

The Triple Training

December 31, 2020

Tonight's the last night of the old year and the first night of the new year. At times like this, we stop to think about the past year—what we gained, what we lost; where we were skillful, where we were not—so that we can plan for the next year, what changes we want to make. In areas where we were weak, we think about how can we make ourselves stronger; and where we have our strengths, how we can augment them. I've been noticing a lot of people talking about the past year, saying it was a horrible year, hoping the next year will be a better one. But remember the Buddha's standards for judging what was an auspicious day or an inauspicious day, a good year or bad year. It doesn't depend on the things happening to you. It depends on what you do.

This year we had a lot of things happening to us. After all, there's the truth that a lot of things in the world are not under our control. But we shouldn't forget that there are a lot of things that *are* under our control. What we choose to do, choose to say, choose to think: Those things we can control, if we want to. A lot of people don't care. They just follow along with their old habits. But they're missing a huge opportunity. Because we're people who practice the Dhamma, that's where our primary focus has to be: What are we doing, to what extent are we committed to the path, and to what extent are we actually learning from it?

The Buddha said there are two big obstacles to gaining the Dhamma. One is not being committed, and other is not reflecting. In other words, you do it a little bit and you say, "I'm not getting the results I wanted," so you stop. Here you don't stop to think: Were you actually practicing the Dhamma? Were you paying attention to what you were doing? What could you do to improve what you've done? That's what reflection is all about.

Think of the Buddha's teachings to Rahula. He started out with the image of mirror. He said that in the same way a mirror is for the purpose of reflection, you should reflect on your thoughts and your words and your deeds. Again and again and again. Then he explained how to do it. First you look at your intentions. If you think they're going to harm yourself or anybody else with that action, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and act. While you're acting, watch to see what results are coming from the action. If you see that any harm is happening, you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue. When you're done, you reflect on the long-term consequences.

If you realize that harm was done, you resolve not to repeat that mistake. Then you talk it over with someone who is more advanced in the path, to get that person's ideas about how you might have acted better. If you didn't harm anybody, don't see any harm, then you can take joy in the practice, in the fact that you're progressing. This joy is important. We have to take joy in the skillful qualities we develop, so as to encourage ourselves to develop even more skill.

So you're combining two principles here. One is admirable friendship, consulting people who are a bit further on the path than you are, to learn from them, so that you don't have to keep on reinventing the Dhamma wheel. The second principle is appropriate attention, looking at your actions, seeing where they're causing suffering, seeing where you can make changes so you don't have to cause the suffering again. And you keep at it. That's how you combine commitment and reflection.

In other words, this is a general principle, and the Buddha said you apply this to the threefold training. You realize that the mind needs to be trained: That's what the commitment is. You realize that when the mind is untrained it can cause itself a lot of suffering, even in good conditions. But when the mind is well trained, then even when things are bad outside, you don't have to suffer.

The training is training in heightened virtue, heightened mind, and heightened discernment. So it's good to take stock: How do your virtues measure up to heightened virtue, how does your concentration measure up to heightened mind, and then how does your discernment measure up to heightened discernment? You take that as your measuring stick for what's a good year and what's not a good year.

In terms of your virtue, start with the basic principles of the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking intoxicants. The Buddha said to practice these in a way that's untorn and unspattered. In other words, you really stick with them in all circumstances.

But there's more than that. He also said that you follow these precepts in a way where you don't grasp at them. This means that you don't build a huge amount of conceit around the fact that you're more virtuous than other people. That conceit is going to turn around and bite you at some point. You realize, you're in this for the training, not to measure yourself against others.

Or you can make another analogy: You've got a disease, and this is the treatment for the disease. If other people have that disease but they're not taking the medicine, that's their business. Your business is basically making sure that you're taking the medicine. Your virtues are your business. That's where you have to keep your attention focused.

At the same time, in addition to being not grasped at, your virtues should be conducive to concentration. In other words, you don't get yourself tied up in knots around the minutia of the virtue, even as you stick with the little details. As Ajaan Mun once told Ajaan Fuang, very few people have ever gotten blinded by having a log in their eyes, but a lot of people have been blinded by sawdust. The little things can take you down, but you don't want to make them a cause for unnecessary worry and concern. Some people get themselves all tied up in knots. You know the purpose of virtue is to get the mind to settle down, so that you can take a look at your behavior to see there's nothing harmful in anything you've done.

So take things in proportion. This is why it's heightened virtue. It's a skill. You're not just following the rules, you're following the rules with the right attitude, so that you can get the results you're aiming at.

Which goes on to the next part of the triple training, which is heightened mind, i.e., the practice of concentration. It's heightened in the sense that you're focusing the mind not on ordinary issues. A lot of people, when they're concentrated, are concentrated through lust, or through anger, or through greed or fear. They get obsessed with these defilements, and their minds can hold on to them for a long time. But that's not the kind of concentration we want.

The Buddha said that right concentration starts when you let go of unskillful qualities: everything from wrong view up through wrong mindfulness. You develop skillful qualities in their place and you let go of sensuality, your concern with your sensual pleasures of the day: what food you like to eat, what places you like to go. Put all that aside. You want to be right here, right where the body and the mind meet at the breath. You learn how to make that your default mode. This is where you're concentrated. This is your home. So if you find yourself slipping away from this, try to bring yourself back. It is possible to stay focused, centered inside, as you go through the day. And if you notice anything that would come up in the mind that would pull you back to lower concerns, you know how to say No.

Now, this is going to involve some discernment. You step back from your thoughts and look at them not in terms of what you like to think about, what you don't like to think about, but in terms of where they're coming from, where they're going to lead you. This is where heightened concentration, or heightened mind, leads to heightened discernment. You get more and more objective about your thinking processes. You look at your thoughts not so much in terms of the content, but in terms of the fact that the thought is an action, an action that has an influence. Thoughts can lead either to suffering or away from suffering. So you look at your thoughts from that angle.

The Buddha said he got on the right path when he was able to divide his thoughts into two types: On one side were those that were imbued with sensuality, ill will, harmfulness. Those were the unskillful ones that he had to keep in check, in the same way that a cowherd would beat back his cows when he saw that they were getting into the rice during the season when the rice was ripening.

But then there are thoughts that are imbued with renunciation, in other words you're willing to drop sensual concerns; imbued with non ill will, i.e. goodwill; and imbued with harmlessness, compassion. Those thoughts, he said, you could allow, because they're coming from a good part of the mind and they're going to lead you to a good place. But even then, thinking good thoughts like that all day long can tire you out, so you go back to concentration.

What we're doing here is lifting the level of the mind, training the mind in a way where the three aspects connect with one another. Heightened virtue is meant to make it easier to get the mind concentrated. Heightened discernment is meant to make it easier to get the mind concentrated. Heightened mind helps with your virtue, it helps with discernment. And your discernment helps with your virtue. It's not the case that you perfect your virtue, and then you go to concentration, and then you go to discernment. You're working on all three because they help one another along.

So as you enter the new year, think about which aspects of this training are still lacking. Because that's what the Buddhist teachings are—a course of training—and not just nice thoughts to think about and discuss.

They're directives: This is what you do with your mind, this is what you do with your speech, this is what you do with your bodily action, for the sake of putting an end to suffering. The suffering that weighs the mind down isn't what comes from outside. It's what comes from inside. So when you learn how to put an end to that internally generated suffering, that's why it's auspicious.

Think of that image of Ajaan Suwat pointing to the mountain over there on the horizon. Yes, is it heavy? You know when an ajaan asks a question like that, you don't just come blurting out with any answer. So he answered the question himself. Is it heavy if you try to pick it up? Yes, it's heavy, but if you don't try to pick it up, it's not heavy at all. It may be heavy in and of itself, but it's not heavy on you, and that's what matters. There are times when the affairs of the world may seem like mountains—think of the mountains moving in crushing all living beings in the Buddha's image—but you don't have to pick them up. And you can train the mind so that it has something inside that can't be crushed, even by mountains.

That's what we're working toward, so whatever you can do to work in that direction, it's all to the good, it's all auspicious. The days in which you do that are auspicious days, the months, the years in which you do that are auspicious months, auspicious years. Don't let events that happen *to* you overcome the mind. Develop the mind's strengths so that it can take care of itself, whatever happens. That's when your practice really is a blessing, and the blessings spill out. The more people can control their minds, the more peace there will be in the world. This is a practice where everybody benefits.