A Refuge in Mindfulness (outdoors)

April 10, 2022

Lampao Phut, who is one of the famous Ajahns in Thailand, studied directly with Ajahn Sao, who was Ajahn Mun’s teacher. He was a novice at the time. And he noticed that when Ajahn Sao taught meditation, he would teach it very simply. People would come and ask him how to meditate, and he’d say, “Well, just focus on Bhutto, or focus on the breath.” And if they asked for further explanation, he’d say, “You don’t need any explanation. Just go into it.” So they’d go into it and come back. If they had any problems, he would advise them on their problems. If things were going well, they’d ask him, “Is this right?” He’d say, “Whether it’s right or not, just keep on doing this.” Lampao Phut, at that time, as I said, was a novice. He liked to read a lot. He was saying that when you begin meditation, you have to establish mindfulness. So he went and asked Ajahn Sao why Ajahn Sao didn’t say that people should establish mindfulness. And Ajahn Sao said, “As long as you make up your mind that you’re going to stay with something, that’s establishing mindfulness right there. You don’t have to use fancy words. The important thing is that you stay mindful.” Because the word mindfulness means the ability to remember something. And to make mindfulness right mindfulness, you combine that with alertness, so you see what you’re actually doing. And then you choose, out of the various things you could be remembering right now, you choose only things that are relevant to staying with the breath. In other words, you’re ardent in your mindfulness and ardent in your alertness. So there are these three qualities, mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. They’re there when you make sure that you’re in the right place and you stay in the right place and you’re doing the right things. Because mindfulness is not just a matter of remembering where you want to stay focused, but also remembering that other things will come up in the mind and you have to decide what to do with them. Some thoughts will be useful, other thoughts will not. And you have to learn how to recognize them. It’s in this way where you get the mind to settle down, to be what the Buddha calls the body in and of itself, just the body on its own terms. You’re not interested in the body in the world. In other words, the body in the world is a concern about how it looks to other people, whether it’s strong enough due to the work that the world demands, that kind of issue. Here you’re just looking at the fact that you’ve got a body here and you’re directly experiencing it. And then you remember you can actually breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of well-being inside. You want to develop that. You’re not just putting up with whatever. Because if you want to stay here, you want to use your discernment and figure out how to make the mind want to stay. If you can compare the mind to a committee, you have to make sure you’ve got everybody in the committee on your side here. There may be a few random voices who are not, but you want the majority right here, happy to be here. And so you remember there are ways of breathing that are comfortable for you. So you ask yourself, what does the body need right now? If it’s tired, you may want to use long in and out short. If it’s tense, you might want to use in short and out long. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good and full in the body right now. Think of the breath as a whole body process. You can hold that image in mind. And again, you keep that image in mind. That’s mindfulness, too. In this way, the mind settles down. Sometimes you hear that mindfulness practice is one thing and concentration practice is something else. But the Buddha never explains it that way. After all, look at his explanation for mindfulness. You’re with the body in and of itself, hardened, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reverence. In other words, you stay in with one topic and you’re alert to what you’re doing. And if the thoughts would come in, you put them aside. That’s the mind in concentration. So things all come together like this. Mindfulness, concentration. And then there’s the discernment that helps you stay here. That’s here, too. The discernment as to which perceptions are useful for the breath right now, where to stay focused, how to deal with your hindrances as they come up, which ones you have to pay attention to, which ones you can simply ignore and they’ll go away. All these qualities come together right here. When you can think in these ways, practice in these ways, then you’re taking good care of the mind. When the Buddha compares the various factors of the path to different things outside, the images he uses for mindfulness are largely images of protection and discernment. The protection, that’s the one that’s important about the gatekeeper at the fortress of the frontier, who knows who to let in and who not to let into the fortress. In other words, you learn to recognize skillful mental qualities as they’re beginning to arise, and you learn to recognize unskillful ones as they’re arising. So you can develop the skillful ones and let go of the unskillful ones in time. There’s the image of the island. The Buddha says when you’re practicing mindfulness correctly, you have an island in the middle of a flood. You’ve got the flood of views, the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of ignorance. As long as you’re with right mindfulness, you’re above the flood. You don’t have to be afraid of getting washed away. As for using your discernment, the Buddha compares mindfulness to a goad. A goad is a long stick with a sharp pointy end, something that a farmer uses. You have a buffalo plowing a field, and if the buffalo starts going up to the right, you poke it with the goad on the right side so it turns back to the left. If it’s going too far to the left, you poke it on the left side so it goes back to the right. In other words, you see what should be done, what you want to do. And if you see the mind is wandering off of what you want to do, you poke it. You keep alert, and you keep in mind what your intention is for being here. All these qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—help one another along. So you’re protected by this faculty of the mind that can discern what’s right and what’s wrong, that can remember what’s right and what’s wrong. You recognize these things as they arise in the mind. Mindfulness can be the chairman of the committee, a good chairman, the one who knows who to allow to have a voice in the committee decisions and who to push out. In fact, there’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says mindfulness should be your governing principle, in other words, the person in charge of the committee. I explained what that meant. If there are skillful qualities that haven’t arisen in the mind yet, you do your best to make them arise. You remember to make them arise. If they’re there, you remember not to let them pass away. That means recognizing what they are and recognizing the various skills you need to make the good qualities stronger, to make them more long-lasting. So instead of simply watching things arise and pass away on their own, you take good things, you make them arise, and you prevent them from passing away. That’s when mindfulness is really in charge. That’s when it’s giving you good protection. Because otherwise we live in this world where we learn good things and then we forget them. All too often it’s especially when we most need them. Either the body is weak with disease or we suddenly find ourselves in a difficult situation that requires quick thinking. And if you forget the good lessons you had, you’re lost. But if you can remember them, bring them to bear. Then they offer protection. When I was a young monk, in the year that Ajahn Phuong had passed away, we had a number of monks from outside the monastery move in, trying to take over, creating a lot of difficulties. It was during that time that a lot of the things that Ajahn Phuong had taught me started appearing in my mind. I’d been able to remember them, about how to deal with people saying untrue things, how to deal with people forcing their way on other people in an unfair way. And all of a sudden those lessons that he’d given, which at the time seemed just sort of coming out of nowhere, suddenly had relevance. And the fact that I was able to remember them helped me keep my head, gave me guidance. On what to do, what not to do. And we weathered the situation well. That’s the kind of thing that mindfulness can do for you. Once your ability to remember, to keep things in mind, is strong, then the lessons you’ve learned from the past don’t disappear. So this practice we have of just being mindful of the breath, it’s more than just a way of finding some peace in the present moment. It’s giving us practice in the basic skills we need in order to protect ourselves, not only from difficult things outside, but even more importantly, to protect ourselves from greed, aversion and delusion inside, from that flood of defilements that threatens to wash us away. If you can make your mindfulness island really solid here, then no matter what the flood, you can be safe and on high ground.

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