

## *The Burning House*

*May 4, 2016*

We focus on the present moment so that we give the mind of a sense of feeling at home here. This is the place where you belong. Now, for most of us, we don't live here. We live in the past, we live in the future, and come running through the present moment just for a moment, like a kid who doesn't spend much time at home. He wants something from home, comes running in, and then he goes running out again. But right here is where a lot of issues are going to happen. And, as life goes on, this awareness, right here with the body, is going to become a bigger and bigger issue. As the body begins to break down, illness comes, pain comes. Soon you find yourself less and less able to do things you used to be able to do before. The mind gets more and more roped into being here, much against its will.

But if you learn how to settle in here well in advance, you have a sense of how the awareness in the present moment can relate to the body in a way that it doesn't have to suffer from the issues in the body. That way, aging, illness, and death are not much of a problem. They're simply issues of the body, but the mind doesn't have to suffer. So you want to get this moment, the present moment, more and more under your control. You want to get the mind under control. You want to get more and more familiar with the territory. It's as if someone is threatening to mug you at a certain corner, so you go down and look at the corner, and you figure out: Where are the escape routes that allow you to run away? How can you escape? How can you get through safely?

So get to know this spot. Get to know how thoughts arise in the present moment, how they take shape, how they get nourished by your attention, and how you can starve some thoughts if you find that they're unhealthy or unhelpful. There are lots of things to learn here.

But even though this is our home, we don't spend all of our time at home. There are times when you have to think about the past or about the future. Someone was telling me the other day that they heard someone say that if you're thinking about the past and future, you're suffering; if you're in the present moment, you're not suffering. Well, that's not the case. It makes it sound like, that to avoid suffering, you just don't think, simply hang out in the present moment. But that's not how the Buddha taught. He taught people to think, and to think in the long-term: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom and discernment.

So you've got to think out to the long-term as to what is really important. And that gives you a perspective on the present moment. In fact, when the Buddha talks about the importance of being right in the present moment—and it's interesting that he doesn't talk about it that much—but when he does, it's because he realized that there are things that have to be done before you die if you want to die well—in other words, to die with skill. You don't know how much time you've got. You can spend a lot of time planning for your old age, and then it turns out that you don't live till old age. Something

happens before then. So you want to be ready to go at any time. It's like knowing that there's a fire off in the distance and you might be called on to evacuate at any moment. So you have your valuables packed. But you can't take all your valuables. You have to figure out which things are important and you have to keep them ready at hand so that when the time comes to go, you pick up the bag and you're gone. You've got all the important things with you.

But when you think about the long-term, how does that reflect back on the present moment? It points to what's important in the present moment. The shape of your mind is important. When anything that comes up in the mind that could pull you away, saying, "We'll have a little entertainment right now," or "Think about this because you like this or that": You have to look at the long-term consequences. In other words, the Buddha is not telling us *not* to think about the past or the future, he's telling us *how* to think about the past and the future. In terms of the past, he wants you to be mindful, to remember the good Dhamma lessons you've learned from the past. That includes not only what you've heard or read in terms of the Dhamma, but also what you've learned from your own actions. What kind of actions lead to harm? What kind of actions don't lead to harm? You learn how to take responsibility for looking at what's going on—and not just "going on," looking at how you've shaped your life and try to learn lessons from that as to how better to shape it now and in the future.

This directs your thoughts from the past to the future. The future doesn't end with death. It goes beyond, and it goes beyond in a particular way. There are some religions that say that, after you die, it's either eternal damnation or eternal bliss. But those teachings don't really encourage you to look at your actions, because there is no human action that could possibly earn eternal damnation or earn eternal bliss. So you're left hanging. And it all sounds very arbitrary. Somebody else out there is making the decisions, which means that you're not making the decisions, which doesn't encourage you to learn from your actions.

But the Buddha doesn't teach that way. He teaches another way. He says your actions do shape the future, and the results in the future are going to be proportional to your actions. Yet a lot of things go into deciding what that proportion is. And if you don't really get your act together, the process is just going to keep going on, and on, and on, up and down, up and down. As he said, it's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on the other end, sometimes it lands flat in the middle. If we just follow the line of one person's many lifetimes, it's pretty random. But when you see the larger picture, you realize that your actions are the factor that determines the long term course. This is why it's good to reflect on the past actions that you've done, the ones that had good results, the ones that had bad results, and ask yourself what lessons you can learn as you head into the future?

So it's not just being in the present moment, or hanging out in the present moment, that counts as practice. Learning how to think properly about the past, and think properly about the future: Those are important aspects of the practice, too. They put the present moment into perspective. Because if you don't get the right perspective on the present moment, there can be a lot of suffering. Even just trying to be right here in the present moment, if you haven't learned how to master the present

moment, entails a lot of suffering right here. There's the suffering of the aggregates, there's the suffering of the clinging and craving. These are things that we have to sort out. Once we *have* sorted them out, that's a real treasure. That's a valuable that you want to make sure is in your bag so that when the time to evacuate comes, you've got good things in your bag.

A lot of people just stuff their little bag with all kinds of garbage, whatever's at hand, and blame all their suffering on the fact that the fire is going to come. Well, the fires of aging, illness, and death are coming, burning on us all the time. That's not something we can change. What we *can* change is what we take with us, what we salvage from this burning house.

So even though concentration provides us with a home here in the present moment, it's a burning house. For the time being, as we work on our concentration, we try to find a room to stay where it's cool, where things are fireproof, or relatively fireproof, so we can figure out what's going on in the rest of the house. But there will come a time when you can't even stay in this room anymore. So where do you go?

This is one of the reasons why, when we work on concentration practice, we try to get ultimately to a sense of just awareness in and of itself. In the beginning, a lot of the concentration is a matter of learning how to stay with the breath, to get to the point where the mind and the breath, where your awareness and the breath, seem to be one. Wherever there's awareness, there's breath; wherever there's breath, there's awareness. But you don't want to stay at that stage. You want to move on to the next stage, which is learning to see that, as these things sit together for a while, they begin to separate naturally. It's easiest to see when you get the mind still to the point where the breath is actually still as well, and the sense of the body begins to dissolve. Then you've got awareness just on its own. When you learn to maintain that sense of awareness on its own, you come to see, "This is how the body impinges on your awareness in the present moment." But then there's the awareness itself, which is something separate.

You first see this clearly at times when the sense of the body goes, but it's really useful to be able to maintain that sense of awareness as something separate even when your awareness of the body is there as well. That's a much safer home. It, too, has its burning edges, but it's a lot safer. And it's by hanging onto the awareness that you make sure that you're in a much better position to notice what's coming and what's going, how the mind latches onto things, and how it doesn't have to latch onto things. That's when you've got a real treasure. And it will be found here in the present moment. You're not going to find it in the past or in the future.

But when you learn how to think properly about the past, and think properly about the future, it really helps focus you on what's important in the present moment. We talk about developing alertness as to what's going on in the present. Well, the alertness is focused on what you're doing. Why? Because that's the lesson coming from the past and aiming at the future, i.e., you've got to really focus on what you're doing because that's the most important thing happening in the present moment, for the sake of your happiness now and on into the future. We're not here just to be aware of whatever impinges on your awareness, because there are lots of things in the present moment that are really irrelevant to the

big issues, i.e., the fact that the present moment is burning, this home in the present moment is burning, and you've got to develop the skills that enable you not to get burned.

So think of the practice as an all-around practice. We're not just practicing in the present moment. We're also learning how to engage the past and engage the future, so that the lessons of the past don't get lost, and the future does hold out the prospect that someday you'll find something that lies beyond past, present, and future. That's the place that's really safe. The Buddha doesn't talk about it as being a home, because home is an area where you go to find shelter from something. But when you're there, there's no need for shelter. In the meantime, though, you've got to keep this present moment shelter as solid as you can. Because this is where the work that needs to be done can get done well.