

King Asoka's Vow

October 28, 2020

One of Ajaan Fuang's students once gave him a book on King Asoka. It included the translations of some of the Asokan edicts. After he read the book, Ajaan Fuang said to me there was one sentence that stood out for him. It was a determination that King Asoka had made, saying that all the good he'd been doing: He didn't want to dedicate it to become a king again. What he wanted instead was to have a capability within himself. That's a literal translation of the Thai.

You might say he wanted to have the ability to depend on himself. You can imagine that, as king, he had to depend on a lot of other people. Reading the edicts, you get a sense that he was frustrated that nobody seemed to be up to what he wanted them to do. So he wanted to be in a position where he could depend on himself.

That really struck a chord with Ajaan Fuang. You can understand why when you think of the history of the forest tradition. On the one hand, the monks were dependent on the fact that there had been some reforms coming out of Bangkok, new texts coming out of Bangkok. But on the other hand, all the forest ajaans really had to depend on themselves, even to the extent of depending on themselves to recognize the true Dhamma when it came.

It's not the case that everybody who listened to Ajaan Mun was immediately taken by his teachings. I once read a Dhamma talk by Ajahn Chah where he was pointing out how Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao divided families. People even in the same family would break with one another: Some people liked Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao very much and were inspired by them. Other people were not inspired at all. But what was important was that some people had the capability within themselves to recognize the true Dhamma when they heard it and to follow it.

When you think about the Buddha's teachings on being able to depend on yourself, they come down to his teaching on making an island for yourself or a refuge for yourself through the practice of right mindfulness. And three qualities of right mindfulness are particularly relevant: mindfulness itself, alertness, and ardency.

With mindfulness, you're keeping something in mind, and it requires some discernment and discretion. What are the things that really are worth keeping in mind? The definition in the text says, "keeping in mind things that were said and done long ago." That can apply to things that other people said and did and also

things that you said and did. But even that requires a filter. What things that were said and done long ago really are worth remembering? What mistakes are worth remembering? What things you did well are worth remembering? What things are really relevant to what you're doing right now? Which things are not.

You want to have that ability within yourself to tell which is which, what's applicable right now and what can be put aside. Think about Ajaan Lee's comment that if you have discernment, then all you need is a machete and you can set yourself up in life. He was referring to the different noble treasures, pointing out that of the noble treasures, discernment is most important. So your mindfulness, to be really useful, does require discernment.

It's the same with alertness. Alertness is not simply noticing what's happening in the present moment. It's noticing what you're doing and the results you're getting. That quality is going to be responsible for developing a skill. Take Ajaan Lee's example of making a basket. You try to choose a good teacher, and then you learn from the teacher how you do the basic weaving. But then you've got to do the weaving yourself. The teacher can't make your weaving smooth, even, good-looking—can't make the shape of your basket good-looking. You have to do all that yourself. And how do you do that? You make a basket and then you look at it. If it's not up to snuff, then you make another one and try to figure out what you did wrong the first time. You keep coming back, coming back, doing it again and again, and then judging your actions by their results, and continually making adjustments.

This is all based on alertness. You have to be reflective. Think of the Buddha's image to Rahula. The practice is like looking into a mirror. This is a problem with a lot of insight methods. They're not very reflective. I remember reading one insight teacher saying you have to see that all perceptions are inconstant, stressful and not-self *except* for the perceptions of inconstancy, stressful and not-self. Those are special, put aside, not anything you want to abandon. But, hey—they are perceptions. Even though they're right, there comes a point where you have to let go of right. It requires a certain amount of alertness and reflective investigation to realize when you hold on to these things and when you have to let them go.

In the same way, you approach the practice as a skill with your breath and the way you relate to the breath. Where are the best places to focus? What is the best way to breathe? What's the best way to picture the breath to yourself? These are things you do and then you check up on the results. You're alert to what you're doing. If you're not alert to what you're doing, then you can't really gauge the results at all. You may not like the results, but you don't know what you did wrong, so you don't really know where to change. You have to see the connection

between what you're doing and the results if you want your knowledge to be useful.

Then you're ardent: You try to do it well. This, too, requires discernment. In fact, of the three qualities, it's the one in the Canon that, in its definition, is directly related to the question of what's skillful and what's unskillful. The Canon defines mindfulness simply as the ability to remember what was done and said long ago, which could apply to almost anything. Alertness is being alert to what you're doing, and again, you can be doing something skillful or unskillful. But ardency is where you try to get rid of what's unskillful and develop what's skillful. This is where the real discernment comes in and applies both to the mindfulness and to the alertness.

It's the ardency that makes you eager to figure out what the right things are to keep in mind, and who are the right people to listen to. After all, even when you have a capability within yourself to depend on yourself, in the practice you're not really independent until stream entry. Up until that point, you do have to depend on other people—their teachings, their recommendations, their example—but it's up to you to choose whose example and teachings are worth following.

So the more ardent you are in wanting to do this well, the more carefully you make your choices and the more discernment you're going to have to bring to them. Where do you learn the discernment? You learn it from the combination of all these three qualities together. If you're alert to the teachings that you're taking on, then what they inspire you to do, and then the results of what you do, that helps sort through the mindfulness. That way, you gain a good idea of what the good things are to apply right now and what things you can put aside. It's through these qualities acting together that you can develop that ability to depend on yourself, to have a capability within yourself.

As you look at the world, you realize there's a lot out there that you can't depend on. So the more you can depend on yourself—the more capability you build within yourself—the better, so that wherever you end up, even if you don't have a machete, you can still set yourself up for life. You can still look after yourself because you're mindful, ardent, and alert, reflecting on what you're doing and trying to do it well. And as you do, you find that you can depend more and more on yourself. You do become your own refuge, your own island, so that you're better off than kings. Think of King Asoka, looking back on his life as king and realizing that the one thing he lacked was the ability to depend on himself.

Well, the Buddha and the ajaans teach us precisely that: how to depend on ourselves. And it's up to us to take their lessons to heart, take their example to heart, so that we can see how far we can depend on ourselves, how far our actions

can take us. The Buddha and all the ajaans say they can take us far. How far? That's up for us to find out. But when we develop these qualities within ourselves, we're more and more likely to find what they're talking about and to see how good it truly is.