

Karma as an Island

July 12, 2016

Focus on your breath. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, remember to stay here. That's what mindfulness is all about—the ability to remember. You establish an intention in the mind that you want the mind to settle down, and you don't want to forget that intention. Otherwise, it doesn't bear fruit.

This is one of the reasons why we sometimes use a meditation word with the breath: *bud*—in, *dho*—out. *Buddho* means awake. It's the quality we're trying to develop here. But the word itself isn't as important as the quality of mindfulness—that ability to remember, to keep things in mind. This is where your refuge is. The Buddha talks about taking yourself as a refuge or making yourself an island. He says you do that by developing mindfulness—right mindfulness.

We have that reflection on aging, illness, and death to remind yourselves that there are a lot of things we can't depend on. But then there's that reflection on karma. That's where our refuge is. If you look at it, it says: "We're owners of our actions, heir to our actions, whatever we do for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir." And you can focus either on the good or the evil. Karma is scary. There are a lot of things we do that are unskillful and will bear results, one way or another. It's so easy to slip and forget. That's one of the reasons why you want to be mindful.

But there's also the good side to karma—there's a lot of good that you can develop with your actions. When the Buddha teaches karma, that's what he focuses on—the good that can be done. This is why the reflection on karma is meant to give rise to confidence—that you have it within you that you can do this. If your habits are unskillful, you can change them. They're not written in stone. Past karma doesn't control everything. In fact, your primary experience is what your intentions are right now.

When the Buddha analyzes the causes for suffering, he lines them up so that old karma, which is your experience of the senses, actually comes after your intentions. In other words, you approach the present moment with certain intentions, and then you'll find what you're looking for. If you don't find what you're looking for, you just keep looking until you get it.

This means that your present intentions have a lot of power. You want to make the most of that. You can bring an expectation of suffering into the present; or you can bring an expectation that there is a way out of suffering. It's your

choice, so remember that you have that choice. And learn to develop it, so that you're looking for the right things in the present moment that will maximize your ability to put an end to suffering.

For example, when a panic attack comes—something in the mind triggers something in the body and the hormones get released, and then your body is acting in a certain way, in a panicked way: Even though the original panic is gone, you've got the results left over, and it'll take some time to get them out of your system. Now, you can read what's going on in the body as a sign that you're still panicking or you can read it simply as, "Okay, that's the result of an action that I took a few seconds ago, but I don't have to keep with that panic."

That's using your ability to shape the present moment with your present intentions. You look at it in such a way that you're not going to be overwhelmed by results of past actions. That's something you have to keep in mind, because it's so easy to slip in and read things in the old way that you used to read them. But that old way was causing a lot of suffering. Do you want to keep with it? Or do you want to change? There may be some appeal to that old way of reading things, but when you admit that the suffering there is not worth it, that's when you can look for a new way. And that's what the teachings are for—to give you some guidance on what the new ways of thinking are, so that you remember them.

As the Buddha said, the whole of the holy life is having admirable friends. That doesn't mean that the Buddha, as our admirable friend, is going to do the work for us. It does mean, though, that he's done a lot of the exploration for us, and he's taught us things that we can keep in mind. So our ability to remember them—that's going to be our refuge: to remember them, and to apply them.

Now, the qualities of right mindfulness—not just mindfulness—include the ability to remember, but also alertness, to notice what's you're doing; and ardency, your desire to apply this knowledge in the most skillful way possible. So all of that together is going to be your refuge.

The teachings we get from the teacher are not there so that we can keep going back to the teacher again and again and again, in the hope that he's going to look after us. They're there to remind us: "Okay, this is what you do—remember this." That way, your memory becomes your teacher that you can go back to. You want to internalize those teachings.

Years back, after Ajaan Fuang passed away, the first year after his passing was pretty rough in the monastery. A lot of people were jockeying for power one way or another, and there was a lot of conflict. It was during that period that his teachings kept coming back to me, about how to deal with conflict, how to deal with difficult situations. And my ability to remember those teachings: That's what

kept me going through that experience. They were his teachings, but I had made them mine with my ability to remember them and to apply them.

That's what you've got to do with the teachings that you gain from the Buddha and his noble disciples and the great ajaans—or wherever you get those lessons. Sometimes you get them from your own actions. In fact, those are often the most important ones. You apply the teachings and then you find that there are details that were not contained in the teachings but they work for you: Then that's the lesson you want to remember.

So your mindfulness combined with the alertness as to what's actually going on and your ardency to shape things in the best way possible: That's what's going to be your refuge. And that's what'll see you through. You've got to have the confidence that acting on these qualities, developing them, you can form an island for yourself.

If the Buddha could have taken us all to awakening, he would have done it; he was a compassionate person. The same with all the great ajaans. But they realize that it's something that requires skill, and that each person has to develop that skill for him or herself. The advice is there; the examples are there. You want to remember those and learn how to apply them so that you can make the most of this ability you have to shape the present moment with your present intentions.

You want those intentions to be well informed. As the Buddha said, they're shaped by our views, shaped by our respect or disrespect for the teachings of the noble ones. So if you have respect for those teachings, you want to understand them as best you can. And you understand them through applying them. You begin to see that there are certain areas that you didn't understand so you have to use your ingenuity to figure them out.

It's the same as when you learning a subject and then you start teaching it. You suddenly realize that there are areas you didn't understand fully, because you can't explain them to other people. You've got to go back and do some more research on your own. In the same way, there are times when you picked up some teachings and you apply them and they don't quite work. Maybe the teachings weren't all that skillful or maybe you just didn't understand them properly. So you've got to check. But either way, it's your reading of the situation and your ingenuity that will adjust things so that they do work. This is how you depend on yourself.

You can lean on other people for a while, but they're allowing you to lean on them so that you can eventually learn what you need to so that you can stand up straight and depend on yourself, so you can be that island in the midst of the flood—the flood waters rise but the island is above the flood waters.

That's how you provide yourself a place of safety, and how you honor that wish you have for true happiness—a happiness that doesn't harm anyone and isn't harmed by anything. That's the wish that the Buddha has us honor, and he teaches us how to do it. But part of that means that we have to realize that there are dangers out there. If your happiness is based on trying to deny the dangers and the changes in the world, it's not based on truth. If it's not based on truth, it's going to get swept away. You want a happiness that can look at aging, illness, and death and not be fazed by them—because it's got something better, something that those things cannot touch. That's where the real island is.

And it's through developing these qualities—mindfulness, alertness, ardency—that we get to the real safety that that island offers.