

Where You Set Your Heart

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One of the ironies of modern Buddhism is how mindfulness is understood. It's defined in the popular imagination as an openness to all things, allowing the mind to go where it wants, being non-judgmental, non-reactive, simply keeping track of what's going on wherever the mind wants to go.

This is very different from the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness. He says you have to establish mindfulness, and that involves two things: One, you've got a frame of reference, such as the body in and of itself. Like the breath right now—you're with the breath on its own terms. Then two, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

In other words, any thoughts that come up with regard to the world, about what you want about the world, about how you're upset about what's going on in the world—you have to put those aside.

You're very definitely making a choice of where you're going to focus your attention and where you're *not* going to focus your attention. You can see this in the different images that the Buddha gives for mindfulness: the quail who stays in his territory, the monkey who stays in *his* safe territory, the person whose head is on fire and is mindful to put the fire out.

In other words, anything that has nothing to do with putting the fire out right now, you just put that aside. Stay right here. Set your heart, set your mind on staying right here. This is where you find your mainstay. This is where you find your refuge. When the Buddha talks about making yourself as your refuge, this is how he defines it: the establishings of mindfulness.

Here, again, there's a very definite image of being focused in the right place, and what it means *not* to be focused in the right place. As you stay with your frame of reference, it's like being on an island in the midst of a flood. If you leave the frame of reference, you're washed away by the waters of the flood: the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views, the flood of ignorance.

So you're very definitely making a choice: Where are you going to go? Where are you going to look for safety?

There's a great conversation where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha. Pasenadi is usually presented as something of a naïf who, after having gained power, suddenly has a Buddha come and live near his city. It gets him thinking about spiritual issues, and about life in general. Every now and then, he'll come to the Buddha and say, "You know"—and then he'll say something that's perfectly

obvious. And the Buddha confirms that Yes, that is true. In this case, he says, “You know, people who misbehave, even though they have an army, leave themselves unprotected. People who behave themselves well, even if they don’t have an army, leave themselves protected.” And the Buddha confirms that that’s true.

This is your protection, this is your mainstay, this is your refuge: choosing where you’re going to set your heart. As the Buddha said, the self is its own mainstay. When you have a self well-trained, you have a mainstay hard to attain. So you don’t just wander around, gazing at whatever captures your attention. You set your heart on being right here and you do everything you can to pull away any threads of thoughts that extend out into the world, that would connect you to the world.

During my years over in Thailand, I came to accept the fact that people would come to Buddhism for the sake of protection. They saw the world as a dangerous place to be, and the world didn’t have their best interests in mind. So they had to take responsibility for their own safety. As a result, they came to the Dhamma for safety.

So I was somewhat taken aback when I came back to the States and saw the Dhamma being discussed as a celebration of our interconnectedness: learning how to be vulnerable, learning how to be open to our connectedness with all things. And that would be our safety.

But as we’ve seen, the world doesn’t have your interests in mind. There are people out there willing to risk annihilation of the human race just for—what? Power? Wealth? Status? It’s crazy. People want to reset our lives in line with whatever they think is good for us, without any input from us. They tend to think, “Well, people can be redundant. Some people are unnecessary.” Some people even say that we have no free will at all, so it doesn’t matter what happens to us. In a world like that, you’ve got to find your own mainstay. You assert your own freedom of will by choosing your mainstay and developing it.

When we practice mindfulness in the way the Buddha described it, being very careful about where we *do* focus the mind and where we *don’t* focus the mind, of course it’s going to lead the mind to right concentration. The instructions for right mindfulness are just that: instructions on how to get the mind into right concentration. In fact, the Thai translation for the Pali word *samādhi*, which we translate into English as “concentration,” is *tang chai man*. Idiomatically, it means, “to be firmly intent.” Literally, it’s “to firmly set your heart.” That’s how you find refuge: You firmly set your heart in the right place.

If you set your heart on the world, you're exposing yourself to danger, because the world is not a safe place. There are people who mean you well; there are a lot of people out there that *don't* mean you well. There are a lot of things out there that, when you get involved with them, can eat your goodness away. The problem is that if you're not trained, *you're* not a safe place, either.

So you have to keep reminding yourself of this fact. This is why mindfulness, the ability to keep things in mind, is part of your refuge. You remind yourself of where the good things in life are, where the safe things in life are. Their potential is in here. It's simply a matter of actualizing that potential. In the four noble truths, the first two truths describe the way things are. The third and the fourth, though, describe the way things *can be* if you set your heart on them. It's up to you to take those truths and make them true, make them realities in your heart.

This is why the teachings on karma are so basic to the Buddha's teachings: It's what you choose to do that's going to make you safe or not safe. You have that right to choose. You have the ability to choose. The people the Buddha criticized most were the ones who denied us that freedom of choice. It's simply up to us to make the most of it. We do have that opportunity. We can train ourselves.

It's so easy to give in to the voices inside that grow tired of the practice and get discouraged. You have to see that discouragement is not your friend. You also have to watch out for the voices outside, people saying that you're being selfish by looking inside for refuge: "Take care of the world first!" they tell you. Well, is the world going to take care of you? When you're sick, when you're dying, as you die, there comes a point where even the best-intentioned people in the world cannot help you at all. That's when you have to fall back on yourself, the skills you've developed, the extent to which you have made your mind its own refuge, its own mainstay.

So as you're focusing here, it's simply a matter of having your priorities straight. Set your mind on what you're doing. Set your heart on finding true safety. The potential lies in here. It's up to you to take that potential and make it real.