A Monument for the Mind

October 21, 2021

Today is the Invitation Day, the last day of the rains. Instead of having a bodhimukha, the monks invite one another to criticize them. If they have any doubts about any offenses that may have been committed that haven’t been confessed, they can bring the matter up. Everyone is open to criticism, usually throughout the year. If someone wants to criticize someone or bring an accusation about a rule that was broken or may have been broken, they have to ask permission first. And the monk who’s potentially going to be accused has the right to say no. That’s to protect him from idle and malicious accusations. But there’s also the possibility that the accusation might be true. So there’s this one special day in the year where all the monks say, “Okay, any accusations, I’m willing to listen.” And it’s an ideal time of the year to do that. The monks have lived together for three months. They know one another. They know the accuser, they know the accused. They have a good sense of how to proceed. And if it turns out that the accused is violent and wants to get revenge, tomorrow the other monks can leave. So they’re not stuck there with him, as they would be during the rest of the rains. And if all the monks make their invitation and nobody has any objection, which means it’s a clean bill of health, then they can go their separate ways. With that stamp of approval, the other monks have looked at their behavior for three months and approved of their behavior. Back in the days when monks were wandering around a lot, this was a useful kind of quality control. And, of course, it illustrates an important principle in the practice, the willingness to listen to criticism. It’s only when you’re willing to listen to criticism that you can learn. When the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, he was basically saying, “This is the way you’re acting. In other words, you’re acting on craving and it’s causing suffering, but you can change your ways.” Instead of acting on craving, you act in terms of the beautiful path. You can put an end to the suffering. So the basic message is, you’ve got to change your ways. And in some cases you see where you’re making mistakes. In other cases it’s hard to see. We have our blind spots. And behavior that we’ve accepted for a long time as being perfectly okay may in the eyes of others not be okay at all. We can’t simply go on the strength of our good intentions, because good intentions may have delusion involved with them. And one way of overcoming delusion is to borrow other people’s eyes. Others may be willing to listen to what they have to say based on what they’ve seen or heard or suspected. As the Buddha said, if someone points out your mistakes, points out your errors, pointing out a treasure, an area where you can improve, that’s why we had the invitation this morning. The other thing to mark at the end of the rains is to think back on all the good we’ve done for the rains. As John Fung used to call this, “Making a monument in your life, a monument to goodness.” Those of us who’ve spent the rains together, we’ve had our ideas of how we wanted to accelerate the practice, and now we can look back on the fact that we have accelerated the practice and try to see the good that’s come from that. Because that gives us more judgment to continue with it. After all, goodness is not confined to the period between the full moon in July and the full moon in October. It should be a year-round thing. That was one of Ajahn Mahan’s lessons, that the practice should be in the shape of a circle. A circle has no end. Or you can think of it as being like a fence. You have a fence around your house. You want it to be totally secure. You don’t want there to be any gaps. If there are gaps, then the rest of the fence is pretty useless. There are places where thieves can sneak in, animals can sneak in. It’s the same with your practice. If you practice, say, three months out of the year or something special, but then you let everything go for the nine months, it’s like having a fence around one-quarter of your yard. It doesn’t provide that much protection. Maybe it’s a snow fence that protects you from the prevailing winds in the north. But any bad winds that come in any other direction, any people or animals that would be destructive could come in from any other direction and cause you harm. So it’s good to think of the goodness you’ve done in the course of these three months as something you can continue doing. Think of this monumental goodness you’ve done. And you don’t want it to fall apart out of lack of attention. Because these monuments are there to jog our memory. Memory plays a huge role in the practice of right mindfulness. It’s interesting when the Buddha talks about the practices that make you refuge for yourself. When he says to make the Dhamma your refuge, to make yourself your refuge, he could have pointed to the entire Eightfold Path. But he didn’t. He pointed just to right mindfulness. You can embody, in and of itself, as your point of focus, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Similarly, with feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, and mental qualities in and of themselves. These are things you want to keep in mind. But you also want to be able to keep in mind things that will gladden the mind as part of the practice. This is where having done good is an important part of the practice. You can look back on your past, and you can see that you’ve done good through your generosity, through your virtue, and particularly through past times when you’ve been meditating and you’ve learned lessons from the meditation. This is what makes it special. You notice what’s going on. Years back, I was visiting a group of people in Seattle, and they decided to take me to see the new library that was built there. As we were going through the building, I was noticing the architectural details here and there. One of the women in the group said, “You’re not like other monks. You notice things.” I thought that was a scary thought, the whole point of being a monk. The whole point of being a practitioner is that you notice things. You don’t just put in the hours when you meditate, or just bhutto bhutto bhutto, without reflecting on what you’re doing and noticing the results you’re getting, or just staying with the breath in-out, in-out, in-out, without thinking about it. You’ve got to notice. When you focus here, what are the results? When you focus there, what are the results? What have you been able to do that keeps the mind with the object? It’s when you notice things, that’s when you can remember them, and then you can use them again. And that’s how you become your own refuge, because there are lessons that we can learn throughout life. But if you forget them, it’s as if you didn’t have them. So this is the quality that makes you a refuge. You have a fund of knowledge that you can draw on. It’s not like you’re sitting there trying to memorize it all the time, but it’s there. You’ve noticed this, you’ve noticed that, and you keep it in mind. Tab it at your fingertips when you need it. That way your knowledge can grow. Otherwise you have to keep going back and relearning the basics again and again and again. It’s a habit of trying to remember the good things you’ve done as a way of lifting the mind, gladdening the mind, so it has the energy to practice and has the sense of well-being inside that enables it to settle down. And also remember the lessons, good and bad, that you’ve learned from your previous meditations. Actively try to notice things in your meditation and experiment. Try different kinds of breathing. Try different kinds of focusing. If the breath doesn’t work as a way of getting the mind to settle down right away, you may need another topic. Put it to peace. Put it in peace. So then it can turn to the breath and feel at ease being with the breath. Some people find that it’s good to think about the good they’ve done in the past. John Lee has a long series, though, of reflections that give rise to a strong sense of sanghvega. In other words, sometimes you need the carrot, sometimes you need the stick. But the sense of well-being in the mind settles down. But if you start thinking in terms of sanghvega, you realize that if my mind leaves the breath right now and goes off to something else, where is it going? It’s going to a world that’s full of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. A world that’s very undependable. Why go there? And part of the mind will say, “Well, that’s the world I’m used to.” But if you think about the world in terms of how many lifetimes you’ve been through, as the Buddha said, if you could collect all the bones, it’d be bigger than a mountain. All the bones are just of your one person’s lifetimes. And what do you have to show for it? You’re still mucking around, creating suffering for yourself. If you don’t learn your lesson, that’s what the future’s going to hold, more bones, piles and piles and piles of them, and lessons learned and forgotten, or lessons not even learned. So try to approach your meditation systematically. Think about Ajaan Lee’s observation that when you get the mind into reflection, the mind is in the right concentration. Some of the factors that are in the right concentration are the causes. In other words, direct a thought, an evaluation, singleness, a preoccupation, and then others are the results, a sense of pleasure, rapture. Focus on those causes. How can you direct your thoughts? What are you directing your thoughts to? How are you evaluating? What are you evaluating? You can evaluate the breath. You can evaluate the state of the mind. You can evaluate your perceptions, your feelings. There’s a lot that you’re trying to put together right here. And if you direct your thoughts properly, notice how you’re directing your thoughts. It’s going to lead to more and more knowledge, more things that you can stash away as part of your fund of memories. So when you look back into the past, it’s not just memories with nostalgia for this particular time or that particular time, or the time when you were young, or the time when someone said this or did this for you, or whatever. All of which are memories that really don’t contribute that much to your true well-being. And sometimes they can turn on you. You start thinking about the past, and you start thinking about all the stupid things you did and all the harmful things you did. That’s misusing your memory. That’s the whole point of mindfulness, that you’re trying to train your memory to be useful, to be helpful. Remember the lessons that can apply right now to keeping the mind still, to keeping the mind at peace, to remind you that you want to observe what you’re doing right now so you can learn from it. That’s using your memory. In a beneficial way. So we’re not just here in the present moment, allowing whatever comes up to come up and then not really doing anything with it. We’re actually doing things in the present moment, so we need guidance as to what to do. And that’s where mindfulness comes in. So learn how to use your memory. Because when you learn how to use it right, then it becomes your refuge. It reminds you of all the useful things you need to know, so you can shape the present moment in a way that’s really skillful, and understand the present moment in a way that allows you to gain freedom from it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2021/211021_A_Monument_for_the_Mind.mp3>