

A Refuge in Mindfulness

July 28, 2021

When the Buddha talks about finding an admirable friend, we have to remember that the purpose is that we ultimately want to become good friends for ourselves. The outside friend sets an example, and it's a valuable example. There are a lot of things you could learn from being around a really good person—in the flesh, as opposed to reading about such a person in books.

We have only a faint idea of what the Buddha was like and how inspiring his example was. But given the fact that he left his teachings—and he left an organization to maintain his teachings, so that people could live with one another, pass on the teachings both in words and in examples—it's as if we have at least something of the Buddha with us so that we can keep him in mind.

This is what it means to take refuge. The word *sarana*, “refuge,” can also mean “something that you remember”—something you keep in mind. This is part of the mindfulness you want to develop as you go out into the world.

Because there's a lot out there that would like you to forget about the Buddha. All those advertisements are based on the premise that what the Buddha taught really doesn't make any difference in life; what really makes a difference is an immediate pleasure—something that somebody can sell to you.

Corporations are buying up our water now so they can sell us water. They're buying up houses so that people won't be able to own houses anymore, and will have to rent them from the corporations. As the Buddha said, “Everywhere you look, things are being laid claim to.” And they'd like you to forget that the Buddha said there *is* a way out.

So, for your own sanity and your own safety, you have to keep remembering: There was a Buddha; he left teachings behind that you can practice, and they really are worth carrying with you wherever you go.

When he was about to pass away, he called the monks together and gave them two important teachings. One was the list of the seven sets of the Wings to Awakening, and the other was to tell them to make themselves a refuge. How do they do that? By practicing one of those sets, which is the four establishments of mindfulness.

So, by practicing mindfulness in its full implications, you're being a good friend to yourself. You're providing yourself something you can depend on, regardless of what other people do, regardless of what happens outside. By practicing these four frames of reference—establishing mindfulness in them in the

proper way—you're providing yourself with good qualities inside that you can really depend on: like we're practicing right now, focused on the body in and of itself—in other words, focused on the breath as you're feeling it right now—the body in and of itself, as opposed to the body in the world.

The body in the world is when you're thinking about whether the body's up to the work you have to do, whether it's strong enough, whether it looks good enough to get by in the world: all the issues that the world would have you think about, or that you would think about when you think about your place in the world. You put those aside.

That right there is an important statement. One of your ways of getting out of the world is to look at things just in and of themselves, without reference to the world. Remember, the Buddha's approach to dealing with becoming as a whole: Once you get into craving and clinging, becoming's going to have to follow. Then there's craving for becoming, but there's also craving for not-becoming. In other words, either you want a particular state where you inhabit a particular world, or you want to see that state destroyed. Either way, the Buddha says, you get yourself entangled in more becoming.

The way out is to simply see the processes in the mind as processes that would lead up to becoming if you assumed a world or a self around them. But here you just look at them as processes, and you see there's nothing much there. How could you build anything of solid worth out of these things?

Now, for mindfulness, all you have to do is learn how to look at things as processes, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And you do it with three qualities: mindfulness—keeping in mind all the things you need to remember to do this properly; alertness—watching what you're actually doing; and then ardency—which is the discernment factor there—which wants to do it well, realizing that, of all the skills you could develop, this is the most important one, so you want to give it as much time as you can, as much attention as you can.

Here again, the world will make inroads. It's not the case that it'll step out of the way for you to practice. You have to push. It has to be your decision how much you're going to do formal meditation, and how much you're going to try to maintain mindfulness as you go through the day.

The mindfulness is there so that you can remember: What's skillful? What's not skillful? How you recognize unskillful things when they start in the mind; how you recognize skillful things when they start in the mind; remembering what the duties are with regard to them; remembering what's worked in the past. You don't run these things through the mind all the time, but you try to have them near at hand.

The best way to do that is to get the mind as still as you can with the breath, because, if you've been working with the breath, you tend to have certain associations with it. Breathing in a certain way will remind you, "I used to breathe in this way when I was meditating, and my mind was centered *here*. This sort of thing came up, and I was able to let it go."

The important thing is that you remember how the rules for being mindful outside of formal meditation and inside formal meditation are not that different. All too often we tell ourselves, "Well, there are certain things I can't think about while I'm meditating, but when I'm not formally meditating, it's okay." In some cases that's true; in some cases, it's not. Anything that's unskillful: There's no time for that. As for things that are skillful, there are things that would be inappropriate while you're trying to get the mind centered; at other times, though, it's appropriate to think about them.

Learn to get some order in your thoughts, remembering—again—to look at your thoughts as processes. Usually, when we see a little thought arising, it's like a little present that's come in a box. You open the box to look into it, and you fall into the box. In other words, the thought comes and you just jump right in; you inhabit that world—another becoming. Now you want to step out and see, "Well, here's the process. This is how a thought forms."

And then you see, "Where is this particular thought going?" Is it going someplace that will actually be useful? Okay, you can step in, but always be ready to step out when it starts getting weird. As for thoughts that you know are unskillful to begin with, you have to ask yourself, "Why am I cluttering my mind up with this kind of stuff?" See the thought simply as a thought and not as something to step into.

It'll lure you either with pleasures or with threats. But you have to be resilient: Say No to those things, because otherwise they eat up your time, eat up your energy, and it's not as if you have an infinite amount of time or an infinite amount of energy. Especially when you're away from the monastery, you have other duties. Even in the monastery, you've got duties, so you've got to be very careful about not allowing your time to go to waste.

When you can be mindful in this way—in other words, mindfulness as an all-around practice and not just as noting or accepting or being non-reactive, but as a practice in which you keep in mind what you need to know in order to develop skillful qualities in the mind, abandon unskillful ones, so that you can be ardent, alert, and mindful all at once—in that way, you provide yourself with a safe haven. It's the little world you inhabit inside as you fend off the world outside.

As the Buddha said, when you have this refuge inside, it's like having an island in the middle of a flood, or like having a lamp in a dark world. You're providing yourself with safety; you're providing yourself with light. That's how you're a genuine friend to yourself.