

## *Mindfulness as Refuge*

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There's a passage where the Buddha tells his followers to take the Dhamma as their refuge, and he equates that with taking yourself as your refuge. This means that you have to remake yourself so that you're reliable. He recommends that you do that by following the instructions on establishing mindfulness. And by this, he doesn't mean simply being aware of what's arising and passing away. The word "mindfulness" means to keep something in mind. And what do you keep in mind? The Buddha sets out the duties that we have in the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation of suffering, and to develop the path. So: four duties to keep in mind, four categories to keep in mind as you're looking at your experience.

This relates to another teaching that he has on duties, which is to abandon unskillful qualities in the mind and to develop skillful ones. As he said, it's through following these duties that you find true happiness and true safety. After all, his definition of true happiness—*nibbana*—is also a place of supreme safety: no conditions that can change, nothing that can turn on you, nothing that can disappoint you. He also calls it refuge, harbor, safety, security. It's the only thing in life that really is secure. Everything else is precarious.

So that's where we're headed, but we're going through a precarious world. This is why he says to take yourself as your refuge—and to do that, you establish mindfulness.

Now the teachings on establishing mindfulness are basically the Buddha's instructions for how to get in concentration. So it's the mind in concentration that you're going to have to rely on. You develop this by, as the Buddha says, keeping track of the body, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That means you focus on an aspect of the body like the breath and you stay there. You hold on. You don't let any thoughts of the world come in right now. If they do come in, you don't pay them any attention. Or if you pay them attention, you've got to let them go. You put them aside again and again and again until you can stay with the breath more continually without having to worry about wandering off.

And how do you do that? You try to make the breath as interesting as possible. That means you have to talk to yourself about the breath and convince yourself that, yes, it is interesting how the breath energy flows in the body, how you relate to the breath.

We were talking earlier today about how the breath is filling the whole body. It's the sense of energy that allows you to know that you've got a body here to begin with. And to stay with the breath requires a perception. This is a label you use to identify things. When the Thais took over the word *sañña*, which is the Pali word for perception, they added other shades of meaning to it as well, which are also relevant: an agreement, a contract, a promise. In this case, you can agree with yourself to look at the breath in a certain way, to see what effect it has on getting the mind to settle down in the body. If you agree with yourself or make the perception that it's just air coming in and out of the lungs, it's hard to get a really good strong sense of well-being out of the breathing.

But you can agree to perceive the breath in another way: It's an energy flow. And you can remind yourself that it's because of the breath that you experience everything else in the body. Also, remind yourself that the breath is there first, so as you think of the breath going through the body, you don't have to push other things out of the way. You don't have to force it through a barrier. You simply allow what's there first to be there first, to be pervasive. As you breathe in, it's not that you're pushing the breath into the solid parts of the body. You're nourishing the breath that's already there. That's breath mingling with breath. So there shouldn't be any conflict, shouldn't be any sense of resistance. If there is resistance, think of it relaxing, and remind yourself that the way the breath flows in the body is going to have an impact on your health, and a very immediate impact on the state of your mind. That set of perceptions makes it easier to breathe in a way that suffuses the body with a sense of ease

If the breath is really comfortable, when you breathe out, make sure you're not squeezing the energy out of the body. Think of the energy in the body staying full as you breathe in, full as you breathe out, all the way through the breath cycle. The breath energy is not depleted, simply that the excess breath goes out. After a while, you develop a sense of fullness. Try to maintain that sense of fullness, because it gives a good foundation for the mind. And it also gives food for the mind.

The Buddha's image of the practice is of a fortress at a frontier. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper who watches people coming in and going out, but he doesn't just watch them. He knows that there are potential enemies, potential spies, so he has to recognize who to let in, who not to let in. In other words, mindfulness is what watches over the mind to make sure unskillful qualities don't come in, and if they do come in, to get rid of them as quickly as possible, and to encourage skillful qualities to come in.

The fortress is surrounded by a wall, a moat, a road. The road and the moat stand for sense of shame and sense of compunction. In other words, you think of

the people you admire in this world, and then you think of doing something unskillful, you think of what they would think. You'd be ashamed for them to know that you were doing something unskillful, so, based on that, you decide not to do it. That's a healthy sense of shame. Compunction is when you realize that if you do something unskillful, there are going to be bad consequences, so to avoid the consequences, you decide not to do it. Compunction here is the opposite of apathy. Apathy doesn't care. Compunction cares. These things are your protection.

The wall is discernment, and as they say in the texts, the wall is covered with plaster so that the enemy can't get any footholds or handholds. In other words, you use your discernment to cut through anything that might try to sneak over the walls away from the gatekeeper.

Who does the gatekeeper let in? He lets in soldiers, which are right effort, and he also lets them bring in their weapons, which is whatever knowledge you've learned about the Dhamma. These are good things to keep in your fortress. And also lets in food. That's what the concentration is: a sense of well-being that you can create right here. This is what gives you nourishment on the path.

If you have trouble staying with the breath or don't find any great pleasure in the breath, find an object of meditation that does give you pleasure. You can try goodwill. Some people actually find contemplation of the body pleasant: You go through all the parts of the body. You realize there's nothing in there that's really attractive, but then the same applies to everybody else's body. It's a great leveler.

So whatever topic you find pleasant, whatever topic you find interesting, stay with that. Because the sense of ease and well-being that comes when the mind can stay with something consistently is going to be your food. And when the mind is well-nourished this way, it has the strength to stick with the path, with the work of right effort. If anybody slips in past over the wall or past the gatekeeper, you've got to do your best to get rid of it, deal with it. And that requires strength, because it's so easy to go for thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of restlessness and anxiety. These things can consume the mind, and there's a part of the mind that really likes them. It takes strength to say, "No." Part of the strength comes from your conviction that what inhabits your mind really is important because it's going to come out in your actions, and then your actions are going to shape your life, and you want a life that's well shaped.

So you have to start with the seeds. You have to start with the beginning points, the little thoughts that come into the mind, and make sure you sort them out as to which ones are your friends, which ones are not. Any thoughts that are not your friends, you've got to put them outside the wall. In other words, you've

got to get control over your mind like this, because the reason why the Buddha talks so much about refuge is that we live in a dangerous world and we can also be dangerous to ourselves. We make the wrong decisions if we lack mindfulness, if we lack alertness. So we've got to get some control over our minds.

You think about the future. All kinds of things can happen in the future, although some things are certain. Aging, illness, and death are certain, but we want to squeeze something good out of this life before they incapacitate us and while we have the chance. That means we have to put the mind in good shape first, so that whatever happens, it'll be in a position where it can act quickly and effectively. You look into the future and it's a big blank in a lot of ways. You have no idea what's going to happen, how long this life is going to be, but you do know that you'll need these qualities: mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, right effort, discernment, a healthy sense of shame, a healthy sense of compunction, conviction that your actions matter. These are the qualities that will allow you to make the right decision when something surprising or unexpected happens.

The fire department always tells us to be prepared for the possibility of a fire. Well, the Buddha's saying always be prepared for the possibility that things could go wrong, and you get prepared by realizing that there are things you *can* do so that you don't have to suffer from them when they do go wrong. After all, even though you're on the path, creating good kamma in the way you act, speak, and think, nobody knows what kamma you have in your past, so you want to be prepared for anything. And these are the qualities that allow you to be prepared, so that no matter what comes up, no matter how good or bad things may be, you don't have to suffer from them, because you've got this source of strength inside. You've developed qualities that you can depend on.

So do your best to make yourself your own refuge. That means everything, starting from basic common sense things about where you avoid dangers. If a danger is avoidable, you do your best to avoid it. As for things that are unavoidable, you learn the skills needed not to suffer from them. There's a sutta where the Buddha says that the problems that you can avoid include things like cesspools, stumbling over cows at night, staying away from places that are obviously dangerous. In other words, as we would say in English, you don't tempt fate. From the point of the view of the Buddha, you don't tempt your kamma.

There's that famous story of the martial arts master who had a lot of students, and they were going to have a demonstration of their martial arts skills in a pavilion out in the forest. On the road to the pavilion was a donkey. The martial students were walking along and they saw the donkey, and they said, "Hey, let's

test our skills on the donkey first.” And so one of the students goes up and tries one of his moves, and the donkey kicks him across the road. The second one comes along and says, “No, you fool, that’s not how it’s done. Do it like this.” And he uses another martial arts skill and he gets kicked across the road. They all end up getting kicked across the road, after trying all the different moves they had learned from their master.

So they figure, “Well, there must be something the master hasn’t taught us yet,” so they hide by the side of the road behind some bushes, watching to see what the master will do when he comes along. As he comes along, he sees the donkey, and he walks way around it.

In other words, you use your common sense. But at the same time, with things like aging, illness, and death, when no matter how much you try to avoid them, you can’t ultimately: This is where you’ve got to train the mind so that it can depend on itself, so that it doesn’t add any unnecessary suffering. And as we find out, the unnecessary suffering is the suffering that weighs the mind down. The necessary pains of life don’t have to weigh the mind down. That’s the Buddha’s message.

And so it’s against those dangers that we learn how to make ourselves a refuge.