

Blessings

December 31, 2016

One of the suttas we chanted just now was the *Mangala Sutta*. The word *mangala* means blessing. It also means protection. The story behind the sutta is that a deva came to see the Buddha and asked him, “People talk about protection. They talk about blessings. What is a real protection? What’s a real blessing?”

The Buddha gave a list, starting with very simple things—not associating with fools, associating with wise people—ultimately building up to complete awakening, the point being that blessings don’t come from other things. They don’t come from the stars. They don’t come from the words of other people. They come from your actions. You protect yourself with your actions; you bless yourself with your actions.

This is one of the reasons why we’re here tonight. We send off the old year and welcome the new by training the mind to be skillful, focusing on the good things we can do with the mind right here, right now, squeezing some more goodness out of the old year before it goes. That’s one of the blessings listed in that sutta: the blessing of heedfulness, realizing that time flows on, flows on. It’s like a water faucet that you can’t turn off, and it keeps flowing, flowing, flowing. If you don’t find a use for the water, it all goes to waste.

So here we are, finding use for this water in training the mind, because that’s the Buddha’s definition of an auspicious day. And of course many auspicious days translate into an auspicious year. You’re on top of what’s happening in the mind now, right now, and doing your duty.

You know what the duties are. On the one hand, they relate to the teachings on skillful and unskillful action. If you see that the mind is doing anything unskillful, or you’re doing anything unskillful in your words or your deeds, you abandon that and you give rise to skillful qualities instead. Those duties, the Buddha said, hold across the board.

The same with the four noble truths: Each of them has a duty, too. You try to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, and realize its cessation by developing the path. So those are our duties right now. We’re focusing on the breath, we’re trying to develop right mindfulness, right effort and right concentration—all of that based on right view. These are all qualities of the path, factors of the path that we want to develop.

This is why we use the breath as a gathering place for the mind. Be aware of where the breath comes in and where it goes out, or where you *feel* it coming in

and going out, which may not be at the nose. Sometimes you feel the energy of the breath moving in different places in the body. Try to gain a sense, when you breathe in and breathe out, of exactly how you feel it. The Buddha is asking you to get very sensitive to how your body feels from within, as a way of inhabiting the present moment so that you can observe the mind clearly in the present moment as well.

But first you've got to inhabit it. You've got to feel solid, well-based, and at home here. Otherwise, it's hard to observe anything. Think of what way of breathing might be comfortable. And if you've got something that already is comfortable, try to maintain it until it doesn't feel comfortable any more. Then make changes. Try to keep on top of what needs to be done.

This is how you develop the basic qualities needed for concentration: mindfulness, i.e., keeping something in mind; alertness, watching what you're doing; and ardency, trying to do it well. You're keeping the breath in mind. You're watching the mind and the breath at the same time to make sure they stay together.

And if the mind slips off, immediately come back. As soon as you realize you've lost the breath, you come back. Let go of whatever thought it was. If it's a thought you haven't completed, leave it incomplete. Leave the ends dangling. You don't have to take care of every little thought that comes in the mind.

All too often, we're like spiders. We have to wrap up every little bug that comes into our web. But if you spend all your time wrapping up the thoughts, you'll never get back to the breath. So leave the thoughts incomplete; leave them dangling. Continue the story of your breath coming in and going out, and the story of the mind settling down with the breath right now.

While you're with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, not only in the main spot where it's most obvious, but also, as you begin to settle in, notice how it feels in other parts of the body as well. Can you coordinate the breathing sensations in the body so that when you breathe in, it feels like the whole body is being nourished; you breathe out, and the whole body is being nourished? You don't squeeze the energy at the end of the out breath. You don't pump it in and make it tight at the end of the in-breath. Allow things to flow evenly and smoothly, and you'll be ready to settle in.

We're here in the present moment not because it's a great place to stay, but because it's an essential place to stay if you want to work on the mind. It's only here that you can actually observe the mind in action. In one sense, we're always in the present moment. It's simply that we're thinking about a thought in the present moment that refers to some other time-frame or space-frame. You want

to be able to step out of those thought-worlds and just be here in the current world of breathing in and breathing out so you can see the thoughts as processes. You want to see where it is in the thoughts where they hook you—especially things like greed, aversion, delusion, fear, grief, or jealousy: When they hook you, why do you go with them? What’s the appeal? And if you go with them, what are the results?

The Buddha himself said that he got on the right path to awakening when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two types. On the one hand, there were thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness. Those were the unskillful ones. The skillful ones were the ones imbued with renunciation—in other words, not getting fascinated with thinking about sensual pleasures; non-ill will, actually thinking thoughts of goodwill and equanimity; and harmlessness, with thoughts of compassion.

So the Buddha judged his thoughts on where they came from and then also where they went. If they were coming from the unskillful motivations, he would hold those thoughts in check because he knew that they would, as he said, create a bend in the mind. The mind would lean and be inclined in that direction. The more you think about something, the more you bend in that direction. The mind starts leaning over, like a tree that’s been bent from an early age. It doesn’t stand up straight and tall. But if his thoughts were motivated by renunciation, non-ill will, or harmlessness, he’d let himself think those thoughts.

But then after a while, he realized that even if the thoughts were skillful, thinking about those things all the time would tire the mind. That’s why he wanted to bring the mind into concentration. Then the mind could have a place to rest.

So create a sense of being here in the present moment so that you can rest in the present moment. Not that you’re going to rest here forever. You want to rest to gather your strength because the mind has been running around all over the place. If it’s going to do any decent work, it first has to rest. Then, when it’s rested, you start looking at what comes up in the mind and see where it’s creating any unnecessary stress for itself.

Ideally, you want to see if there’s any unnecessary stress in the concentration itself so that you don’t get easily distracted. Is the way you breathe placing a burden on you? Could you breathe in a more refined way and still feel nourished by the breath? Or the way you visualize the breath to yourself: Is that creating a problem? Sometimes you think the breath can come in and out only accompanied by certain sensations. And so you create those sensations even though they’re not

necessary. If you can see that they're not necessary and can allow them to relax, it's like a solvent going through the body to dissolve them away.

As you work on your perceptions and the actual mechanics of the breathing, and as the mind begins to settle down more and more, you find there's less and less need to breathe. You don't suppress the breath, but you just don't need to breathe in and out. Your oxygen needs are met one way or another, and the mind comes to more and more stillness. There's less distraction even from the breath. The breath doesn't distract the mind, and that's when the mind can see itself clearly.

That's the point when you can start to observe the mind and deal with even more refined issues as they come up because you begin to realize that greed, aversion, and delusion, when they come, first come in little, tiny whispers. If you catch the whisper and breathe right through it—if you can zap it—it doesn't have a chance to grow. This puts you more on top of things in the mind. It doesn't totally solve the problem, but it clears the decks so that this becomes your place to stay. Whatever comes up, you can see it coming from a far distance away. It's a much safer place to be.

That way, when the mind does get distracted, you can start asking questions about it because you know you've got a better place to stay than the distractions. All too often, the reason we're distracted is because we don't know where to stay. There's no sense of pleasure; there's nothing to feed on, so the mind goes looking for a place to nibble on something. Something comes along, catches its fancy, and you're off. You want to be able to see that process, to see how these things arise. When they leave, how do they leave? That gives you a sense of what the cause is.

Then you want to look at what the Buddha calls the allure. Why do you go, say, for anger? All too often, we know that we do stupid things under the power of anger. Many times we want to get rid of it, but then we just keep going back to it again. Or with lust: Sometimes you've seen the drawbacks of lust, but you just keep going back again. Part of the reason is that you have nothing else to go to—nothing better to go to.

So with the concentration, you try to provide yourself with something better. But even then, there's some allure that you're not seeing, some little hook in the mind that goes for these things. It thinks it's going to get something out of them that it doesn't really get. These things lie to you and you believe them 100 percent. So you want to learn how to see through those lies. They don't provide the satisfaction they promise, or the satisfaction that you think you get out of them.

When you actually see in action, "Okay, this is why I go for that," then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks. And if the mind is established enough in

concentration, it can see a lot more clearly what the relative weight is of those things. That's when you develop dispassion.

In this way, insight is a value judgment. You look at the things you've been feeding on and you finally realize that it's not worth it. It's that sense of "It's not worth it" coupled with the fact that "I don't have to": That's how you let go.

And when you can do that, that's when you're having an auspicious day. Keep that that up through the year, and you have an auspicious year. It comes from examining your actions, cleaning out your own house and making it your resolve that your goodness is not going to depend on the world outside.

Whether the year outside is a good year or a bad year, there are a lot of things out there and a lot of people out there that you cannot control. If your happiness depends on the actions of other people, you're setting yourself up for a fall. You've got to find a resource inside. You've got to find a place inside where you can provide and produce your own happiness. And you do it by cleaning out the mind in this way, gaining an understanding of what's going on, so that the mind doesn't lie to itself anymore—doesn't fool itself anymore. Because if you go for these little pleasures that come from these states of mind, you're missing out on a much larger pleasure, a much larger happiness that can be found inside.

The Buddha's not telling you to let go of these things because he's a harsh, stern taskmaster. It's because there is a better happiness in life. And if you're willing to give up your normal feeding habits and retrain your hunger, you can develop a hunger for something that's really solid—or what the Buddha called the noble search. He said most of us search for things that are going to age, grow ill, or die. Either that, or we will age, grow ill, or die before they go. And if your life is devoted to that, there's nothing really noble about the life. But if you search for something that's free from aging, illness, and death, that's a noble activity—a noble search.

That's what gives nobility to your life and makes all your time auspicious. It depends on your own resolve. Nobody else encourages you. Remember the Buddha in his time. Nobody encouraged him on his path. This is a desire that has to come from within. But it's a goodness that comes from within, and you want to nurture it because it allows you to find a happiness that comes from within that nothing else can touch. That, as the Buddha said, is the ultimate blessing, the ultimate protection.

When touched by the ways of the world, as the verse says, the mind doesn't shake. Things come and go: gain and loss, status, loss of status; pleasure, pain; praise and criticism. The mind has something, though, that's not touched by these things at all, and that's when it gets really good.