Strong Through Mindfulness

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Most of us learn about mindfulness starting with mindfulness meditation, mindfulness of breathing, the four foundations or establishings of mindfulness. But in the time of the Buddha, mindfulness started much earlier in your practice, memorizing, you memorized passages of the Dhamma. You heard it from the Buddha, tried to take it to heart, and then you maintained it, as they said. In other words, you kept it in mind. And the Buddhist talks were designed for that. We complain about the repetition in the talks, but that’s for ease of memorization. For the people who couldn’t memorize a whole talk, often he would summarize the main points at the very end with a verse. So you could remember the verse, and then as you thought about the verse, you could remember bits and pieces of what the Buddha had to say. When the Buddha talks about mindfulness as a strength, it encompasses both, both the memorization and the establishing of mindfulness as a meditation practice. And the two help each other along. Because when you’re meditating, you want to keep in mind the instructions, what to do. What to do when something unskillful comes up in the mind, how you recognize it as something unskillful. That’s a function of mindfulness. And then you remember what to do with it. If something skillful comes up, or if it needs to be developed, you work on it. It needs to be maintained, you maintain it. You’ve got to keep these things in mind. And on top of that, there are the whole set of values that go along with the practice. And you want to be able to keep those in mind. Because you find yourself sometimes in difficult circumstances, and it’s good to remember that passage or two in the Dhamma that’s relevant to what’s going on. So you can keep your values straight. There’s a scene at the very end of Thomas Mann’s novel, The Magic Mountain, where the main character suddenly finds himself thrown into the trenches of World War I. He’s walking along, and words of a Schubert song come to him. And in the midst of all that misery and the war, the words of the song give him some comfort. The words of the Buddha are meant to give comfort, too. The statement about the two bandits. Even if people are sawing you up with a two-handled saw into little pieces, you should still have goodwill for them. It’s an image that sticks in the mind. It’s meant to stick in the mind. And John Lee tells a story about a mother monkey who ends up dying out of concern for her baby monkey. There’s nothing plain about that image, but it’s one that sticks in the mind. In this case, the point that John Lee is making has to do with attachment, clinging. So you want to keep these images in mind. You want to keep these words in mind. Because they provide you with values, even when everything else gets stripped away in your life. And it will. The image of aging, illness, and death will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to us. It’s going to happen sooner or later. So we want to have something good to hold on to. Which is why it’s good to memorize some passages of the Dhamma. This is why we chant them in Pali and in translation. If the Pali doesn’t mean much to you, well, the translation will. It’s a rhythm of your own mind. Then, as the Buddha said, you take that quality you’ve developed through memorizing passages to get better and better at holding things in mind. It makes it easier to settle down and do the real work of the meditation. Because we’re not here just to be aware of things, to watch their coming and going. The Buddha wants us to be discerning, which means seeing when they come, why they come, how they come, and how we can recognize when something comes, whether it’s to be developed or abandoned. That’s the kind of discernment we want. And that depends on keeping things in mind. When the Buddha talks about making yourself an island in the flood, so you don’t drown, it comes down to establishing mindfulness. Like we’re doing right now, focusing on the breath in and of itself. You want to put aside all other thoughts. And to put them aside, sometimes you just say, “No.” And other times you remember what the Buddha had to say about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. Sometimes you remember your own ingenuity and remind yourself of why you don’t want to go to things outside of the breath right now. But you also have the Buddha’s images of the quail that leaves its ancestral territory and a hawk swoops down and gets it. Or the monkeys who leave their safe space where only monkeys go when they go into areas where human beings go as well. And they get caught, killed. Those images, again, are pretty drastic, but they’re meant to give you a strong sense that you really do want to master this skill. Of keeping the mind with the object you’ve decided you want to keep it with. And it’s not going to waver and it’s not going to slip off. So we’re here to remember what to do. And then to do it. Remember to develop skillful qualities inside, abandon unskillful ones. Being alert to what we’re doing. Keeping in mind what we should be doing. And then being ardent in doing it well. Of those three qualities, mindfulness, alertness, ardency. And Chan-li focuses on the ardency as being the wisdom factor. We have this knowledge, we’ve memorized these things. The wise response is to want to do this well. It requires effort, but it’s effort well spent. And again, to make that kind of effort you have to remind yourself of why it’s good. So memory functions in a lot of ways to keep you here, to keep you alert, to get the mind in the concentrations in such a way that you can develop your own discernment. So instead of just remembering what the Buddha had to say, you can produce some discernment of your own as to what’s skillful, what’s not, what works and what doesn’t work in your mind. You borrow the Buddha’s wisdom to begin with and use that as a template for figuring out how to make some wisdom of your own. That’s when you have an island in the flood. Because that’s the Buddha’s image for a world. It’s a flood, a river that’s overflowing its banks, and it can pull you along. He has lots of images associated with rivers. There’s the river that, as you’re being swept along, you see that there’s some grasses on the side, on the banks. So you don’t hold on to the grasses, but the grasses either get uprooted or they cut your hands. That’s a symbol for trying to hold on to your body, hold on to your feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, the aggregates. You need something better. You need that island which you build through your mindfulness. And your alertness and your ardency. That island becomes the island of concentration. There’s a school of thought that says mindfulness practice is one thing, concentration practice is something else. But the Buddha didn’t belong to that school of thought. To him, mindfulness is when it’s really done well. And it is something you do. You’re not just passing it along. You’re not just passively watching or sitting here watching things go by as you do nothing. You’ve got a lot of work to do. That’s another school of thought that’s strange, that mindfulness is something that’s just always there, and all you have to do is get back and relax into that mindfulness, and there you are. Well, where are you? You’re in the aggregate of consciousness. The duty with regard to that is not just to be with it, it’s to try to comprehend it. Figure out how you’re clinging to it, and learning how you can let go. And to get that kind of discernment into what’s going on, you have to learn how to take the aggregates and make them into that island, the island of concentration. So here again, you remember what you’re supposed to do, and you get down to work, and you do it. This is how you become strong through memorizing, strong through developing a memory, learning how to use your memory well. It’s part of the information that your inner critic should be educated with. Many of us don’t like the idea of an inner critic, but if we had no inner critic, there’d be no bounds to our actions. There’d be no good or bad. What you have to do is train your inner critic with right view. So it’s actually helpful. It becomes part of the path, learning how to talk to yourself. I notice again and again and again, wherever I go to teach, a lot of people have their number one problem as not knowing how to talk to themselves. So again, you try to remember, how did the Buddha talk to himself? How does he recommend that you talk to yourself? When you remember these good things, then your inner critic actually becomes part of your inner strength, rather than as something destructive inside. He knows how to encourage, how to point out things that you might have forgotten. For the sake of your genuine well-being. So try to use your faculty of memory as a part of the path to making you strong. We live in a world that demands a lot of us. It’s probably going to demand a lot more. So having this inner strength will provide us with that island we need so that we don’t get overwhelmed by the flame.

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