

*Songkran Talk — April 13, 2014*

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa*

Okay, let's sit and meditate for a while. Close your eyes and focus on your breath. When the breath comes in, watch it all the way in. When it goes out, watch it all the way out. And try to see if it's comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you can change it. Try longer breathing shorter and deeper or more shallow, heavier, lighter. Find a breath that feels good to stay with right here in the present moment.

We're starting another new year. The Thai's have the advantage over almost any country I can think of. They have New Year four times a year. There's the Western New Year, then there's Chinese New Year, then there's Trut Thai, the original Thai New Year, and finally there's Songkran.

At the beginning of each year you have the opportunity to clean the slate from the previous year—in other words, to look back on the past year and see what things you did that were good and what things you did that were not so good, and make up your mind to improve yourself. This is how a year becomes auspicious. It's not auspicious because of things outside or the stars or anything. It's auspicious because of what you *do*. After all, you've got this opportunity to live a human life. You've been given one more year to start. So you want to start it well.

Now, human beings being what they are, it often happens that your resolutions at the start of the new year disappear a couple weeks after the new year. If you have four New Years, it gives you opportunity four times to start them up again. But this is the last chance this year. Like the midnight bus, this

would be the last bus of the day, so make sure that you set things up right this time.

One of the reasons why we meditate is to set our minds upright so that we can think about our life in the past year, and think about what's coming up for the coming year, what we want to *make* of this new year.

The Buddha talks about this quality. It's one of the perfections, the perfection of determination: when you make up your mind that regardless of outside circumstances, you're going to stick to what you know is right, what you know is good, what you know is helpful for yourself and for the people around you.

So take some time to think about what you would like to do with this year or what remains of the year. What would you like to make out of it?

The Buddha recommends four qualities to bring to this investigation: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and peace of mind.

*Discernment* involves thinking about what really is wise to strive for, and what's the wise way to bring that about.

What do you want to achieve in your life? Don't let other people set your goals for you. You have to set the goals for what *you* want out of this lifetime. But use discernment in choosing your goals. What, when you attain it, really will make you happy? And what, if you try to attain it, will set you up for more trouble? You have to make the choice.

Once you've made the choice, then you have to decide what's the most skillful way to bring those good results about. The Buddha recommends being virtuous, developing powers of concentration, being generous, and developing qualities of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

In terms of virtue, he recommends observing the precepts. You can look over the five precepts. In which one are you lacking? We just took them just now. What were you taking?

The first precept is against killing. This applies to any living being.

The second one is against stealing, taking things that are not given to you.

The third one is against having illicit sex—in other words, getting involved with someone who already has a partner, or is too young to be having that kind of relationship, or who has made a vow of celibacy. You don't want to get sexually involved with those people at all.

The fourth precept is against telling lies. And this includes white lies—even things you think might make other people feel better. If something's not true, you don't want it coming out of your mouth, because if they catch on to the fact that you lied, they won't trust your words any more. As the Buddha said, if someone has no shame about telling a deliberate lie, there's no evil that person will not do. So of the precepts this is probably the most important and yet it's the easiest to break—which means that you have to examine your speech every time you open your mouth: Is this true, is this beneficial, is this the right time to say it? That kind of questioning could be something you decide to do this year to give rise to the true happiness you want.

And then finally the fifth precept is against taking intoxicants. We're intoxicated enough as it is—with youth, health, and our life—and then on top of that we add other intoxicants to the point where we can't see things clearly.

So you want to check your precepts to make sure that they're all in good shape. If they're not, that gives you something to work with for the coming year.

Once you've used your discernment to decide what you want out of this year and how you're going to go about it, then the next thing is to be *truthful*. Stick with that decision. Don't let anything deflect you—unless you find something that would be much better: a higher goal or a more effective way of reaching the goal you've already set for yourself. You can make those kinds of changes, but you don't want to lower your sights or let up on the good practices that you've made up your mind to follow.

The third quality is *relinquishment*, giving up the things that get in way of the goals that you want. This applies not only to things that are obviously unskillful. Sometimes there are many things on different levels of skillfulness, and you want to be able to stick with the highest level and not just fall for other things that are lower. And looking at the kind of happiness you want, sometimes a really worthwhile happiness requires that you give up certain pleasures. You have to be willing to give them up, through relinquishment and generosity, learning how to make sacrifices. This is an important part of focusing your mind on what you really want out of life and sticking with it.

And then finally the fourth quality is *peace of mind*. You want to develop a sense of inner calm and wellbeing that allows you to stick with the path when it gets difficult. This is why we practice concentration: to have a sense of nourishment that allows you to stay calm and collected. At the very least, you can just focus on the breath for a few minutes and clear away the clouds of the mind, clear away the tensions in the body. That allows the mind to think more clearly. It gives you a sense of inner health and inner nourishment that allows you to stick with the path.

So as you look toward the new year, ask yourself :What do you want to make out of it? Are you going to let other people make your year for you? Are you going to let your defilements make the year for you? Who's going to be in

charge here? You want the wise part of your mind, the truthful part of your mind, the generous and the peaceful parts of your mind to be the ones in charge.

Try to bring these qualities to your life and to the decisions you make about how you want to shape your life—because if *you* don't shape it, someone else will shape it for you. Who knows what agendas they have? And if these qualities of the mind, the wise, truthful, generous, peaceful qualities of the mind are not in charge, what *is* in charge in there?

The mind is like a committee. It's got all kinds of voices inside, so you have to be very careful about who's taking over the committee meetings, who's making the decisions. If any committee members are unskillful, you want to keep them out of the meeting room if you can. If you can't, just learn how to get around them, so that the good members of the committee can be in charge to make this life, this year at least, a year that you're proud to look back on at the end of the year.

So take this time. We've got this opportunity now, one last time this year, to look back at the previous year and make up our minds about what we want the coming year to be.

Try to make your choice wisely, with as much truthfulness as you can.