

The gates of awareness

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Yeah, good morning, everyone. So I'm... Can you hear me? Okay, it's a little loud. Let's see. Can we turn it down a little... How's that now? Is that okay? Yeah. Good? Okay. So I'm home this weekend from teaching the first month-long Vipassanā retreat at IRC. It's quite special. I used to teach them for many years at Spirit Rock. The month-long retreat, Vipassanā retreats, I think of it a little bit like maybe the idea that in Islam, once a lifetime you should go to Mecca. For insight practitioners, once a lifetime to do a month-long retreat. I think I kind of... They're quite kind of useful, important in our tradition.

And so I'm going to teach a little bit, kind of a summary, a little bit of what the theme is for that retreat. But my wife warned me about giving this talk here today. Because at the month-long retreat, it's kind of, I talk, it's almost like the Dharma talks are more like guided meditations. Or if someone wasn't there, they would think I had too much tranquilizers. So she warned me, don't talk so slow here. So I don't know what will happen here as I go along in the topic. But maybe it's for two weeks now I've been... The Dharma talks have been a very different nature than what they normally are.

So, you know, the core kind of reference point for practice in our tradition is mindfulness. And one of the metaphors for the practice of mindfulness in the ancient Buddhist texts is that of mindfulness functions like a gatekeeper in a walled city. So if there's one gate into the walled city, or from the walled city out, the gatekeeper sits there at the gate and decides who to come in and who to let go out. And so if people who are violent and into thievery want to come in, maybe the gatekeeper says, not today. And it's just pretty easy to prevent them coming in. Because they want to have good neighbors, the gatekeeper maybe always gives them some gift to go with. Here, here's some cookies or something for your travels.

And the gatekeeper also prevents people from leaving. If there are violent people in the city, thieves in the city, it creates very bad neighbor relationships to let them out. And so the

gatekeeper doesn't let them out. Maybe he has a nice table there. Hey, stay here. We'll have a nice meal together and I have lemonade. And so it kind of gives them a different context for those people. So it's kind of nice to them. Maybe something. But the important thing is the gatekeeper tracks what comes in and out.

So the simile is meant to be for us, that the gates for us are our senses. So everything about the world comes in through our eyes. And sometimes how we use our eyes is how we communicate with the world. So that's the eye gate, the ear, the ear gate, the mouth gate, the taste gate, the smell gate, and the body gate. And also Buddhism has this sixth gate, which is the mind gate by which we know what's going on in the mind and by which the mind can know what's going on elsewhere.

And so everything we know about the world comes through our ability to know. Everything we know about the world and about ourselves comes through our ability to know. Mindfulness practice looks at and tends to that ability to know. It's about how we know as much as what we know. Most things that we know about the world and ourselves occurs through our senses. And the sense that the Buddhism gives a lot of emphasis on is the body sense, the tactile sense, all the different ways we can feel through the body.

And so, but everything there, like we know ourselves in a deep way. There's a wonderful meeting place of the world and ourselves through what happens at our skin, the experiences we have in our body and outside. And so much of what we know about the world happens through our senses, in our ability to sense. So an important part of mindfulness is attention to how we sense. For a deep Buddhist spirituality, the metaphor, the sense gate that's used as a metaphor for a deeper Buddhist spirituality is seeing. The experience of awakening is opening the Dharma eye.

Some of the deepest states of experience are more seen in the mind's eye than they are felt today or known. And so the question is, how do we see? So this constant reference back, not to the object of what we're paying attention to, but how we're experiencing things. Right there in the how is also the gate by which we then relate to the world. So if we can be our gatekeepers and know how we receive it, and what we send forth, we have a tremendous capacity to be careful and wise and kind and supportive. We don't send out from us things, words, activities, actions that are characterized by greed and hatred, delusion and lies.

We also are very careful what comes in. We're very careful not to take in messages of greed and hatred, delusion. We're right there seeing it and seeing the impact it has on us, and we're attending to how we're aware. And what most people focus on, I believe, is what we're thinking about, what we're concerned about, what we're, you know, the things that we're

watching, the things that we're reading and knowing that way, the things that, you know, we're experiencing. We're concerned about something that's different than the nature of how we know and how we experience. And it's reasonable. That's how we find our way in the world, and that's how we make ourselves safe and, you know, survive is to know what's happening in the world and to track it and But we can get caught in that so that half of who we are, in a sense, is never known.

And I call it half because I want to emphasize its tremendous importance. And that is not what we know within us or outside of us, but how we know. Not what we experience, feel, sense, but how we do that. And so when we practice mindfulness practice, one of the things that we're doing is noticing how we know and how we experience things. And sometimes you can see, if you go out to the park and watch people downtown in the city, you can kind of see sometimes in the people's eyes, their face, their mannerisms, how they're taking in the world around them. Sometimes you see that people are afraid. Sometimes you can feel and see that people are looking and relating to others with hostility.

And so how they're taking in and how they're relating is through these deep emotional attitudes that we can carry with us. But often we don't realize that we have choice there. That's the filter through which we see the world, and we don't see the filter. So mindfulness practice is to take that backward step, for a while at least, at least maybe in meditation, to not be so concerned about the world of aboutness. Most people live in the world of aboutness. If you spend most of your time concerned with what you're thinking, concerned about your preoccupations, and if you spend most of your time in front of a screen... And most of the time in conversation with people, chances are that you're, big part of what you're doing is you're living in the world of aboutness, about something.

Let me tell you about what happened yesterday. And then we tell them what happened yesterday, but it's about yesterday. It's not about the present moment experience here and now. It's about something else. So if you sit in meditation, that's one of the great lessons in meditation, is to learn how much of our time is in aboutness, the world of aboutness, rather than the world, the living world, the lived world of the moment. As we get closer to the lived world of the moment, what begins to stand out is how we're aware, how we know, how we sense the experience.

And this how we're aware, the capacity, the ability to know, the ability to sense in a deep way, and the ability to, in the mind's eye, to see, these are profound capacities we have that are gateways and doorways to profundity within us, to profound ways of being in this world, being with ourselves. So learning to pay attention to how we're aware is, is not just so we can

adjust a little bit how we're aware, so we're in a better way. It's also a means to connect to something very profound that only can be known, only can be felt, if we are no longer caught in the world of aboutness and rather can learn to feel in very deep ways and feel certain sides of who we are, aspects of who we are, instead of the usual aspects. And to know, not just know as if knowing is the point, but how we know and the source within us from where we know. Because there's two major sources that the Buddha emphasizes for how we know and how we cognize and how we construct this world that we live in. So this how and what's possible here.

So when we practice mindfulness, one of the things that we're learning to do is to cultivate our capacity to know, to sense, to observe. And the fourth one, this is clearly stated in the Buddha's instructions in mindfulness. The fourth one is to relax or become calm or become tranquil. And so the Buddha's primary instructions are first foundational instructions in mindfulness meditation, mindfulness practice, involves first knowing, using our capacity to know. Second, using our capacity to sense. And the instructions there is to sense the whole body. And in terms of knowing, to know that you're breathing.

For some people, knowing your breathing seems like a pretty silly thing to do. There's more important things to do on Netflix. But what we're doing here is taking something very ordinary and regular and continuous, our capacity to know breathing, and not just to know breathing better. Some people say breathing is boring. But rather, to learn how to know breathing. And in the how we know breathing, breathing comes alive in a delightful way. Some people call it a beautiful way.

And then we're sensing the body, and it's not so much exactly what we sense that's important, but we're cultivating a higher degree of sensitivity so we can sense much deeper and fuller in new ways that we're usually never been trained to do. And then to relax. Because when you sense and know the body and breathing, sooner or later, probably sooner, you'll know that you have tension. Tension in the body, tension in the mind, tension in the heart. And so then to calm it. And maybe relaxing, I like to use the word relaxing because it's so physical and immediate. But the Buddha's word is more like calming.

And what's advantage of calling it calming is, if you understand, we're calming the whole nervous system. We're not relaxing just the shoulders. This practice is to calm the whole nervous system, which can be over-activated, can be afraid, can be all kinds of things that is not so healthy for us. So we're doing this deep calming, and the advantage for that, calming the nervous system, is then we can know better and we can sense better, and eventually with the mind's eye we can see better. In a way we can't if the field of awareness is cluttered. If

the field of awareness is crowded with the aboutness, all the things. And some people have so many things to be thinking about, be concerned about, that their mind is just jumping around all the time.

So not only is it cluttered, but it's spinning. It's overactive. If you sense and feel and know the thinking mind, some people finally realize it's claustrophobic in there. Some people finally realize that it's exhausted. It's just, it's so weary. Because some people for decades have the same kind of way of kind of being caught in this thinking mind as if that's where the solution to all their life's problems live. And so it's constantly caught in that world. So as that relaxes, we learn to sense better, feel better.

And what begins to occur, and what the Buddha clearly instructs in his teachings, is that we begin to be able to differentiate between two different modes of sensing, of areas of sensation. One, are those sensations that are born, that arise, when the world touches us. When there's a sight object in the world and it comes into the eye. When there's temperature or tactile experiences, a massage, you stand on a nail or something, there's something, you know, we're touched by the world. And that's an important part of surviving in the world, is having this wonderful exchange with the world where we take in data from the world, so we know what's going on in the world, we know the impact that has on us. There are people apparently who cannot feel pain. And it seems like on the surface, what a great thing. Those people apparently don't live very long because they end up injuring themselves and not knowing it.

Because pain is an important part of the feedback system for life. But it's still, it comes, it's kind of from the surface, it's kind of from the skin that we know it. And so kind of surface sensing... And some people are living in that surface sensing world. They just want comfort. They want sensual pleasure from the world. They want food or sex or alcohol. They want, you know, comfortable surroundings. And some people feel like a successful life or being a successful person is measured by the comfort they have, by the sensuality they have. And sometimes it's conscious and sometimes that is unconscious.

And so to be preoccupied with that world means that we haven't gotten quiet enough and still enough to sense this deeper source within. A deep source that kind of a profound sensing that can happen, that maybe is not dependent on being impacted by the world, but maybe has more to do with, it feels more like a flow, more like a radiance or a glow. It's something that has a little bit more persistence than a simple sense contact that comes and goes in some ways, that maybe has to do with hormones, maybe has to do with... Who knows exactly how this deep inner world lives, operates? But I associated this distinction a little bit, and I'm not

a scientist or psychologist or anything, so take this with a grain of salt. But the surface way of sensing, I associated with the reptilian brain. That's what helps us survive. Right? And then the steeper way of sensing the mammalian brain, the mammalian capacity, the how mammals care for their young, for example.

And we know that there are all kinds of hormones and activities that course through a mother's body in order to manage this crazy thing of caring for a child when they're young. And, you know, these wonderful, wonderful chemicals that just makes it feel like you want to nurture and it feels that you want to care for and tend. So there's these deeper, deeper feelings that related to, sometimes with love, sometimes with compassion and care, sometimes with warmth, sometimes with kindness. Sometimes with the feeling of the whole psychophysical system being in harmony with itself. Most people live divided lives, scattered lives, where all the different capacities we have are sometimes at cross-purposes with ourselves. The mind is concerned with many different things, or emotional life is kind of divided between the resentment we had yesterday, the excitement about what's happening tomorrow, and the boredom of today. And all these things are happening at once. And then we have all kinds of intentions and desires and wishes that might be happening, kind of multi-tracking.

Mindfulness meditation, meditation and Buddhism is to help us come into harmony, to bring all of who we are into kind of a unified whole. And that sense of unity, that sense of harmony awakens some of these beautiful sensations that can live within us. Beautiful sensations of well-being, of calm, of peace, of well-being. So if we live in this world of aboutness, we live in the world of external sensing always, we don't feel this deeper place. And so it's shifting our attention at some point to be not so concerned about the physical sense world, but to be concerned with this deeper place of sensitivity that's possible. And that's also a place that guides us in our ethical lives, because that's where we can feel care and love for people and... integrity for ourselves, that's where we can feel remorse and feel like something's off, feeling, oh, this doesn't feel right to me. Something feels, something feels, I'm violating some deep aspect of my heart now if I lie to my best friend.

There's a reference point that's ethical, deeply within us, that often the surface senses don't really provide. In fact, sometimes they do the opposite. If people are addicted to pleasure, for example, some of them people, it doesn't care what effect it has on other people sometimes. I just want that thing for myself. And so, but to come into this deeper place of care, a place of approach and nurture rather than fight or flight. So the sensing opens up a whole different way of being that this mindfulness is bringing us to. And then with knowing.

So some people think knowing is boring. You know, sometimes we have in our tradition something called mental noting. And so that's, for some people, that drives them crazy. You know, just to use a single word to know, to name what's going on. But what we're doing is we're training ourselves to know, to cognize, to recognize what's happening. And sometimes naming what's happening is really helpful. Something settled sometimes when something is named. But more important is we should pay attention when we do this mindfulness practice to how we know, how we do that act of recognition, and what our relationship is to these moments of recognition.

So for some people, knowing something is the end of a journey. It's like a period at the end of a sentence. So, for example, if I feel my stomach tighten up and I know tightening, and then what am I going to do about it? There's just a problem. I hope no one notices. You know, it goes on. But if I notice my stomach tighten and I recognize, oh, it's tight, and think of that as the beginning of a sentence, the beginning of a journey, knowing it opens the door to now sense and know this more. I know this. What happens now? How is that experienced? What happens now that I know it? Make room.

So, oh, so the mental noting when that's done is more like beginning a journey. Some people note in a staccato-like way as if they're doing a, I don't know, some job, the point is to note. The point is not to note. The point is not to know. But knowing is the beginning of sensing, feeling, recognizing, becoming familiar with what's there. So the how you know. And then where is a source of knowing?

And the Buddha, the new newsletter article, which is just put on the counter today, has an article by me about this topic. But if it's the reptilian knowing in the brain, if it's the surface mind that knows, that's often the mind that's being fueled by clinging, by attachment, by selfishness, self-preoccupation. And so it constructs ideas and stories and understandings of the world that are strongly under the influence of our bias, our clinging, our attachments, our hatreds, all kinds of things. There's an other source of knowing for what we can know. And I kind of call it sometimes, I kind of profound knowing, Sometimes I think about it, there's a surface mind and a deep mind. Sometimes I think of it as knowing from the source of life. Isn't that kind of cool? Source of life within us.

And some of you know this, but the way the Buddha refers to this kind of knowing and this kind of way of cognizing and thinking about it, he literally uses the expression thinking or understanding, knowing from the womb. And here the womb is used as a metaphor. And since not every human has a womb, it might be nice to not just limit it to that, but the source of life or profound... The translator Bhikkhu Bodhi translated as careful attention, attending,

understanding from carefully. If he's going to use careful, then I want to use the word caringly to know caringly, to know with care from some deep, that source, deep, that mammalian source deep within here to care in a deep way. So most, it's so easy to think from the surface mind. And it's so compelling at times. Because some of you are brilliant in your imagination and what you can think up there, the fantasies you can make up. Wow, you could probably keep Hollywood busy for a long time with making movies and all those fantasies and or, you know, maybe it's, maybe the war movies you're going to make are, the movies you're going to make are war movies because that's where you live and conflict and fighting and all this. But this surface mind can be very compelling. And I've seen that in myself, that I sometimes have some kind of imaginary thought about something. And I can see the effect it has on my surface body, my survival body. I can have a thought that's really graphic and get afraid. But wait a minute, there's nothing to be afraid of. But if my body reacts... I can have beautiful fantasies and somehow just feel enamored. All kinds of things can happen. But if we learn not to be caught in the surface mind and the surface way of knowing, but we learn to know from this deep source, then it's a whole different world we live in.

So now I've talked about two things. I've talked about sensing from a deep place within. That's not the normal way that people might sense. And then knowing from a deep place within. So the third way the Buddha in mindfulness practice teaches how to be mindful is to see with the mind's eye, to perceive. And what's, I think, very significant about seeing is that seeing doesn't interfere with what's being seen, in and of itself usually. We just see, and we leave it alone as it is. It doesn't have the same intimacy as sensing does, and it doesn't have the same kind of cognitive factor that knowing has. Seeing is much simpler. Seeing is also tied, connected, to our... We have a lot of different ways that attention works. And one of them is our spatial ability.

Our ability to kind of sense space and the space within things. And so it's possible for some of us to look around at the space in this room. You know, it's kind of nice with a high ceiling. I think it's, someone said I think maybe 18 feet up there? I don't know. But it's a bit high up. But if you cut a sense of space, the space between the people who are here... And some of us could then close our eyes, and we can kind of have it in the mind's eye, we can kind of visualize the space or have some sense of the space. We have an innate sense of space and spatial direction because you can even close your eyes and maybe know which way to go to go out of here. You should know to turn around. Most people will turn and go that direction. And you know how to step around people. So the spatial capacity... It sometimes is used to help relax the mind deeply. You go down to the beach or go to the river or to the park and

just settle back into a place where it's very spacious and where the mind doesn't necessarily fixate on any particular concern, but the mind floats within that space and takes in casually the different objects and something within us begins to relax deeply.

The inner eye is the same way. At some point, as we relax deeply, the mind no longer feels small, contracted, tight. The mind starts feeling expanded, expansive. The Buddha called it an expansive mind, and then they call it big mind, where there's a sense of a lot of space in the mind. That's in a kind of funny way or odd way. It feels like the mind now is bigger than the head, because there's no boundaries to it in this spacious way. And one of the nice things about that is that a spacious mind, spacious awareness, has room for everything. A contracted mind does not have a lot of room. And so if you're in a tiny little elevator that can only hold one person, but there's you and three very big, tall people who really like eating ketchup all over their shirts. And they're like having a shower in a few days. And you get in by yourself and then they come in and they're all around you in that elevator. It's a bit much. It's like claustrophobic. But if you go into a vast, vast, vast cathedral or beautiful spot in nature, and you see those same people spread out far away, then it's easy to love humanity. But, you know, when they're like that, so it's kind of like that in our minds. When we're so caught in our concerns, our preoccupations, and get claustrophobic, it's very hard to, there's a very different attitude we have about ourselves, our life. But when the mind becomes like a vast cathedral, sacred spot, lots of space, even if you have a terrible thought. It's like, wow, look at that, the thought. It's like a bird flying through the sky, as opposed to, oh my, how could I? Or this is terrible, or yes, I'm going to really get into this fight or something. Just, we tend to be much more equanimous and sometimes much more generous when things can be known with lots of space in the mind.

So this ability to see without interference, with equanimity, without being caught, without being for and against, with that holds things in a very generous way, not to be a pushover for things, but so that we can operate much more carefully by what we let out of our gate into the world. So we can do that wisely and carefully and stuff. And what do we want to let out into the world? Well, if you ask that deep source of life within, it's probably going to be connected to something like care, love, compassion. If it's connected to this deep source of feeling, of sensing within... It's probably something that arises out of that resonance that's there that exists with other people and ourselves. So part of this focus of mindfulness is to be able to sit at the gate where all things we know about the world come and all things about ourselves go out. Those gates have to do with how we sense, how we know, and how we see with the mind's eye.

And what's important is not so much, for the purpose of this practice, is not so much what you know, what you sense, what you feel, but how you know, how you sense, how you see, how you feel. And how should you do that? Calmly. Maybe you have some choice about how calmly you know. You're agitated? Know it calmly. How do you sense? Sense calmly. Calmly implies that you have a little bit of time to know, a little bit of time to sense, a little bit of time to look and see. And that's the beginning of this wonderful journey of mindfulness. To know calmly, to sense calmly, and to see calmly. And as you do that... How you sense, know, and feel will deepen and fill out and become richer and richer and enrich your life in phenomenal ways that it cannot be enriched if you live in the world of aboutness and you're unfortunate enough to win a big lottery. That's so much about the world and the pleasures of the world. And that's not where success is. That's not where the deep pleasure is. That's not where the deep sense of fulfillment in this life of ours, the deep fulfillment comes from these deep places that are often overlooked.

So that's mindfulness practice. And that's kind of little synopsis of what's happening at this retreat. Imagine that. People devoted a whole month to doing this. Maybe now you can appreciate why it's our mecca. And it turns out the mecca is really in you. But, you know, once a lifetime go really into it deep. So those are my thoughts. And we have about five minutes before the official end, and then we have our tea. So I think it's very nice if those of you who have a little bit of time to stay and would like to turn to two or three people next to you and say hello and greet them and... And if you want to share something about this talk, something evocative from it that was interesting for you, that might be nice. And those of you who are going to be leaving, thank you for being here. So I'll ring a bell in a few minutes when it's time to end the conversation. So just look around if you turn to people, make sure no one's left alone. Just everyone's included.