

## *Protection for the Holidays*

*November 21, 2016*

One of the first things you notice about Buddhists in Thailand is that a lot of them wear amulets around their neck. When I first noticed this, I asked one of my friends why people wore amulets, and he said, “For a sense of protection.” So I asked, “What kind of protection do they give?” And he said he didn’t know about other people, but in his own case, the amulet was there to remind him: If he was going to do something unskillful, he could feel the amulet against his chest, reminding him the Buddha would not appreciate or approve of what he was doing.

This is how the practice of mindfulness acts as a protection. A lot of passages in the Canon talk about it, that this is your refuge. You make the Dhamma your refuge, you make yourself your refuge, by practicing the four establishing of mindfulness. When you think of practicing mindfulness, think about that passage with the acrobats. If you practice and devote yourself to the practice of mindfulness, you’re protecting yourself and you’re protecting others. The protection there comes from the fact that mindfulness reminds you how to look at your life in a way that helps you to know what the skillful and unskillful things would be to do.

Here, of course, mindfulness doesn’t mean just being aware or nonreactive. It has its original meaning, a meaning from before the time of the Buddha, and the meaning that the Buddha himself took on: It’s a faculty of your memory. What makes mindfulness right is that you remember the right things. For instance, when the Buddha talks about the six sense spheres, he’s not just saying that you watch sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations arise and pass away. He says that you notice when you’re creating a fetter by the way you look at things or the way you listen. Then you figure out how to let go of that fetter, and how to arrange so it doesn’t come back. So mindfulness is an active process, and it reminds you this is what you have to watch out for.

This is good to remember as you go home and visit your family: You don’t want to forget the frames of reference. You don’t want to forget how to establish mindfulness. You don’t want to forget the Buddha’s way of looking at things. You go home for the holidays: Desire comes up, greed comes up, and in the context of family, okay, that’s a good thing. After all, this is the holiday for greed, the holiday

for everybody to get together and get a little bit drunk and be friendly—as if being drunk and being friendly were two things that went together well. That’s on a blatant level, but there are a lot of more subtle things going on, too—old stories and continuing narratives in the family—and it’s all too easy to slip into those. A lot of people ask, “How do I fit Dhamma practice into that context?” Well, if Dhamma practice fits into that context, it’s not doing its job.

When it’s doing its job, it’s going to create some awkward moments, when you suddenly catch yourself doing something that you’ve done many, many times before, the games people play with one another, and you remember, “Oh, this is not skillful.” You then have to think of some other way of dealing with the situation. So rather than think of fitting Dhamma practice into that context, try to fit that situation into Dhamma practice. In other words, you hold the various frames of reference in mind. When a feeling comes up—say, of pleasure or displeasure—you have to ask yourself, “Is this the kind of pleasure that will be good for the mind, or is it going to be bad?”

You could just say, “Well, this is the holiday season, so it’s time to go along with the pleasure.” But no. Some pleasures are bad for the mind. Not all of them, though. A lot of pleasures that are good for the mind. And so you can’t just watch pleasures and pains come and go. You have to figure out what kind of pleasure is going to be skillful. Remember the Buddha’s teachings to Sakka, the deva king. There are some forms of joy that are skillful and should be pursued and other forms of joy that are not. Some pains should be pursued and others should not. Some forms of equanimity should be pursued and others should not. Remember that our feelings are not handed to us ready-made. As the Buddha said, there’s an element of fabrication in terms of which feelings you’re going to focus on, and which ones you’re going to ignore. When you focus on certain potentials, you actually turn them into full-fledged feelings. So how are you going to fabricate something skillful out of the pleasures of being home? xx

That’s what the framework of mindfulness reminds you of, and that’s how it protects you. When you abandon that framework, you lose your compass—or the practice loses its momentum—when you go home. You take on a different framework: the stories of the family; the stories of your friends; the stories of the ways you’ve been interacting with them, and how this particular interaction is going to continue. If you hold that as a framework, then the Dhamma gets shredded into little pieces. The pieces can maybe fit in here, fit in there, but they lack coherence. You’ve got to make the framework of the establishing of mindfulness the framework with which you approach situations at home and at work. That’s how mindfulness protects you. It gives you things to remember.

The same with mind states: You don't just watch passion come and go, or aversion come and go. Some forms of passion are skillful, some are not. Being averse to doing something unskillful is actually a good aversion to have. And again, these are things that you can promote or you can demote depending on how they fit into the framework.

So mindfulness doesn't hit you against the head, or hit you against the chest. It's not like an amulet, but it should serve the purpose of reminding you what should be done and what shouldn't be done. Remember how the Buddha gave protection to all of his students. That, he said, was one of the duties of a teacher. And the protection he gave was in giving them instructions on how to figure out what should and should not be done. He said that any teacher that didn't provide those instructions was not providing anything of worth, anything of value at all. And that's the protection, those are the shoulds and should-nots, that you can hold to and trust.

So work on keeping these things in mind, developing your powers of mindfulness. This is what formal practice is good for. Because the nature of the mind is that moments of attention come up, they don't last all that long, and you have to pay attention again. And pay attention again. If you want to stick with something, you have to keep reminding yourself, "This is what I want to work with." Now, that's mindfulness. The mindfulness is what provides the thread that sews all those moments of attention together. You can strengthen it by asking questions, taking an interest in what you're doing. That gives you more motivation to keep stitching, stitching, stitching those moments together.

So realize that this is a challenge. You're going out into the land of wrong views, so how do you keep right view together? If everything goes smoothly, it's a sign that the Dhamma is not doing its work. After all, the whole purpose of the Dhamma is to get you to change, to abandon unskillful qualities, to develop skillful ones. That requires changing the way you do things. As the Buddha said, if people couldn't change the way they do things, there'd be no purpose in teaching them. The reason that he saw that it was worthwhile teaching was because people can change their ways.

So hopefully the Dhamma will bang up against some of your old habits while you're at home and make you rethink them. That's a sign that it's doing its work and providing you with a protection you need. Otherwise, who's going to protect you? You're the one who has to protect your practice. The people around you are not there to protect your practice. They may even be taking potshots at it. So you have to value your practice, value your state of mind, value the skillfulness of your actions. In Ajaan Lee's image, it's like having a bowl of good food. You want to

protect it from the flies.

In the Buddha's image, it's having a bowl brimful with oil on your head. There's a beauty queen singing and dancing to one side, and a crowd of people getting all worked up about the beauty queen on the other side. You're walking between them. There's a man behind you with a sword raised, and if a drop of that oil spills, he's going to cut off your head. And the Buddha asked, in a situation like that, would you allow your attention to get diverted? Well, no. The beauty queen stands for all the nice things out there in the world; the crowd, of course, stands for your defilements wanting to get all the nice things, but it's your mindfulness of the body that provides you with a good foundation. That's what keeps the bowl of oil in balance. And then from the mindfulness of the body, you can be mindful of your feelings and mind states and the different list of dhammas or mental qualities that give you guidance on what should and should not be done. If you protect them, they'll protect you.