the lighting and the kind of air—I remember this.

It was like wild. This was like an embodied sense of being nourished by a place. So the Buddha tells a story. He says kind of an analogy story. He said that in the foothills of the Himalayas there is this area of jungle, a forested area where there are lots of monkeys, and this jungle area is their ancestral home. They've lived there for a long, long time.

And as he said, Buddha said, as long as they stay in that jungle, it's kind of in the foothills, maybe a certain place they're safe. Hunters don't come into that jungle. Maybe it's too dense, or maybe a little bit too difficult to get up the mountain side of the hill or something. Be there. They're safe. But if the monkeys go wander up further up into the Himalayas, where there's high, steep cliffs and maybe very few trees to hang from or hold on to, he said, then they go some place where they're not safe.

They can fall and hurt themselves, get killed. And if they go in the other direction, and they go out onto the plains of northern India, out of the foothills, in the jungles, where it's more open and flat than people live, that's where the hunters can catch them. They're exposed. They're not safe high up in the trees, where people are not going to get them, I suppose. But if they stay in their ancestral homeland, then they're safe. In the same way, practitioners of mindfulness, they're safe when they stay in the ancestral home of *sati*, of awareness.

That present moment awareness, present moment attention, being grounded attention in a place here, now, the place where we're standing. Our feet are on the ground, where our bottom is on our cushion or chair. There's a place or location for where awareness resides in this body here, now, to really be here and feel it. The First Foundation of Mindfulness. Then we're in our ancestral homeland, in that mindfulness of these things. And there we're safe.

And maybe if we—Buddha doesn't say this, but if we extend the analogy—then if we go out into the place, into the world of people, and we lose our groundedness in our attention. We get preoccupied and swept up in the crowds, and the concerns, and the activities, and what people are saying and doing. And now we're part of the arguments, part of all the worldly pursuits that people get caught up in and lost in, and kind of lose themselves, lose their clear, grounded presence. It's very easy to be dangerous. We say and do in activities which are not nourishing, not supportive, actually can be harmful, and then we later regret. We can lose ourselves in the world, like being well grounded and centered in meditation, really feel present,

and then deciding to go to be fully absorbed in all the activities of Las Vegas, you know?

And pretty soon we're frazzled and not so connected. And then the going up into the high wilderness of Himalayas, where it's, you know, cliffs and mountain sides, maybe to go into the wilderness or the barrenness, where we disconnect in a different kind of way. We're not in society, not in the world, but we're not grounded in ourselves either. But maybe we're in the high cliffs of fantasy and dreaming about the past and the future, and something which, you know, is kind of very far removed, and up high in the Himalayas, high up in our thinking mind, disconnected again, which also may be a dangerous place. So there is a refuge, there is a pasture to be nourished in, there is a place in which we're safe, our ancestral homeland. All three of these things is referred to as subtly as mindfulness is awareness.

These are very, to me, very warm, very nourishing, very inspiring, very embodied reference points for understanding what awareness can be for us, what mindfulness can be. That mindfulness is not a duty. It's not a tension in the mind. It's not a lot of work. It's the place where we can relax, the refuge where we're safe, and awareness can open, relax, and just be itself. We can—the awareness, which is not the work.

It's not like the muscle of mindfulness is pushing and trying. It's more like the place where awareness can operate naturally. Just relax, trusting awareness. We trust awareness, and more than do awareness, we allow awareness rather than work awareness, allowing that awareness, because it's a refuge. We can relax in there, all the doing of the mind, that the thinking muscle can relax. So we can just trust the inner intelligence, and then it's also a pasture where we can graze.

We can be nourished by our experience. Imagine being aware, and what we're aware of feels like food coursing through our body: This is good, this is settled, this is comfortable, this is nice, and that it's our ancestral homeland, that we're home, that here we can kind of let go of our self-preoccupation—me, myself, and mine—because now we are at home. We're here. We're allowed just to be who we are. What a great thing to sit in mindfulness, sit in meditation, and really you're allowed to be who you are in all your ways. It's an experience not a lot of people have.

Society and people and situations, all of them sometimes work against our deep allowing ourselves to be who we are. And in doing that, coming to a deep appreciation for ourselves, a deep care, deep love, deep support. Not because we're selfish and conceited, but actually the opposite, because we're really present in a deep way. So here we are, here you are. You're in a location, listening to this, that location, to be grounded, to be centered, to be here, to really be present with your body. It's in this location, always in this location, always in the place

you're at, where the refuge is found, this refuge of awareness, of mindfulness, awareness of the body, awareness of feeling tones, awareness of mind states, and awareness of how we're caught and how we're released.

May it be that you're delighted, happy with your capacity to trust awareness. Trust awareness so it becomes your support. Thank you.