

Reflect on the Past

December 24, 2017

Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Watch it all the way in, all the way out. Try and make sure it's comfortable.

Keep watch over your mind, to make sure it doesn't go slipping off. If it does go slipping off, bring it right back.

The mind has work to do. Meditation can be restful but it is a kind of work. Otherwise, the mind just kind of wanders around aimlessly. If you were to draw a map of its wanderings in the course of the day, it would look like a bird's nest: everything all tangled and a mess, basically. We're trying to straighten it out, because after all, the mind is the source of all our well-being and it's also the source of all our suffering. This is why we have to watch out for what the mind is going to do.

And this is why we need that quality of heedfulness, recognizing that the mind does have some dangerous qualities inside and that we've got to develop the good qualities to fight them off. Otherwise the dangerous qualities take over.

So here we are, trying to develop some good qualities in mind. And it's useful, especially at a time like this as the year is ending, to look back on the year and reflect on what you've done—the things you did well, the mistakes you made—so that you can learn from them.

All too often, when we think about a mistake we've made, we shove it out of the mind. But that's not a very heedful way of acting, because if you shove the mistakes out of your mind, you're going to repeat them. You shove them out again, and they keep causing suffering again. There should come a time when you say, "Look, I've got to learn from these things."

So remember, the meditation's not always just about being in the present moment. Sometimes you reflect on the past. Think about some actions you did that were harmful and how you might learn how not to repeat that mistake. In this way, you learn from your past mistakes and they actually become part of your practice, as you develop the mind into higher and higher levels of being clear about itself and being clear about what it's doing. That way, you can be more and more skillful in what you do and say and think.

So take some time to reflect on what were some of the mistakes you made in the past year and how you might learn not to repeat them. Apply those lessons to your meditation, and not only to your meditation but also to your actions throughout daily life.

When the Buddha was giving his last instructions, he stressed the quality of heedfulness. When he asked, "What is the basis for all skillful qualities of the mind?" the answer he gave was: "Heedfulness."

So let's keep that in mind, that we have to watch out after our minds. Things don't just flow our way nicely. Sometimes they do flow our way nicely but that's because we did something

skillful in the past. But we also want to learn how to keep on doing skillful things in the present moment. Because things you did in the past, you can't go back and change, but you can take control of the present. Make sure that no matter what comes up in the present, you're going to respond in a skillful way, in a way that doesn't harm yourself, in a way that doesn't harm anybody else. Meditation is something that gives you the strength to do that.

All too often, you think about the mistakes you made in the past, it's a painful memory. You want to have something to soothe the mind, so you soothe it with the breath, you soothe it with a sense of ease and well-being. That way, you can breathe freely, and the mind will be in a much more conducive place to think about the past and to learn from it.

So you take care of the present, you learn from the past, so that you can guarantee yourself a good future: a basic principle in the Buddha's teachings, so basic we often overlook it. So make sure you keep it always in mind.