

## *What Am I Becoming?*

*December 31, 2019*

Here we are at the end of the year, and as you practice you should remember that and forget it. You forget it in the sense that the practice itself is *akaliko*, timeless. The principles are the same whether it's the beginning of the year, the end of the year, or the middle of the year. You're trying to develop mindfulness, keeping the breath in mind, and alertness, watching the breath: What's it doing right now? And how is your mind relating to the breath? You're also developing ardency: You want to do this well because this is the only path out.

So is the breath comfortable? If it's not comfortable, you can change it. Is the mind staying with the breath? If it's not, is it a problem with the breath or with the mind? You've got time to check these things out. Experiment with different kinds of breathing; experiment with different places of focusing your mind. If the mind's hung up on some issue from the day, learn how to think about that issue in a way that you can put it aside, so that the mind can settle in with the breath and have a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging here.

All of these principles are timeless. But at the same time it's good to think of the passage of time. The Buddha has you reflect every day: "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I becoming right now?" You can think back to where you were this time last year. How are you different now? Hopefully you've improved in the practice. But take stock. What are you becoming? Because what you're doing, what you're clinging to, determines what you become.

We know that clinging is the cause of suffering, but clinging also plays a part in the path, and learning how to figure out which kind of clinging is good for you and which kind of clinging is not is an important part of developing discernment on the path.

There are four kinds of clinging in all. The first one is sensual clinging and that has no role in the path. It's the clinging to your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—how this would taste good or how that would look good, this would smell good, you'd like to eat this, you'd like to see that. You can think about these things for long periods of time and you can cling to the pleasure that kind of thinking can give, but it doesn't help you on the path.

Now, there will be sensual pleasures on the path. You can't totally do without them. But your fascination with planning for them and then reminiscing about how great that pleasure was, how great this pleasure was: That gets in the way of the path because you're trying to develop right concentration here, which is

another thing you can actually cling to in a beneficial way—clinging to habits and practices.

You have to make a distinction. Which habits and practices do you cling to that are getting in the way? Which ones do you cling to that are actually helpful? Clinging to the practice of meditation is not a bad thing. There will come a day when you let go of all clinging, but in the meantime—to get there—you have to hold on.

Think of the image of the raft. You put together a raft out of twigs and leaves. It may not look pretty. In other words, it is something you fabricate, something you put together. We're not sitting here waiting for the nibbana yacht to come over from the other shore to pick us up and take us back. We have to put together a raft out of what we've got here. We've got the breath; we've got directed thought and evaluation. These are things we're doing all the time: breathing in, breathing out; thinking about this, evaluating that. So we take these things we're doing all the time and we point them in the right direction. We've got perceptions and images in the mind; feelings that we develop through the way we breathe. These are things we're doing all the time. But if we get them in line with the practice, they can become part of the path. And you hold onto the raft as you make an effort, as the Buddha said, with your hands and feet to swim across. If you let go of the raft, you get swept away.

So you want to have a daily practice of training the mind to settle down. And view it as something that's as important to you as anything else that you would do on a daily basis—actually, more important. After all, you brush your teeth every day, you eat every day, why can't you look after your mind every day? Try to hold onto this practice as something of essential worth. It's your good food. Because when the Buddha talks about clinging, the word he uses can also mean taking sustenance. This is your nourishment. So the practice of the precepts, the practice of meditation: The more you do these things, then the more you become a meditator, the more you become a practitioner—and that's a good thing to become.

The same with clinging to views: Views can cause you suffering or they can be part of the path, as when you hold onto the right views, understanding suffering correctly. What kind of suffering is causing your problems? What kind of pain is causing your problems? What kind of pain is not really the problem? As the Buddha pointed out, there are things in the world you have to accept. The body ages. It gets ill. It dies. These are things we can push off for a little while but ultimately they're going to have to happen no matter who you are. As long as you're a being, the Buddha says, you're going to have to experience aging, illness,

and death. The question is, do you have to suffer from them? That's where you can make a difference. And you have to hold that view in mind. Hold onto that view. Because otherwise you drift back to blaming your suffering on things outside, thinking of yourself as a victim of outside events—and that doesn't help on the path at all.

Regardless of whatever bad things there are out in the world—and we don't deny that there are bad things out there—the important issue is realizing that the extent to which you're suffering from them has to do with your own lack of skill in dealing with them. As long as you hold onto that view, it's not laying blame on you, it's actually offering you hope that you can get out of these things. After all, if you had to change the world to be just the way you want it, forcing everybody to fall in line with your ideas, you would never come to the end of things. But realizing that suffering is something you're doing—it's an active verb, it's coming from actions you're doing but you don't have to do them: That's the view that helps you find a way out, so that's the view you want to cling to.

So again, are you clinging to right view? Are you becoming a person of right view? That's one thing you can become as days and nights fly past. You can ask yourself to what extent you move back and forth, sometimes blaming things outside, sometimes admitting that you're the agent that's causing the suffering. To what extent are you heading more and more in the direction of right view? That's something worth taking stock of every day, every day, every month, every year.

And then there's clinging to doctrines of the self. On the one hand, this can lead to all kinds of suffering as you identify with something and then feel you've got to protect it. When the Buddha talks about self, he's not referring only to the idea of a permanent self. There's also the idea of the self that could die at the end of the life of the body. And it's not the case that you could cling only to the idea of a permanent self or you could suffer only from the idea of a permanent self. In fact, people who hold to the idea that what they are is something that's going to die, get very attached. They'll do anything not to die. Even people who have a very fluid idea about their gender, about their identity, hold on very tightly to that. There's a lot of suffering there, too.

"Self" is however you define yourself. If you cling to the wrong ways of defining yourself, you're just going to cause more and more suffering. But if you cling to skillful ideas of self—that you're capable, you're responsible, you're the kind of person you can learn, a person who's not stuck in his or her bad habits, who can recognize bad habits for what they are and be willing to make the change: That idea of self is a good one to hold onto because it opens the path instead of closing it.

So as days and nights fly past, fly past, the question is: What are you holding onto? And how consistently are you holding onto practices, views, ideas of yourself that are on the path? The more consistently you can hold on in these ways, the better, because otherwise you're going to hold onto the old ways that pull you down.

In other words, you've got the twigs and the leaves and the branches on this shore and you just hold onto them right here. You don't make them into a raft. You cling to the trees. Maybe you hug the trees. But as the Buddha said, staying on this shore is a dangerous place. There are animals coming after you, vipers, thieves waiting to plunder you. In other words you've got the sufferings that come from the aggregates, you've got the sufferings that come from the six sense spheres, you've got the sufferings from your greed, aversion, and delusion. These things are going to plunder you as much as they can as long as you're on this shore. The only safe course of action is to get to the other shore.

So what are you becoming? Are you becoming the person who stays here and tries to say, "Well, let's make an ideal world here on this shore"? Or are you going to cling to the raft and make the effort to get across? These are choices you make every day, every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out. You make them at the end of the year, you make them at the beginning of the year, you make them in the middle of the year. So try to become timeless in the way you hold onto the path, so that regardless of which day of the year the question is asked—what am I becoming right now?—the answer is, "I'm becoming a Dhamma practitioner. I'm becoming a person on the path who stays on the path."

Ajaan Lee has a nice passage where he talks about most people straddle two different paths—the path to the end of suffering and the path that leads to more suffering. And when you straddle two paths like that, it's a very awkward position to be in and a very uncomfortable one. It's better than someone who's totally on the path to more and more suffering, but still we don't get full advantage of the path that could take us away from suffering.

So try to be the kind of person who's always on the path. If you're going to cling, cling to the things that help you get on the path and stay there so that when the Buddha asks you—"Days and nights are flying past, flying past, what are you becoming right now?"—you can give an answer you'd be proud to give.