

Mindful & Grateful for Lessons in Freedom

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The way the Buddha defines mindfulness, it's a neutral quality—simply the ability to remember what was done or said a long time ago. What makes it skillful mindfulness or right mindfulness is when you remember the right things: things that are useful.

Like as we're meditating right now: We're remembering that it's a good thing to stay with the breath. We remember the different instructions that tell us what we can do with the breath and what we can do with the mind so that we can get the breath and the mind to stay together. We're trying to develop a state of concentration. And from the concentration, we want to be able to see the mind clearly—to see particularly where it's causing itself unnecessary suffering.

Those are all good things to remember. And when we think about good things to remember, it's an interesting linguistic feature of Pali that another word that refers to remembering what was done or said, *kataññu*, means gratitude. Think about the things other people have taught you that were actually useful, actually helpful, or the examples they gave in their behavior that were useful examples for how you should behave. You should treat all those lessons with gratitude. The more gratitude you have for those lessons, the more likely you are to apply them.

So while we're meditating, it's not just a neutral, impersonal technique. We should have a sense of gratitude for the fact that we have these teachings, we have these instructions. There was someone who, a long time ago, said or did something that's really useful for us right now. Of course, the sense of gratitude grows as you practice, and you begin to see the results.

They say that on the night Ajaan Mun gained awakening—right after he gained awakening—the first thing he did was get up and bow down to the Buddha again and again and again out of gratitude for all the Buddha's instructions that enabled him to find something of real value inside himself. Until we reach that point, we may not have that intense a sense of gratitude, but it still is good to remind ourselves that we're fortunate to have these teachings. Think of all the difficulties the Buddha went through in order to find them and how precarious it has been sometimes throughout the centuries that these teachings have stayed alive. But there were people who made the effort, all the way down to our teachers.

So come to the meditation with a sense of gratitude that it's something you can do. Even before you see the results, when you look at the teachings you realize

the compassion that lies behind them. One of the things we've learned from post-modern theory is the extent to which, when people teach you, they're often trying to exert power over you. But you look at the Buddha's teachings and there's almost nothing of that. It's all, "These are things that are going to be useful for you," or "These are things that are going to help you solve your problems," and "These are the things that are going to show you freedom." It's in pointing out the various ways in which we are free and don't usually realize the fact that the teachings are especially valuable.

The Buddha starts with generosity, pointing out that it is an act of freedom. In that moment when you're generous, you're free from your greed. You're free from your attachment. You're able to rise above these things. You get a sense of your worth as a person and that there's a higher level of happiness that comes when you don't simply give in to your appetites. You see the benefits of sharing, and you realize you're free to make that choice.

Similarly with the precepts: You're free to choose to behave in ways that are harmless. Now, you may have to make sacrifices in order to do so, but you realize that your worth as a person lies in your ability, your freedom, to stick with that choice because you're also free to be harmful. If we didn't have freedom, there would be no worth to our actions at all. But because we do have the freedom to be either harmful or harmless, and we choose to be harmless, it gives rise to a justified sense of self-esteem.

And here as we meditate, we begin with something very simple—the way you breathe. You're free to breathe in any way you want. The Buddha's simply pointing out that this is a very useful area to explore your freedom. You can try long breathing and short breathing. As Ajaan Lee points out, you can also try deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, and slow. You can think of the breath in lots of different ways.

In fact, you're free in all the types of fabrication you bring to the present moment. There's bodily fabrication, the breath. There's verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation. You're free to direct your thoughts anywhere. Well, direct them to the breath, because it's going to be a useful place to direct them. And evaluate the breath. What kind of breathing is comfortable? What kind of breathing is the mind willing to stay with for long periods of time? When you get a sense of comfort, what do you do with it? You spread it around the body so that your awareness can fill the body and get a grounding.

Then there's mental fabrication, your perceptions and your feelings. You have more room for creating feelings in the body and in the mind than you might have thought. The present moment is not just a given. The way you breathe and the way

you perceive the breath will have an effect on how you feel it. So what kind of perceptions can you play with? What kind of perceptions will be most useful? Ajaan Lee talks about the breath channels of the body and the different levels of the breath: the obvious breath that we breathe in and breathe out, and also the subtler breath that goes through the breath channels around the nerves and the blood vessels. Then there's the still breath that lies deeper still.

These levels of breath energy are all there. And for the fact that there have been people who teach us about this, we should be both mindful and grateful. The more gratitude you bring, as I said, the more likely you are to apply the teachings. And the more benefit you get from them, the more gratitude you have.

So we learn how to explore this area of freedom we have in the present moment. Try to make the most of it because the Buddha said there's something else: We're also free not to suffer. We begin to see, as we get the mind into concentration, that we're getting pretty close to not suffering at all. But as it happens, the more you're used to this level of ease in the mind, the more sensitive you become and the more demanding you become as to what really counts as well-being.

You begin to see that, even in the various levels of jhana, there's still some stress. As the Buddha points out, we don't have to just stay there and accept that. We can start exploring that. What are you doing to cause the stress? When you find the perception causing the stress, can you change it to another perception that's less stressful? You're free to do that. And you keep exploring this issue of what you're doing to cause unnecessary stress until you get to the point where you realize that wherever you go in concentration, there's going to be some stress. Is there an alternative? The Buddha says yes. And you're free to find the alternative.

This is where the freedom gets more radical. Up to that point, you're either staying in one spot or moving to another spot. That's the choice you have. Then you realize that either way you're going to encounter stress, and you find that there's another alternative. That alternative opens things up in ways that you wouldn't imagine. And that's the real freedom the Buddha's talking about.

You realize that his intention was to free us. As he said, he dwelled with an unrestricted awareness, and he was teaching other people how to dwell with unrestricted awareness—totally free.

So it's good to keep that in mind, to be mindful and grateful at the same time that there was someone who made the effort, found that this was possible, and then made the effort to leave those teachings behind. You read about his 45 years as a teacher, and it wasn't easy. There were a lot of people who put up resistance.

You can imagine the irony he saw in that. He was trying to offer people freedom, and they felt attacked.

The proper response, as I say, is gratitude and mindfulness. As the Buddha pointed out, a teacher's duty is to offer protection, and the primary protection he offered was to show us that we do have freedom of choice. The few times he would go out and argue with other teachers were when they denied freedom of choice because, as he said, that leaves you unprotected. You don't feel you can do anything at all. You're trapped. Whatever suffering comes up, you're stuck with it. So his first gift is to remind us we do have freedom of choice, and the choices can take us very far. That's his protection.

There's another connection in Pali. The word *saranam* can mean both a refuge and something you keep in mind. So here again you keep in mind what the Buddha taught. You have gratitude for what he taught, and it will provide you with protection—the protection that comes when you know that you're free to choose. You're ultimately going to be free to choose not to suffer at all.

Always keep that in mind.