

Start the Year Right Here

December 31, 2000

We've come to start the new year off right, because we want a happy new year, and we know that happiness has to come from within. If you want true happiness, you have to create the true causes for happiness, and that doesn't mean just following your whims or desires, because those often end up with something other than happiness as a result.

True happiness comes from building good qualities in the mind, because the mind is the source of all happiness and misery, the source of all pain and pleasure, so it's through developing the power of the mind that we can create true happiness.

If you want a happy new year, a happy life, a happy new century, a happy new millennium, you've got to start right here. Fortunately, it's the thing that's closest to us. If happiness depended on something outside, we'd really be in bad shape. If it depended on pleasing somebody outside or getting outside things in a certain way, we'd really be up the creek, because those things are always changing and undependable and very uncertain. But when the cause of happiness lies within, we can focus right here where we can bring things more under our control.

We talk about developing the power of the mind. What is the power of the mind made up of? Well, it's fostered by five qualities. The first is conviction: belief that, yes, you do have this power, that the mind has the power to shape your experience for good or for bad, and it's something that can be trained. It's not that the mind has certain habits and is going to have to have those habits forever. If that were the case, then there'd be no point in meditating. But the habits of the mind can be changed. They can be trained. They can be developed and made more skillful.

When we realize that the source of happiness is a skill of the mind, that develops the second quality that brings power to the mind, which is persistence.

Persistence is the effort to keep with the path, to try to keep trying to be more skillful, finding out what's the most skillful thing to do right now in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. In particular, in the meditation, persistence means sticking with it, sticking with it, keep coming back, because it's the ability to build a consistent and persistent awareness and persistent mindfulness that will make all the difference in the mind.

Mindfulness is the third quality that gives strength to the mind. In other words, we focus

here on the breath. Everybody can know the breath. It doesn't take too much just to quiet the mind for a second, and there it is: the breath coming in; the breath going out. What requires work is making your awareness consistent. In other words, you stay with it whole in-breath, and then the whole out-breath, and then the next whole in-breath, and then the next whole out-breath. Just keep staying, staying, staying right there with this combination of persistence and mindfulness. Mindfulness here covers both mindfulness and alertness—keeping the breath in mind and being aware of the mind along with the breath. You've got these qualities working together.

The nature of your awareness begins to change and you start seeing things you didn't see before, because before, your knowledge was in little bits and pieces, like connect-the-dots. You pay attention here, then there's a big blank space, and you pay attention to something else over there, and then there's another big blank space. If you were to draw this down as a chart or a map, there'd be little dots and little bits and pieces here and there, and then you'd try to sketch in what's in all the blank spaces. All those sketches come out of ignorance.

Most of our ordinary knowledge is built out of ignorance—these big blank spots, these big blind spots in the mind that you then sketch things into: “This must be here and that must be there.” You don't really know, but for most people that's what passes for knowledge.

What we want is a knowledge that's consistent, that just stays there with the breath, stays here in the present moment—to see not only the breath, but also what's happening in the mind so that you can start detecting patterns of cause and effect as they actually happen in the mind—in particular, seeing how the actions in the mind really do affect the state of your happiness and misery, your pleasure and pain.

So at this point you're not just stuck of the level of conviction. It starts turning into knowledge and discernment that really can have a revolutionary effect on the mind.

In the way you relate to yourself, the way you relate to people around you, you begin to see patterns you didn't see before. You see some patterns that really are unskillful. Well, you can change them. There are patterns that are skillful. You maintain them. You make them more skillful, because it's all based, not on guess work or just what you've heard from somebody else, but on what you see of how these patterns actually function in the mind.

This is how mindfulness and alertness develop into concentration, and concentration develops into discernment. All of these are qualities that give power to the mind. In this way, you find that the mind becomes something you really can depend on, because you've strengthened it.

We like to talk about being self-reliant, depending on ourselves. There are passages in the Canon that talk about the self being its own refuge, the self being its own mainstay, but unless it has really developed these qualities, you can't really depend on it. It can't really be your refuge. As the Buddha says, "Make yourself an island. Make yourself a refuge." That refuge isn't there automatically. You have to develop the mind, because otherwise it's the same old mind it was before, creating the causes for pleasure sometimes, and the causes for pain at other times, and mostly for pain. That's not much of a refuge. That's not much of security at all.

Real security comes when you can really rely on the mind, knowing that you've got the conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment you can depend on, because they've been developed into powerful qualities that give the mind the strength so that when you do something, you can do it skillfully; when you say something, you say it skillfully; when you think, you think skillfully.

This whole process, this whole question of being skillful: That's the whole basis for the path. The Buddha said that the first question you ask when you go see a teacher should be: "What's skillful?" The implication being that if you could learn to be skillful, it would create happiness for you and for people around you.

That's the basic question the Buddha answered, and his teachings build on that. Some of his teachings are plain old Do's and Don'ts. Other teachings are more about how you can develop the mental qualities that enable you to start looking at your own actions and learning how to do them more and more skillfully without your having to depend on texts, without your having to depend on teachers. It's a combination of the two: the straight-out Do's and Don'ts, and then the subtler things that you have to learn to observe on your own— because there's so much in the power of the mind that requires being observant.

In fact, that's the basic power. Mindfulness, persistence, concentration, discernment all come together in this simple question of how to be observant. Watch what's going on. Notice what you're doing. Notice what happens as a result. When you see that, the mind really does have the chance to become more skillful. It becomes a mind that does create happiness for itself, a mind that creates a happy new year, a happy life, a happy new century, a happy new millennium. That's the kind of mind you want, and it can be done.

You look at the texts. Little kids—little boys, little girls—men, women, rich, poor, educated, uneducated: All kinds of people have come to the practice, and it's simply a matter of sitting down and doing the work, being persistent, being mindful, as this mindful persistence, or persistent mindfulness, becomes a new kind of knowing in the mind: a kind of

knowing that shakes out all the old cobwebs, reorganizes things in the mind so that it doesn't keep on creating suffering for itself, suffering for other people. It becomes a mind that really is a cause for true happiness.

So when we think about wanting a happy new year, where do we look? We look inside.

A lot of Thai people come on New Year's Day, wanting a blessing for the new year. Well, the blessing has to come from within. That's how you bless yourself—by developing a good, strong, skillful mind—and it's done by doing just what we're doing right here, right now: being mindful of the breath, being alert to the breath, being persistent and sensitive in how you approach the breath, how you play with the breath, adjust the breath, experiment, so that you really get to know how the mind and the breath relate.

To develop this kind of consistent awareness requires discipline. The discipline is, as soon as the mind slips off, you realize it's slipped off, you bring it right back. It slips off again, you bring it back again. You don't give up, no matter how hopeless the situation may seem.

We talked the other night about the Shackleton's expedition down to Antarctica. Everything went wrong, but nobody died. They didn't get to Antarctica. They were supposed to cross the continent. They didn't even get to land. They got stuck in the sea ice; their ship was wrecked by the sea ice. They had to trudge across the sea ice and finally got into these little, tiny dinghies and went across the south Atlantic. There were so many times in the expedition where it looked totally hopeless. They were all going to be wiped out, but there were a few people who said, "Well, even though it's hopeless, let's just do what we're supposed to do here."

They knew what their duty was. They were disciplined, and it was because they went ahead and did their duty that they were able to get through.

So even when things seem hopeless, and nothing seems to make sense, just stick with the discipline of training your mindfulness, training your alertness, watching what's going on, being observant. Whatever good or bad happens in the mind, just watch so that you can see cause and effect, and really understand what's genuinely good or bad, rather than having to depend on other people to tell you. This is the kind of discipline that really makes a difference.

We don't like the word discipline, but we realize that it's for our own good, and it really doesn't have to be painful. After all, staying with the breath is pleasant. You don't have to think about the future, you don't have to think about the past. You can just be with what's already here and watch, and then make adjustments to make sure that it stays comfortable, feels good, being here.

After all, the path is one that's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle,

admirable in the end—admirable not just in the sense that it's noble, but also in the sense that it's a good path to follow. Even when you don't get all the way to happiness, you realize that being on this path is a good place to be.

Look at the way the world teaches happiness. They say, "You have to go out and sell a lot, hustle and cheat, maybe cut a few corners here and there if you want to get ahead in life." What kind of happiness is that? That path itself is a miserable path, and the happiness that comes as a result doesn't really leave you satisfied. What—money? Status? Praise? These things can turn into their opposites really fast.

The Buddha tells you to follow the path that's really good. It feels good to be persistent, mindful, concentrated, discerning, and all the other good qualities he has us develop—compassion, sympathetic joy, goodwill for all beings. These are good qualities. They feel good in the mind and lead to a happiness that's really solid and sure.

So this is the path. It's a good path to be on whether or not you go all the way. It's a good place to be. It's a good place to start the new year. Finish off the old year and start the new year right, working on your potential for happiness, which is right here.