

A Well-stocked Memory

June 22, 2023

In the descriptions for the factors for awakening, mindfulness comes first. Usually it's defined as being mindful of the body in and of itself, feelings, mind, mental qualities—in other words, the four frames of reference for establishing mindfulness, in and of themselves,—ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. This is the practice leading up to right concentration.

Then in that context, there's the next factor: analysis of qualities. It means looking at what's going on in your mind as you try to get the mind to settle down, to see which events in the mind will be helpful to settling down and which ones won't.

Then comes persistence: You do what's required to develop the skillful qualities and abandon the unskillful ones.

Then, following that, come the factors deal with concentration directly: rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity.

But there's another description in which mindfulness is defined as being mindful of the Dhamma teachings you've memorized, that you've learned: what you've read, what you've listened to. Then analysis of dhammas has to do with sorting through what you've listened to, to figure out what's skillful and what's not, what can be applied right now, and what's not useful right now.

The two meanings are not all that different because after all, when you're being mindful to be with the body, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, you have to remember what you've learned that's really relevant to what you're doing right now. In this sense, mindfulness is being able to memorize a lot of the Dhamma. Remember that back in the beginning, they didn't write the Dhamma down. People learned the Dhamma by listening to it and memorizing it, and there was a very systematic way of memorizing long passages of Dhamma.

We've lost that ability now. Our memories get shorter and shorter because we get more and more dependent on gadgets to keep things in mind for us. Which is sad, because those gadgets are not going to be with us all the time.

We have to learn how to internalize things, to internalize our ability to call on the

Dhamma when we need it. In the image the Buddha gives of the practice as being like having a fortress at the frontier, mindfulness is the gatekeeper. States of mind present themselves at the gate, and then mindfulness has to rifle through his memory and recall, “Who are these people coming here? Do I know them? Do I not know them? Are they friends? Are they foes?” The more extensive a memory the gatekeeper has, the more he’s able to recognize who he can let in and who he should keep out.

When you get inside the fortress, you’ve got the soldiers of right effort, and their weapons are your learning—the teachings you’ve memorized.

This is why we have chants. This is why we memorize passages of the Dhamma, so that we can have some weapons at hand. After all, things come up in the mind, and the question is what to do. This is a very basic level of inner conversation or dialogue: “What to do next? What to do next?”

Different imperatives will recommend themselves, and the question is: Where do we get those imperatives? They come from our family, they come from the media, things we’ve picked up here and there: the geography of Middle-Earth. Our minds are full of all kinds of things.

The question is, are they useful weapons or not? Think of that Far Side cartoon with the Cow Tools. This cow is standing behind a table. There are some tools on the table that the cow has made and is very proud about. But you look at the tools, and they look totally useless. One, you can’t imagine that even a cow would be able to use anything like that. And there’s no idea of what they would actually be useful for. Yet so much of our inner storehouse here is like that. It stores lots and lots of trash.

Sometimes, if the weapons are inside, they’re weapons that we turn on ourselves: the lessons we’ve learned from modern psychotherapy, the lessons we’ve learned from the media that dissuade us from the practice—who knows where we get all these things.

So it’s good to memorize the Dhamma, so that you have some actual weapons you can use against your defilements as they try to get in through the gate or to climb over the walls. You want to be able to recognize these things before they invade the mind, because often when they do invade the mind, they remain. So take some time to memorize some Dhamma, learn the chants so that you’re not having to look at the chanting book all the time. When they’re memorized, at least they’ll be sloshing around in the mind someplace.

When your mindfulness is good, they’re lined up right here, right at hand. And it’s a

possibility—as you get older and your mindfulness begins to get a little bit blurry—that you’ll still have some good things in there, and they’ll come popping up when you need them.

So take some time. Do your chanting not only while we’re here as a group but also when you’re off alone. Go through your chants. Equip the mind with good weapons, so that when greed comes, you can shoot it down; when anger comes you can shoot it down. You recognize these things as enemies. That’s part of the training. And then you remember what to do with them: These are things to be abandoned. That knowledge will help you when there’s another part of the mind, that says, “Oh greed, let it in. Lust, let it in. Anger, jealousy, let these things in.” They’ve been in the mind for so long.

Think of Ajaan Chah’s image of the house that has one chair. Your defilements taken over the chair, and you’re standing off by the side, serving them. What you want is to get them out of the chair. *You* sit in the chair. Don’t let anybody else sit in the chair. And have your weapons by you, so that if anyone tries to take the chair from you, you can recognize them as either skillful or not. If they’re unskillful, you can shoot them down.

Some people ask why we should learn the Pali. Well, you learn the Pali and you look at the English. But the Pali has a nice rhythm. It gets into your body, gets into your blood, gets into your breath. As you’ve learned to associate that with the Dhamma, then sometimes even if you can’t remember the meaning of the words, the rhythms that you build into your body through memorization will, at the very least, call the Dhamma to mind, so it’ll be there when you need it.

You may not be able to remember the meaning of a specific passage, but just remembering that there is the Dhamma in the world, that you’ve practiced the Dhamma in the past—remembering these facts can often help you call useful things to mind.

There’s a passage in the Canon that talks about how people who’ve memorized the Dhamma and then die, and if it so happens that they get reborn in heaven, for a while they get careless and heedless because the pleasures in heaven are pretty good. But then the Dhamma comes to the surface, and they remember, “Oh, there is such a thing as the Dhamma.” You remember what the teachings were. That helps to make you heedful. So even in heaven you need weapons—to say nothing of being here on Earth.

So make sure you stock your mind with good weapons, and not just cow tools or weapons that turn on the owner. You want weapons that can shoot down the defilements. In this way, the conversation that goes on in your mind is actually a help to you, and not a hindrance.