Protection to Take with You

May 25, 2014

The lessons we learn as we meditate are useful in all areas of life. We have to be mindful. In other words, remember the lessons we’ve learned from the past. Remember our mistakes and the lessons that can be learned from them. Remember the things we’ve done well. And remember the teachings of the wise. There’s that famous sutta, the Kalama Sutta, where the Buddha says you have to test things in your actions to see what’s skillful and what’s not, and also to look around you to see who’s wise. Let’s see what the wise praise and what the wise criticize. So it’s not just a matter of deciding that you like something and you’re going to follow that. We live in a world where the options that are offered to us through advertising basically don’t matter. You can buy your iPhone in white or you can buy it in pink or black. This is how you express yourself. But it doesn’t really matter what the color is. It doesn’t really make that much of a difference. We like to think that as we come to the practice, we can choose what we like and leave behind what we don’t like. But it really does make a difference how you understand things, how you practice. Those are the things we’ve got to keep in mind. What are the really good lessons you’ve learned? You don’t want to forget them. And many times the good lessons are things you’ve learned from mistakes you’ve made. I’ve talked before about that test they had for potential brain surgeons. The first question was, “Can you tell us a mistake you’ve made recently?” And if the candidate said, “I can’t think of any mistakes I’ve made,” the candidate was out. If the candidate did admit to a mistake then the next question was, “Well, how would you do it differently next time?” And if the candidate hadn’t really thought about it, how to change his ways or change her ways, that wasn’t the sort of person they wanted either. They wanted people who could learn lessons and use their ingenuity. That’s the ardency part of the equation. These three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—noticing things is the alertness. Mindfulness tells you what you’ve learned from the past that you can apply now. And ardency is the desire to do it well. And the ardency is the wisdom factor in those three. This is something that John Lee pointed out in his book on the frames of reference. And it’s a point that’s missed so often. We think that when we’re mindful and alert, we just note what’s arising, what’s passing away, and that’s all your responsibility is. But the teachings on mindfulness come in the context of the teachings on karma. If you allow unskillful mind states to keep coming back, coming back, coming back, they dig ruts into your mind and it’s very hard to get out of them. So you’ve got to remember mistakes you’ve made in the past so you don’t make them again. And it’s your desire not to make those mistakes again. That’s where the wisdom lies, that’s where the discernment lies. You try to figure out how you can do things differently. Sometimes it means simply being mindful, remembering, “Oh, I learned this lesson from the Buddha, I learned this lesson from the teacher, and this is the time to apply it.” I’ve told you in the past about the time when Ajahn Furing had passed away and we went through a very difficult year in the monastery as things got stirred up. And as different issues came up, I kept thinking, “Oh, Ajahn Furing said this, he said that.” And he wasn’t just saying it to sound wise or to sound nice. The skills of the Dhamma are survival skills. These are things you need in order to keep your goodness alive. And they really do make a difference. Once you’ve learned from the practice, see if you can apply them. The ingenuity comes in seeing if something does seem to work quite right. Well, what can you adjust? What can you change so that it does work? Because not everything can be handed to you on a platter. And as you encounter difficulties, say, in staying with the breath, not wandering off, there’s no one who can just stand right by your ear and whisper instructions in. You’ve got to notice what’s going on. You’ve got to try to figure it out. This is one of the gifts of the Buddha when he gave us the Four Noble Truths, to use that as the framework for looking at any problem. Where is the suffering? And what is suffering? As we pointed out, suffering is clinging to the five aggregates. You can be clinging to your sense of your body, certain feelings that you like, certain perceptions you would like to have about yourself and what other people might have about you, thought patterns you’ve had ingrained into your mind, the way you pay attention to things. All these things, when you cling to them, can actually constitute suffering. The suffering is in the clinging, and it’s the craving. What do you want that causes you to cling to these things? That’s the cause. So he gives you a framework for analyzing problems. That’s a really good gift. We’ve talked in the past about how the Buddha felt his responsibility as a teacher was to offer protection. That didn’t mean he went around hovering around you all the time, but he gave you the tools you need to look into things. Get your problems to figure them out and to figure out a solution. And if the solution doesn’t work, he gives you the encouragement to try, try, try again. That’s another lesson we have to learn from the meditation. It’s not a matter of sitting down and having a really nice experience or really great insight. It’s the practice. Try to keep the mind settled and centered in all kinds of situations—easy situations, pleasant situations, unpleasant situations. Each of those situations offers a different challenge. The basic principles are the same, but how you apply them might require some ingenuity on your part. But the basic framework keeps pointing you back to what you’ve been doing. This is how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He was looking at his actions and figuring out, “I want this kind of result, but I’m not getting the result I want.” So he turned around to look at his actions. What could he change in his actions? And that’s how we learned. So the lessons you’ve learned are not only lessons in things to remember, but also approaches to remember, skills to develop, so that you can take what you’ve learned and be creative and effective in how you apply it. That’s your protection. Everyone wants all the people they love and they admire to be safe, but we all know that at some point we’re all going to die. Illness may come first. Aging may come first. And the protection here is learning how to deal with aging skillfully, deal with illness skillfully, and deal with death skillfully, and deal with separation skillfully. After all, once you’re born here, that’s part of the fine print. The people who cared for you when you were young are going to die, and you’re going to be left in the world without them. And that’s the normal way of things. You may die first. We don’t like to think about this, but we have to think about this, because it’s something we have to prepare for, and we can prepare for. In some passages, the Buddha talks about future dangers. They’re basically aging, illness, death, separation, political turmoil, even a split in the sangha. The Buddha said there are times when the sangha is going to be split and there’s going to be a lot of difficulties. It’s going to be hard to practice because everybody will be arguing. Those things haven’t happened yet, so you want to be prepared. Yes, you think about these things and then reflect, “What can I do right now so that if these things happened, I won’t suffer? I won’t suffer with aging, I won’t suffer from illness, I won’t suffer from death.” These things will happen, but you don’t have to suffer from them. That’s how you keep yourself motivated. Those are the skills you really need, and that’s your protection. So not everything that you need to know is written down in the books. The basic principles are there, but it’s going to be up to your ingenuity to learn how to apply those principles well. So this is how you look in the book of your own actions, or as the Buddha called it, the mirror of your actions. You can see your mind in your actions, you can see your mind in your words, you can see your mind in your thoughts. Just as you look in the mirror, when you look in the mirror, you notice there’s a blemish. There’s some dirt. You’re having a bad hair day. Well, you do something about it. You don’t just look in the mirror and then leave it. If there’s something wrong, you fix it. You use the mirror so you can know what you need to fix. So you look in your actions, you look in your words, you look in your thoughts. You see what needs to be changed. Because that’s what we’re practicing. We all know we have to change. We have to change our ideas, change our habits, have a change of heart. The Buddha gives us the basic skills and the basic instructions on how to use them. But whether we’re going to become masters of those skills, that depends on our own ingenuity. Just with the breath right now, you can watch it coming in, watch it going out, and it doesn’t seem quite right. What can you do? Can you make it shorter? Make it faster? Longer? Slower? Try things out. If you have a cartoon sensation of breathing in your nose and having to pull the breath in through the nose, see what you can do to erase that. Think of the breath coming in the back of your neck. Think of it coming in the base of your spine. You can play around with these things. And in doing that, that’s how you develop your ingenuity. And it’s not playing in the sense that every possible thing you could do would be right. You play around for a bit and you realize, “Okay, there are some things that are wrong.” You breathe in certain ways and you get a headache. You breathe in other ways and you have a headache. You aggravate your pains. The choices you make are not purely arbitrary or without consequences. So you want to remember that’s why we have to develop mindfulness, so we don’t have to keep repeating our mistakes over and over and over again. These are some of the lessons that we have to take with us and apply to all our situations. We take the protection offered by the Buddha and our teachers and make it our own.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140525_Protection_to_Take_with_You.mp3>