

Treasure Island

August 31, 2022

You've probably played that game where you ask some of your friends: "Suppose you've got to live on a desert island. What would you take with you?" On a day like today, when it's hot and you don't want to think about a desert island, make it an Arctic Island. Suppose you're going to live on an Arctic Island: Ellesmere, Svalbard, or Franz Josef Land. What would you take with you, assuming that you had a place to stay that would keep you warm when you needed to be warm? The first thing the Buddha would recommend would be that you make sure your island gets above the flood. It's not going to be overcome by rising sea levels. In his image, that's the establishing of mindfulness. Focus on the body in and of itself, putting aside all thoughts of greed and distress with reference to the world—just you right here with your body. Be ardent, alert, and mindful.

Notice the order there in those three qualities: They start with ardent, Ardency is what makes everything skillful there, because mindfulness can simply be keeping anything in mind, skillful or unskillful; as you're alert, you can watch yourself doing skillful or unskillful things, and it would count as alertness. But when you try to do this well, when you do it in a way that would give rise to concentration, that's the function of ardency, and that's what makes the other two skillful. You're mindful for the purpose of right concentration. You're alert for the purpose of right concentration.

So you remember what needs to be done. You put aside all thoughts of sensuality and just focus on the form of the body. If you're going to look for happiness, you look for happiness here. You explore the breath. What way of breathing is refreshing in the body, strengthening the body? Explore, trying to develop a sense of ease, a sense of coolness. If you're feeling oppressed by the heat, try to gladden your mind. What things would make you glad right now, things in line with the Dhamma? Could you get fascinated by the breath? You could tell yourself, "It doesn't matter what the temperature is outside. I've got something really interesting to play with right here."

You're alone on your Arctic Island. But you've got a fascinating toy, one that has an infinite variety of variations, because you can play with the breath going down the body as you breathe, you can play with it coming up the body as you breathe. I've found at times, when my back feels weak from sitting too much, it's good to think of the breath energy coming up as you're breathing in, coming up from the soles of your feet, up your legs, up the spine, up over the head. But don't get it stuck in the head. Think of it coming back down again through the front of the torso.

But you play around. See what works for you. And as you're established here, you've got three of the frames of mindfulness right away: body, feelings, mind. As your ardency keeps working, you develop dhammas as well—particularly the dhammas of the factors for awakening.

So we've got all four frames of reference together right here. This is your island. This is what keeps you safe from the flood.

Then you want to make sure that you've got good treasures, treasures that will stick with you all the time. The purpose of this kind of contemplation is to ask yourself, "What's really worthwhile? What can you take with you when you go, when you really go to leave not only this spot on Earth, but also this spot in your body?"

This is where the Buddha recommends seven treasures. The first is conviction. You realize that you have verbal actions, mental actions, and bodily actions. You're convinced, in line with what the Buddha taught, that you actually choose your actions, that freedom of choice is not an illusion, and that your actions do have consequences based on the goodness or lack of goodness of your heart.

That's an empowering thought right there. You wonder why people who have this opportunity to act and speak and think and choose good actions would want to throw away the possibility that they have any choice. In some cases, it's because they don't like the idea of responsibility. But that really limits them. As the Buddha keeps saying, there are lots of areas in life where you can't prove anything before you've practiced: whether nibbana is possible, or whether you really do have control of your actions. But why choose the option that limits your possibilities? As long as you don't know for sure, be open to whichever hypothesis gives you more possibilities.

So that's your first treasure: seeing that your actions do have value, and you want to make the best of them.

Based on that, you develop a sense of shame, you develop a sense of compunction, both of which basically tell you to do things that are skillful. They reinforce the lessons of heedfulness. In the case of shame, you think of the people you admire and how you would like to look good in their eyes. Whatever values you've picked up from them, you want to measure yourself by those values. You'd be ashamed to drop them or work below them.

Compunction is when you realize your actions will have consequences, so why go to the effort of doing something that's going to lead to suffering down the line? It makes no sense at all.

Based on your shame and compunction, there's the treasure of virtue. You decide to abstain from anything that's harmful. You remember that the virtues of the precepts are also positive. In addition to not killing, you're gentle and kind with living beings. In addition to not stealing, you help people protect

their possessions. The same with not engaging in illicit sex: You develop the virtue of restraint. You're going to look for your pleasures in other areas aside from sensuality. In addition to not telling lies, you're actively truthful, open about your mistakes so that you can learn from what other people might have to give in terms of their recommendations. Finally, with intoxicants, you not only avoid intoxicants but you also develop heedfulness.

So, learn how to think of virtue not simply as abstaining from harm, but also as positively doing good.

Then there's a treasure of generosity. You make a habit of being generous not only with material things, but also with your energy, your knowledge, your time. When you do, you broaden your mind. You make your mind more spacious. You're not just here grabbing things. You see that you have something that other people can use with benefit and you're happy to share it with them. That creates, as I said, a sense of a spacious mind state. As Ajaan Lee points out, you make the whole world your home. Wherever you've been generous, that becomes part of your home. Wherever you've been generous, you're relatives with the people there.

One of the very first studies that established the field of anthropology was on the act of giving, and one of the things that the author noted was that you take down barriers when you give a gift. When you charge a price for something, you're erecting a barrier. Giving is something you do within the family, and when you give something to somebody outside the family, you're basically making that person part of your family.

This is why, in Thailand, monks refer to lay people as their relatives: Especially their supporters are their relatives. However, there's a sense of family around any healthy monastic community because we're tearing down barriers. And, as I said, you're making your mind more spacious, your sense of the world as a place where you belong, where it's your home, where you have relatives wherever you go. That's the treasure of generosity.

Then there's the treasure of learning—learning the Dhamma. You try to listen to what the Buddha had to say. Get his advice, not only in terms of the abstract teachings, but also his advice in terms of the analogies he gives. As you know, the way you shape your experiences is through how you breathe, how you talk to yourself, and then the perceptions and feelings you focus on. The Buddha gives you advice on all of those. We're born into this world without much advice on how to breathe. Nobody tells us how to breathe, unless you become an athlete or become a singer, and even then, the lessons in breathing may not be the best for the long-term health of the body. Here, the Buddha is teaching you on how to breathe that gives the greatest long-term benefits.

He also gives advice on how you talk to yourself. That's what his teachings are: examples for good inner conversations. The analogies he gives in the

Canon are his advice about what perceptions to hold in mind: the perceptions that'll give rise to thoughts of goodwill, perceptions to help give rise to thoughts of endurance—the ability to endure, how to talk to yourself when things are difficult. These are the Buddha's gifts. And so as you take his gifts, you make yourself wealthier in terms of knowledge.

Then finally there's discernment. You start with the discernment that comes from listening to what the Buddha had to say, but then you build on that. You start thinking things through. You ask yourself, "What is there in the Dhamma that I have trouble accepting? How do I fit the different teachings together so that they make the most sense?" This is where you bring qualities of truth and your powers of observation and your goodwill to the teaching.

A lot of people out there who listen to the Dhamma are trying to find fault. You look at a lot of the teachings of modern Dharma teachers, and it seems as if they have ill will for the Dhamma, they hate it. Their first reaction always is, "Well, we're going to change this to suit ourselves." They're missing out that the fact that Buddha is giving you really good advice in the areas where it goes against your sense of self or your sense of the world. When he does that, he's challenging you. After all, he's telling you that your sense of self in the world is a state of becoming—and we're trying to get past becoming. Wherever there's becoming, there's going to be suffering.

So even though you may have a strong sense of your idea of what your self is and what the world is, is it reality? He asked you to be truthful about the fact that those are just working hypotheses. Where did you get those hypotheses? And on what are you basing your decision to take them as working hypotheses? There are so many things in our worldviews that are not things we really know. We just take them on because we like them or because they make sense. But then, if they make sense in a way that gets in the way of our ability to put an end to suffering, why adopt those views?

So, you have to look at where you got the ideas. You look at your motivation for wanting to hold on to them. Is it something really honorable? Or is there some greed, aversion, or delusion in there? And when you hold on to these views, what kind of actions do they inspire? Do they actually inspire you to act in skillful ways? If you believe, for instance, that everything is determined by material or physical laws, what impetus is there to go to the trouble of trying to be skillful? You're abandoning your power to choose your actions and shape your life.

So from the discernment that comes from reading and listening, there comes the discernment that comes from thinking things through. Then, when you think things through in the proper way, you develop a desire to put them into practice. That's when you develop the discernment that comes from

actually trying to get the mind to settle down, actually trying to get the mind to be one with the breath, trying to develop all the factors of the path. Even right view, although it leads the way, gets fully trained only by actually following through with developing these factors of the path.

All the factors of the path support one another so that your discernment gets trained. Your discernment gets trained by your right mindfulness, your right effort, your right concentration, and all the other right factors. That's when it's strong, strong enough to see through to what the real treasure is that the Buddha taught, which is that there is a deathless dimension in the mind. How do you find it? By developing these treasures of the character. That's why they really are valuable.

At the same time, they're treasures you can take with you wherever you go, even when you leave this life. They're part of your mind. You may forget specific Dhamma teachings, but the habits that these treasures develop go with you. When you encounter the Dhamma again, it's like encountering an old friend.

So, when you think about your Arctic Island, the island of mindfulness, this is what you take with you to make sure that you not only stay safe from the flood, but you've also got plenty of things to take you even further, over to the safety of the other shore. These are the treasures you can exchange for nibbana, although the final result is that even when you attain nibbana, these things don't leave you. They're part of the mind as well. As long as the mind is still with this body, it's got these treasures to use, and you can share them with other people.

That's the best kind of wealth there is: wealth that doesn't create boundaries, wealth that erases boundaries, the kind of wealth where, the more you give to others, the more you have to enjoy.