

## *Near to the Buddha*

*July 3, 2020*

There's a sutta, the Mangala Sutta, where the Buddha lists various ways you can be a blessing to yourself. In those days, they would have little ceremonies that people would perform—tying strings around people's wrists and other little things like that—that were supposed to be blessings. But the Buddha said that the real blessings are when you yourself act skillfully, because you provide yourself with protection at the same time.

The number one blessing is not associating with fools, and associating with wise people instead, because the people you associate with tend to determine the kind of person you're going to become. Your behavior tends to follow theirs. There are many people in the world that you can associate with, so try to be choosy in deciding who you want to spend your time with, who you want to be close to.

And "being close," here, doesn't necessarily mean physically close. As the Buddha once said, someone can be right at the edge of his robe, but if they don't practice the Dhamma, they're far away. Whereas those who practice the Dhamma are right next to him. This is why the term for lay follower – *upasaka, upasika* – means literally "someone who's close." And again, that's "close" in terms of your behavior. When you're close in this way, then simply by the way you act, by the way you speak, by the way you think, you're near to the Buddha.

The Buddha's your refuge, so you want to be close to your refuge. You don't want to be far away. What this means is you bring the qualities of the Buddha inside yourself. That's when you can really depend on them, and that's where they're really safe. They're your safe space inside to protect you, not only from dangers outside but also from dangers in your own mind. Ultimately, those are the ones that are really dangerous. Other people can hurt you, they can even kill you, but the results go only as far as this lifetime. But through your actions—your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—you can do yourself a lot of damage that goes beyond just this lifetime, so you need a source of safety that's nearby.

It's like the ground squirrels and the rabbits. You drive down the road, and suppose the rabbit is on the left side of the road but its hole is on the right side of the road. It sees the car coming and it's going to run out into the road to get to its hole. It ends up exposing itself to danger. It would have been a lot safer to just stay where it was. That's because it's far away from its home, and there are dangers between it and its home.

So you want to be close to your home. This is one of the reasons why, when we meditate, we don't meditate on things far away. We meditate on the mind; we meditate on the breath. The breath is the closest thing in the world to your mind. Even in your own body, there's nothing that's closer to you than the breath. When you learn to develop qualities of

mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, discernment around the breath, then every time you breathe, there they are, right nearby.

In this way, you become a real friend to yourself. The reason we fall for bad friends outside is because we're not really friendly to ourselves, we can't really depend on ourselves. We think we can find someone else outside who will take care of us. And once in a long, long while there may be somebody like that, but even with the best of people, there's going to be an end to the relationship. So you've got to learn how to be your own friend and have your good qualities right nearby.

So try to be mindful. Keep the breath in mind. Be alert. Notice: Is the mind staying with the breath? Is it wandering out to other thoughts? If it's wandering out, ask it, "Why are you going?" It's like having a child in the house, one you can't fully trust. When it heads out the door, you've got to ask it each time, "Where are you going? Where are you going?" And you have to check on it, to make sure it's telling the truth. You give the child something good to have in the house, good to play with in the house, so it's not always wandering off.

Play with the breath. Get to know the breath really well. See what long breathing feels like, what short breathing feels like. Deep/shallow, heavy/light. In some cases, this friendship may take time, but you've got to learn patience. Often, the biggest mistakes that people make in the world are because they're impatient. They want something right away, right away, and they don't think about the long-term consequences.

That's another reason why you want to be friendly with the breath, because it gives you a sense of well-being inside once you get to know it. That way, you're not so hungry for pleasures.

At the same time, you want to learn how to talk to yourself properly. That's part of the mind that's really close. This is one of the reasons why it's good to have admirable friends, because they teach you how to talk well. They talk about conviction, conviction in the principle of karma. They talk about being generous, they talk about being virtuous. They talk about wisdom, which is basically looking for long-term happiness, not running for short-term. As you listen to them talk, you start talking to yourself in those ways as well.

You remind yourself: There are things you've got to give up in life. We go through life, seeing this pleasure and that pleasure, and we'd like to have them all. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins it wouldn't be enough for one person's desires for sensual pleasures. Multiply that by all the people in the world and no wonder there's not enough to go around.

At the same time, some pleasures get in the way of other more valuable pleasures. It's like having a garden: When you plant different kinds of plants in the garden, some of them get along, some are actually helpful to one another. But if you put eucalyptus trees in the garden, they'll kill everything else. Some pleasures kill off the possibility for other pleasures that are more valuable.

So you have to realize there are certain things you've got to sacrifice, certain things you've got to give up if you want the more valuable pleasures. But look at what you're gaining in

return. All too often, when we think about giving up, letting go, it sounds like we're going to be deprived. But you have to remember, there's a trade. If you let go of unskillful things, skillful things will come in and take their place.

As the Buddha said, loss of friends and relatives is not all that serious. Loss of wealth is not that serious. Even loss of your health is not that serious. The serious losses are when you lose your right views and when you lose your virtue. With things outside the mind, when you lose them, you can get them back. But if you lose your virtue, you lose your right views, you can do a *lot* of damage before you get them back.

What does it mean to lose right view? You decide that you don't believe in the principles of kamma. You don't care about the precepts, you don't care about acting in skillful ways. You say, "It doesn't matter what I do. I'm just going to go for what I want, what I like right now. Who cares about the consequences?" Then, of course, you have to live with the consequences and you complain. You say, "I don't like suffering like this," and you grab at whatever comes by that offers a little bit of pleasure. You're not very choosy, and so it just gets worse and worse and worse.

You've got to make up your mind: Who are you going to trust? Are you going to trust your defilements or are you going to trust the Buddha? As the Buddha said, when you're practicing, even if tears are running down your cheeks out of frustration from missing whatever it is you're missing, it's better to stick with the practice, because in the long term you'll benefit. And you'll be glad you did.

Of course, the practice doesn't require suffering frustration all the time. There may be some times when it's hard, but you're being asked to do what? Honorable things, good things: generosity, virtue, developing the mind in meditation. All of these are good things to be doing. And in doing them, you get close to the Buddha. If you drop them, you're far away.

Years back, when we were starting the monastery and things were just getting underway, we had a lot of Americans coming and saying "Now that you're here in America, you're going to have to do things differently. These rules you have, they're going to have to change. The way you do things around here is going to have to change." And I told them, "These are the things I learned from my teachers. My teachers, the ones who are still alive, are over in Thailand. Some of them have passed away. If I change what they taught me, it's like I'm far away from them not only physically but also in terms of the mind. But if I follow their teachings, they're close, right by. Even though they're on the other side of the world, they still feel close."

So ask yourself: Who do you want to be close to? Who do you trust? If you can't trust yourself, at least put some trust in the Buddha, and he'll show you the way.