

An Island in the Flood

July 23, 2023

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha gives up his will to live longer. He then calls a meeting of the monks and says that he's going to live for only three more months. Then he gives them some teachings to hold on to. He says, without him there, they're going to have to depend on themselves, take themselves as their refuge. He asks them to remember among his teachings the most important ones were the wings to awakening. And then he says, "Make yourself an island for yourself. Make the Dhamma your island."

And how do you do that? By practicing the four establishing of mindfulness, starting with the body in and of itself. You're ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Or you take feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, dhammas—mental qualities—in and of themselves, as your frame of reference. But the important thing is you don't just stop with the frame of reference. You also engage in those other activities: being ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

This island that you build is not the other side of the river. You're crossing a river and you get to an island in the middle of the river. The river has the potential to flood, but you've got an island that's high enough, so that even when it floods, you're not swept away. But it's a way station on the way to the other side.

What does it mean to practice these things, and to make yourself an island for yourself in this way? Look at those three qualities—ardent, alert, mindful—taken in the reverse order.

Mindful means keeping something in mind. Like right now, you're keeping the breath in mind. That's part of the body in and of itself—in other words, your body as you experience it right here, right now, without reference to the world. If you think of the body in the world, it's a matter of whether the body is good-looking enough to be appealing to other people, or whether it's strong enough to do the work required by the world; where it's going to rest tonight, where it's going to get food: those issues. If any of those issues come up, the Buddha said, just put them aside. Just take the fact that you've got a body right here, right now. You've got the breath right here, right now. So try to bring the mind to the breath.

That's part of ardency. You're trying to create a state of concentration.

There are people who say that mindfulness practice is one thing, concentration practice is another thing, but the Buddha wasn't one of those people. As he said, it's through the practice of right mindfulness that you get to right concentration. If you look at the factors of the path, the instructions for how to get into right concentration are there in right mindfulness. So you stay with the breath. You're mindful, keep it in mind. You also remember what you've learned in the past, in terms of the Dhamma, lessons you've learned about how to do this and how to do it wisely.

This self that you're creating here, or the self that you're engaging in the practice of establishing mindfulness, has three aspects. There's the self that's doing it, there's the self that's going to enjoy the results as the concentration begins to grow, and then there's the self as the observer who watches over everything. All three of these need to be trained so that you can rely on them.

In other words, the doer has to know how to stay with the breath, how to manipulate the breath in such a way that you're not forcing it too much, you're allowing it to find a good rhythm. It feels good breathing in and breathing out. Notice where in the body you seem to be most sensitive to whether the breath is comfortable or not.

Recently, I've been running into a group of doctrinaire people who say that you have to focus on the tip of the nose and nowhere else. Otherwise you're destroying the religion, they say, which is pretty extreme. The thing is that the tip of the nose doesn't give you much in terms of pleasure or pain as you breathe in and breathe out. Those are the things you'll notice further down in the body, say, in the chest, in the abdomen, the diaphragm, the shoulders—the parts that are really sensitive to how the breath feels. If you can stay steadily with an area that's sensitive like that, the breath will have to become more refined, more comfortable. It's when you're not paying careful attention to the breath that it can get rough, harsh, or restricted.

So you want to stay continually. This is where the ardency comes in again. It's one thing to be mindful. You can remember anything. You can be alert to anything. But ardency reminds you that you want to be mindful of things that will be really useful right now. And you want to be alert to what you're doing and the results that you're getting.

That's the doing.

The enjoyer of the concentration is in those sensitive spots where you allow that sense of ease, that sense of well-being, to permeate as you make yourself more and more sensitive to this. You really appreciate it. You become a connoisseur of your breathing.

As for the commentator, that, too, has to be trained. In fact, of the three, that probably needs the most training, because it's your inner teacher that decides whether what you're doing is good or not, what can be done to improve it if it's not good enough, and then deciding what to do with the results. Things will come up in the meditation as the mind gets more and more quiet. Things that you didn't notice in your own mind before will become clear. It's like having had a flooded basement in your house. You finally get the water out, and as the water recedes, you begin to see items in the basement that you didn't see before, because they were covered by the water.

Now, the fact that they get uncovered when the mind is still doesn't mean that they're reliable. There's that belief somehow that whatever appears to a still mind is to be trusted. But again, the Buddha didn't teach that. His question always was, "What's the most skillful use of this?"

Look at him on the night of his awakening: He gained knowledge of previous lives. There were other people who had gained knowledge like that, and they said, "Well, this is good enough. I'm going to set myself up as a teacher." But the Buddha's question was, "What's the most skillful use of this knowledge?" The most skillful use, he realized, was seeing that his lives in the past didn't go up a stairway from low to high, and then higher, higher, and higher. They would go up and down. They would go to very high levels of the heavens and then fall very far, and then you had to work your way up again, and fall again. And sometimes it wasn't up and down, it was just erratic. So that was a puzzle to be solved. Solving that puzzle was the most skillful use of that knowledge.

So the next knowledge he gained was seeing how and why this process went up and down. He saw that people and all beings would die and then be reborn in line with their kamma. And the kamma was pretty complex. It's not the case that you do one bad thing and you go to hell, or one good thing and you go to heaven. After all, you're doing lots of things all the time. Kamma is your intentions. You can ask yourself, how many intentions have you had in the course of a day? You've had a lot. Going from one lifetime to another is not simply a matter of adding up the good intentions and subtracting the bad intentions and seeing what number you've got. A lot depends on your state of mind as you die.

But the whole process, as it goes up and down, goes nowhere. It goes around and around but doesn't really accomplish anything. Nothing solid gets established. Nothing comes to closure.

So that was the next question: What's the most useful use of this knowledge? Again, there were people who had seen this kind of process happening, gained knowledge of this sort, and set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha saw that

that didn't put an end to suffering. The most skillful thing would be to learn how to take this knowledge and make it lead to the end of suffering.

That's how, in the third knowledge, he realized that seeing things in terms of the four noble truths and then doing the duties with regard to those truths would lead him out, would lead to the unconditioned.

At that point, he didn't have to do anything more. In other words, the unconditioned isn't used for the sake of something else. It's an end point. That's when things came to closure.

So his quest was always, when things came up, when he gained knowledge of different kinds, what was the most skillful use of it? That's how his inner commentator kept him safe.

So you can take those lessons to heart. Things come up in the mind when you're meditating. You have to ask yourself, what's the most skillful use of this? Here it's good to take some advice from the forest ajaans. Like Ajaan Mun, talking to Ajaan Fuang, who, even when he was a young meditator, tended to have lots of visions about devas and other things: He told him it that doesn't matter whether a deva comes into your vision. What matters is if the deva comes with a Dhamma lesson, or the vision seems to teach you a Dhamma lesson. Your questions should be: What is the lesson? Is it something that can be tested? If it can't be tested, if it's something that has nothing to do with getting your practice further along, just drop it. If it *can* be tested, ask yourself first: How does it fit in what you know of the Dhamma?

This is where it's good to have some basic background knowledge of the Dhamma. As you remember, what is the Dhamma for? What does it mean to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma? It's for the sake of disenchantment, for the sake of dispassion. So if you put a particular insight into practice, would it lead to dispassion? Or would it lead in another direction? If it looks like it'll lead to dispassion and be helpful along the path, try it out and see what results you actually get. It's in your ability to judge the results: That's where you have to learn how to be your own mainstay. That's your protection.

Then there's the piece of advice Ajaan Mun gave to Ajaan Maha Boowa. When something comes up in your meditation, and you're not sure whether it would be right or wrong, good or bad, just stay with the sense of the knower, your basic awareness. Just watch that something come, watch it go, and you'll be safe.

There's also Ajaan Lee's advice. When something comes up, ask yourself: To what extent is this true, and to what extent is the opposite true? In other words, have a sense that different insights can have their time and place.

The Buddha himself taught only two topics or two points of Dhamma as being categorical, i.e., true and beneficial across the board. One is the principle that skillful behavior should be developed and unskillful behavior should be abandoned. The other is the four noble truths and their duties. Anything else is knowledge that's appropriate for some situations, but not necessarily for others. Always keep this in mind, because when the mind gets into concentration, you get really confident that whatever comes up must be believed. You can run with things much further than they deserve, much further than they can actually help you.

So train that commentator, train the observer to be circumspect. Look at things from different angles. And you do that by being mindful, alert, and ardent as you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. A lot of the ego that gets in the way of insights, or spoils our insights, has to do with our position as we see ourselves in the world. That's why the Buddha has you put those terms aside, so that you can look more squarely at what's skillful and what's not skillful, without reference to anybody else and what it's going to do for you in terms of the rest of society.

When you have that kind of independence, that's when you really can depend on yourself, and you can make it across the river.