Mindfulness Island

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The Buddha says to make yourself an island, to make yourself a refuge. He says you do that by establishing mindfulness. Now if you think of mindfulness meaning just awareness, it doesn’t help you very much. But then you remember that when the Buddha used the term mindfulness he talked about the faculty of the memory, things you keep in mind. This is where it becomes helpful. Because there are values you want to keep in mind. Especially as you leave the monastery and go out on your own. You have to rely on yourself, to train yourself, to hold the values of the Dhamma in mind. Because the world is not going to hold them for you. You can use the internet, to listen to Dhamma talks, listen to chanting. But as you go through the day you have to carry these values around with you. The importance of your virtue, the importance of right view, things you don’t want to lose. So when you’re faced with loss of other kinds in the world, you realize you can hold on to these things they can’t be taken away from you. People can make it difficult for you to hold by the precepts, and they can make it difficult for you to hold by right view. But you’re working now on the strength that you can withstand those influences, if you remember to, if you keep them in mind. If you remember the values of the Dhamma, keep in mind the values of the Dhamma. Then you can rely on yourself. If you forget, then you’re back in the river. You’ve lost your island. So it’s important that you learn how to keep these things in mind. It’s good to start the day, every day, meditating and reflecting on the values of the Dhamma. We focus on the breath as our main topic for meditation. You don’t use that as your only topic. It’s your home base. But as you realize that you’re facing a world where the values are very much opposed to the Dhamma, you have to reinforce your determination that you’re going to stick with the Dhamma. You start with goodwill. If you really have goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, for other beings, you’ve got to hold by your precepts, and you’ve got to hold by right view. Then, as the Buddha said, you have to have determination. The first determination is not to neglect discernment. What would it mean to neglect discernment? It would mean to not pay attention to the long-term consequences of your actions. Here again, it’s so easy in this world where everything is done by quarterly measurements or day-to-day measurements. Everybody thinks in the short term. Although the Buddha does recommend that you focus on the present moment, it’s not for the present moment for its own sake. That’s not to say narrowly focus there. You focus on the present moment because you know there are things in the future you’ve got to prepare for. Keep those in mind. The fact that you’re going to die someday. The world wants you to forget that. They want you to focus on other things. But you’ve got to keep that in mind. When you die, what’s going to happen? Where are you going to go? What have you prepared? That’s why we have those five reflections. We’re subject to aging, illness, and death. Subject to separation. These things are going to happen. All we have to rely on are the principles of that fifth reflection. They’re the owners of your actions. Whatever you do, for good or for evil, to that will you fall heir. So what kind of legacy are you giving to yourself? What kind of will are you writing for yourself? Keep that in mind. Make that your priority as you go through the day. That becomes your island. You have to keep reminding yourself that the long term is what’s really important. There’s a sutta where the Buddha is talking to the monks. They’ve just seen a huge fire and he asks them, “Which would be better, to lie down hugging a nice young maiden or to lie down hugging a fire?” And the monk’s playing the straight man and says, “Oh, I’d rather lie down hugging a maiden.” And the Buddha says, “Well, if it’s a monk who’s not really a monk, a monk who’s,” the Buddha says, “rotten and oozing inside, it would be better for him to lie down hugging the fire.” That goes against a lot of our immediate knee-jerk reactions. But the Buddha’s saying, “Think about the long term.” If you lie down hugging a fire, it would cause, as he said, it would cause you death or death-like pain. But it wouldn’t send you to a bad destination. But if you’re not good in the practice, if you’ve neglected the practice, and you give in to sensuality, you give in to all your other defilements, then lying down hugging a nice maiden would take you down to hell. So you have to think about these things. These are the things you have to keep in mind. When the Buddha told the Night of His Awakening, the chanted version, he had three knowledges. Now, as he said, in other places there was a lot more that he didn’t talk about. He compared it to what he did teach to a handful of leaves, compared to the leaves in the forest. The leaves in the forest were the things he learned in his awakening. He didn’t tell much about what he awakened to. So the things that he did talk about were important. Sometimes we had the belief in karma and rebirth dismissed as simply a carryover from other beliefs in his time. But if you actually look at what people had to say about karma and rebirth in his time, they’re very different from what he had to say. Some people said that there was no such thing as karma, that you had no choices. Or it wasn’t even real. Or if your actions were things that you chose, they wouldn’t have any consequences. That was taught. And some thought that your karma did have an influence on your rebirth, and some thought that it didn’t. As for how it worked in terms of rebirth, some of the beliefs were really strange. My favorite one is the belief that when you die you go up to the moon and you feed off the moon, which is why the moon looks so muddled, like cheese that people have been nibbling on. And then eventually you fall down as rain, and you turn into a plant. And then from that plant, it depends on who eats you and what eats you, you turn into that kind of animal. Really bizarre. So when the Buddha taught that your actions are real, that they are determined by the quality of your intention, and the results are determined by the quality of your intention, and they do lead to different destinations after you die, he wasn’t just picking up beliefs from his time. He used to remind you that this is really important to keep in mind. Reminds me of that cartoon in the New Yorker. A group of business people are sitting around a table, and one of them is announcing, “Well, we’ve improved our percentage in the 15 to 20 year, 24 year old age group, but we lost our immortal souls.” In Buddhism we don’t talk about immortal souls, but you could say, “We’re headed to hell.” Put that cartoon on your refrigerator, and use what the Buddha said are the guardians of the world, a sense of shame and a sense of compunction. Shame is here we’re talking about the healthy sense of shame. That’s the opposite of shamelessness. Think about a John Mun, a John Lee, or the Buddha, or any of the great teachers. Think of them as watching you as you go through the day. What would they say? What would they think? Realizing that they would hold you to a high standard, but it’s out of compassion. Have the senses you would want to please them. As for compunction, again, think of the long term. Your actions are going to have consequences, and you would rather not add to the suffering that’s already there in your life. Try to keep these two qualities in mind. Keep in mind the fact that someone has, in this world system we live in, found the end of suffering, found that it’s something that can be attained through human effort, and the teaching of that person is still alive, and the opportunities to practice are still there. And it’s not the case that modern life presents difficulties, and life in the time of the Buddha did not present difficulties. They had their difficulties then. Think of Kimmasena, did he come here to see the Buddha? He asked him, “What have you been doing today?” Again, in a remarkable bout of frankness, he says, “Oh, the typical things of someone who’s obsessed with power, trying to maintain his power.” Those issues were there back in those days too. The Buddha gives him an image to hold in mind. He says, “Suppose someone were to come from the East and say there’s a mountain moving in from the East, crushing all beings in its path.” Again, this is reliable. Another reliable person coming from the South, saying, “Well, there’s a mountain coming from the South, crushing all beings in its path.” Another person from the West, from the North, two more mountains moving in from the West, from the North, four mountains in total moving in, crushing all beings. Given that there would be this horrendous loss of life, what would you do? Thinking, he says, “What else can I do but practice the Dhamma?” Then he says, “Well, I warn you, aging and death are moving in.” Again, crushing all beings in their path. So what are you going to do? The king says, “What else can I do but practice the Dhamma?” And that’s the king speaking. So keep that in mind. These mountains are moving in. And how they move in on you, the details of how it happens. It’s not just a question of what you’re doing to prepare. Knowing that you’re going to have to give up this life at some point. What are you going to take with you? What have you prepared for the next life? The Buddha says, “If you’ve done good, then that goodness will greet you as you come from the other side.” Like relatives greeting someone. A relative of theirs has long gone away, coming back home. The person, what she says, that keeps repeating, “Home, home, home.” You’re coming home to your good deeds. As for your bad deeds, it’ll be a different welcome. A harsh one. So try to keep these things in mind. This is the kind of mindfulness that becomes your refuge, that becomes your island. Something you can really depend on. It requires an effort on your part, because the values of the world are screaming in your ears, flashing in front of your eyes. And you’ve got to resist. So remember, you’re here for a short sojourn. And you want to survive this sojourn. You want to survive with your goodness intact. With your goodness not only intact, but also plentiful. And that way you can leave some goodness behind for the rest of the world and be assured that it’s going to go with you too. Keep that in mind.

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