

Protection Through Mindfulness

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The Buddha often talks about mindfulness as a form of protection, in that it protects you from doing unskillful things—because you have a fund of knowledge, and if you're mindful, you have it at your fingertips. You can remember things that you've done in the past, things you've learned, things you've heard, the lessons you've learned, and then you can apply them to what you're doing now. Without that kind of memory, without that fund of knowledge that you can call to mind, you're helpless, at the whim of whatever emotion comes passing through.

So we try to be mindful, and we try to be mindful in the right way, establishing our awareness right here, because if you're off wandering in other thought worlds, you can forget a lot of things: The lessons you've learned may not seem relevant; you can pretend that they don't even exist. It's one of the reasons why they have those questions: "What would the Buddha do?" "What would Ajaan Mun say?"

If you're still in the present moment, conscious that you're practicing, it's easier to call those things to mind. If you're off wandering in sensual fantasies, it's very easy to put up a wall: a wall of forgetfulness, a wall that tries to make the fact of the Buddha's existence, the fact of the Buddha's teachings, the facts of the ajaans and their teachings all seem irrelevant. And that's when you're left helpless, defenseless—because the biggest dangers in life come not from things outside, not from viruses, not from other people's actions. They come from what you're doing. That's one of the first lessons of right mindfulness: You want to look into your suffering, look into the dangers you're facing, see what you're doing to create them, and then try to protect yourself by not creating them anymore.

The different analogies and similes the Buddha gives for mindfulness give some ideas of the different ways in which mindfulness can provide protection. For example, the simile of the man whose head is on fire: Mindfulness in that case keeps reminding him, "You've got to focus on *this* above everything else. You've got to put out the fire. You can't get distracted by other things." Certain things are urgent; certain things have to take priority. In this case, of course, the priority is the state of your mind, the qualities of the mind you're acting on, the qualities of the mind you're trying to abandon. So give the issues of the mind top priority: That's one of the lessons of right mindfulness. That's the kind of protection that that image calls to mind.

Then there's the image of the gatekeeper. He's guarding a frontier fortress. There are enemies about, so he has to be very careful who he lets into the

fortress, who he doesn't. Here the protection is recognizing what's going to be unskillful in your mind, recognizing what's going to be skillful, and then acting on that knowledge. When you're sitting here meditating and the mind starts wandering off into a fantasy, into thoughts of ill will, thoughts of restlessness, all too often you don't recognize these things as unskillful. The mind can tell itself, "Oh, this sensual object here is really attractive, it's worthy of my desire. Or that person did something really awful, that's worthy of my will." Sometimes we don't even think about our ill will as ill will—we just go for the feeling and we side with it, we take it on, we identify ourselves with it.

The image of the gatekeeper is to remind you that you have to keep asking yourself: "What's the most skillful way to deal with what's coming up in the mind?" The things that come bubbling up in the mind are not necessarily going to be to your advantage. Some of those things could destroy your goodness, could destroy your well-being, so you've got to be very careful about who you let in, who you don't. You have to look at things in terms of where they're coming from, what emotion they're coming from, and where they'll lead.

Remember how the Buddha got on the path the very first time—when he divided his thoughts into two types, skillful and unskillful, and then from there decided what he was going to think, what he was not going to think. His likes and dislikes didn't get into the issue at all. That's how you protect yourself, reminding yourself that your thoughts do have their consequences. This means you have to be careful about which ones you allow into the mind, which ones you embroider, which ones you take on, and which ones you put aside.

There's an image with a similar message: the simile of the quail. The quail, if it stays in the field, is safe because it can hide behind rocks, and the hawk can't get it. If it wanders out away from the field where there are no rocks to hide behind, then the hawk can get it. In other words, you've got to keep your thoughts within bounds, keep your interests within bounds.

This lesson applies all throughout the day. All too often we forget that the things we think about in the course of the day will have an impact on the mind that lasts well beyond the time the thought has passed. You can think about thoughts in the morning that can make it very difficult for the mind to settle down in the evening. They hang on—their influence hangs on. So watch where you allow your mind to wander. Remember the consequences of your thoughts. You want to be thinking in a way that allows the mind to settle down easily, smoothly, at will.

That means you have to be very strict in terms of sense restraint, and particularly restraint over the mind: where you look, where you listen, *why* you look, *why* you listen. The choice there all comes from the mind. Upasika Kee makes this point: When we talk about sense restraint, it's really *mind*-restraint

at the senses. When you can exercise restraint there and in that way, then you've got yourself protected.

Then there's the simile of the cook. The cook is mindful to notice what his master likes, what food he likes, what food he praises, what food he reaches for. Sometimes the master doesn't say but just shows what he likes by what he eats. If the cook notices, he can then fix more of that food, and he'll get rewarded for pleasing the master. If he doesn't notice, if he just keeps on fixing whatever he wants without paying attention to whether the person eating likes it or not, he's not going to get rewarded.

So listen to the message of the image: You protect yourself by paying attention to what works and what doesn't work. You have to be observant. You may have read all kinds of things about what the meditation should be like. You may have a big fund of knowledge, but if you don't actually learn how to observe your mind to see what kind of breathing it likes—or if it doesn't like breathing to begin with, what other object you may focus on to get it to settle down: If you don't notice these things, concentration won't come. So you protect yourself by being observant, watching your own actions, watching the results, and learning to develop some skill.

Think of Ajaan Lee's examples. You're learning to make clay tiles. In the beginning, you simply learn how to make them so that they're strong and don't break, how to fire them properly. That takes a lot of trial and error right there. But then once you've mastered that skill, there are more skills you can master. You can try different shapes, different colors. Expand on your skill. It all comes from being very observant of your clay and your sand and your water and the fire that's used to fire the clay.

In other words, there's a lot you have to learn by looking at your own actions. Teachers can teach you only so much. The books can teach you only so much. Your real protection is that you're observant and you're paying attention at the right spot: what you're doing and the results that you're getting. If you keep on thinking: "Well, people should be this way, people should be that way, or I should be able to say what I want, and people should just learn how to accept that," you're never going to learn anything. You have to notice: "If I speak in this way, act in this way, and everybody gets upset, maybe I shouldn't speak and act in that way." Especially at a time like this when a sense of harmony in a group is really important.

The same principle applies inside. If focusing on one spot doesn't work, try another spot. Use your ingenuity. Be observant. That's how you protect yourself. That's how your skill as a meditator grows, so that the protection becomes more and more all-around. The meditation really does become your refuge, and you yourself become a person you can trust.