

A Sense of Direction

December 31, 2007

Physically, it's a little crowded tonight. So mentally try to develop as spacious an attitude as you can. There's a Thai saying that you can live when it's physically confining, but it's hard to live in a place where it's mentally confining. So there's no mental confinement tonight. If you want, you can think of the space element. Space penetrates everything: the people around you, your own body, the walls around the sala, out in every direction without end. Think about that, and then make that the context for your meditation.

Think about all the beings in the world—human beings, animals, beings we can see, beings we can't: We all want happiness. That's something we have in common. But what we also have in common is that we're often confused about how to be happy. This is why we practice. This is why we train the mind: to find a true happiness. And it's good to reflect on that on a day like this: the end of one year, the beginning of another year. You can ask yourself: Is your life heading in the direction of happiness? Or is it wandering off in other directions? And if you find it wandering off, what can you do to bring it back on course?

In physics there's something called Brownian motion. It's the way molecules move around. Basically they bump around into each other. You see it if you look at dust motes in beams of sunlight. First they go up, then they go down; then they go left, then they go right; zig-zagging back and forth, up and down, going nowhere in particular. They just move in whatever direction they get bumped. And for most of us that's how we live our lives. We bump into other people; we bump into different situations. This past year we bumped into fires, we bumped into windstorms. And you have to ask yourself: Do you want your life to be just bumped around that way? Or do you want to give your life some direction?

That passage we chanted just now that says when you direct yourself rightly, that's a source for true happiness. So what direction do you want to go in? The Buddha warns that there are four wrong directions you have to watch out for. One is the direction based simply on your desires: You want this, you want that, without really thinking about whether what you want is really proper or not, or really amounts to true happiness.

Other times your actions are directed by aversion, and that'll send you off course. Even when it's obvious that situations are wrong, that people are acting in an unskillful way, if you allow your anger to take over, even though it may seem justified, it can take you off in the wrong direction as well.

A third reason for taking a wrong direction is delusion. You mistake left for right and right for left; you get headed off in the exact opposite direction of what would really provide happiness in your life.

The fourth reason for taking a wrong direction is fear. We've seen a lot of this lately, where people do really foolish things out of fear, harmful things out of fear.

And it's usually not the case that we're motivated by only one of these at any one time. Sometimes they all get mixed together. Aversion, delusion, fear, desire all work together to make us act in all kinds of unskillful ways and take our lives in crazy directions.

This is why we need some clarity about what we're doing and where it leads. And this is why we need to train the mind, to develop its powers of awareness, mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, so that we can see which kind of direction is the direction you want to go in and which directions really lead off to more suffering.

Because this is a lot of our misunderstanding right here: We do things that bring some happiness but the price is much too great. It's really not worth all the effort, worth all the harm it does—that little bit of pleasure and that little bit of happiness we get from some of our actions.

When you think about it, the only direction that's really worthwhile is a happiness that's worth more than the price. And that means, one, you want it to be long lasting. And two, you want a happiness that doesn't cause any harm, either to yourself or to others. Every kind of happiness requires some effort, but you want to make sure it doesn't cause harm. This is why our path is a harmless path.

It starts out with virtue: the decision not to indulge in any actions or words that harm yourself or harm other people. You realize that if your happiness depends on other people being harmed, it's not going to last because they're not going to stand for it. So you start with virtue.

You move on to concentration. Again, concentration causes no harm to anybody. At the same time, it gives you a pleasure that's above the ordinary. Because if the only pleasures you know in life are sensual pleasures—i.e., the pleasures of beautiful sights, beautiful sounds, fragrant aromas, delicious tastes, nice tactile contacts—they require taking a lot of resources. And if you don't know some restraint in that area, if human beings don't know restraint in that area, there's no way we can live together. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins there wouldn't be enough for our sensual desires.

So you need an alternative. And this is what concentration provides, a sense of well-being inside that can't be bought with gold coins. You focus on the breath, allow the breath to be comfortable, think of that comfortable breath sensation

then seeping throughout the whole body. And you work with it. If you find any areas that seem to be blocked, you do what you can to allow that sense of ease and well-being to seep through or seep around until it permeates everything in the body.

And you realize what you've got here is a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure that doesn't take anything away from anyone else at all. It's totally harmless. At the same time, it allows the mind to see itself clearly. Because when you get the mind well-settled in concentration, mindfulness and alertness come to the fore. You can see the motions of the mind and their results: when they cause harm, when they don't cause harm. In this area, though, the harm is very subtle, it's hard even to call it "harm." It's more like simply a disturbance in the mind.

First you notice the disturbances of the hindrances. Sensual desire's a disturbance. Ill will is a disturbance. Sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty: These are all disturbances in the mind, so you do what you can to counteract them. Sometimes you can simply turn your attention back to the breath and that's enough. Other times you need to do more work. You actually have to look at the drawbacks of those various hindrances and see what you can do to counteract them.

For sensual desire, there's contemplation of the body. What's inside the body? Take it apart in your mind. What do you have in this bag of skin? Everybody else has the same thing in their bags of skin too. And are they really worth getting all worked up about? Livers? Spleen? Contents of the intestines?

As for ill will, the Buddha has you consider that it's like walking across a desert. You're hot, tired, thirsty, trembling from thirst, and you come across some footprints of a cow. There's a little bit of water in the footprints. You realize that if you were to scoop the water up with your hand, you'd muddy it, you couldn't drink it. So you very carefully put your lips down to the water and slurp it up. You go to that much trouble just to get that little bit of water because you need it.

And it's the same with dealing with other people: If all you can see are their bad points, you don't get any nourishment, because your own goodness needs to feed off the goodness of other people. In other words, if you see everybody else in the world as being selfish or thoughtless, it's very easy for you to become selfish and thoughtless as well. So for your own well-being you have to go to the trouble of looking for the good points of other people, even the ones that you don't like, even the ones who've been harming you, harming your loved ones. There's got to be something good about them there.

At the very least you don't want to feel ill will for them. You don't think about how much you want them to suffer, because you don't gain anything from their

suffering. In fact, the more they suffer, the more unskillfully they'll probably behave. So for your own well-being and the well-being of others, it's good to develop thoughts of goodwill, wishing that they might find the causes for true happiness and abandon their unskillful behavior. In that way, the world becomes a better place.

To counteract sloth and torpor: If you find that your meditation is putting you to sleep, well, change the object of your meditation. Sometimes the breath gets too refined and too subtle and you can't follow it. You drift off. You can either breathe more heavily, or else think about other topics in your meditation. You can recollect the Dhamma, you can recollect the Buddha, the Sangha. You can recollect the good that you've done in being generous, observing the precepts. If that doesn't help, you can try thinking of any of the chants you've memorized. Run those through your mind. Or visualize a bright light in front of you. If that doesn't work, get up and do walking meditation.

And if you still find yourself falling asleep then, it's a sign the body really needs to rest. This is not the mind just playing tricks on you. The body really needs some time to sleep. So you lie down, but make a vow that as soon as you wake up you're going to get up. You're not going to flip over and sleep for another hour or two. In other words, you try to test the sleepiness to see if it is genuine sleepiness or just the mind getting a little bit bored and playing tricks with you.

As for restlessness and anxiety, remind yourself that simply worrying about a problem is not going to solve it. The best way to solve it is first to get your mind in good shape. So if some future possibility has you worried, remind yourself that the best way to prepare for that possibility—or any unseen possibility—is to get the mind to develop its mindfulness, develop its alertness, i.e., give it some rest in concentration.

The mind is like a knife: If you just keep chopping, chopping away with a knife, after a while the knife gets dull. And no matter how much strength you put into the chopping, you can't cut anything through. But when you allow the mind to rest in concentration, it's like sharpening the knife, especially when it's in right concentration where you're alert and mindful. When it's rested and sharpened, then you can start thinking about the issue again. And many times you find you can just cut right through it because the mind is in much better shape.

As for uncertainty, that usually comes down to not being clear about what's skillful and unskillful in any particular situation. The best way to deal with that is to realize, well, the roots of unskillful behavior are greed, anger, and delusion. And particularly delusion: The mind doesn't even know itself. So ask yourself, well, what does it know? Bring everything back to basics. Focus everything right here. Is

the breath coming in? Do you know that? Well, yes. Is it going out? Do you know that? Yes. Is the mind with the breath? You can answer that for yourself. In other words, just take stock of what you really know right now.

And as for the things you're not sure about, put those aside for the time being. Get the mind so that it can actually watch itself and you can begin to see greed, anger, and delusion in action where you might not have seen them before. And you realize, okay, any thoughts, any actions that are based on these things are bound to be unskillful. So try to develop the right qualities in mind. Then when you're sure that you don't have any of those roots of unskillful behavior in the mind, then you can deal with situations, you can deal with questions with a lot more confidence.

So when you've taken care of these hindrances, the mind is ready to settle down and really look at things for what they are. And you're in a much better position to consider this question of where you want to go in life. What would you like to accomplish in this life? You have to realize, of course, there's so much in the world that's beyond your control, but you *can* focus on developing good qualities in the mind. That's something that *does* lie under your control and that should be the primary focus.

What this all boils down to is that you've got to start out with discernment. Just look at what the situation is and try to see it as clearly as possible, to make up your mind, where would you like to go in life? What kind of direction would you like? Once the direction seems clear and you're clear both on the goal and the way to get there—what needs to be done—then the next step is to be true to your decision. In other words, do your best not to fall back into your old deluded ways. And don't worry, the mind will think up all kinds of reasons for not following that direction. But you've got to be clear about what is in your best interest and also clear about ways to get around the mind's arguments that say, "I don't want to put all that effort in, that's really too hard. I'm just a layperson, how can I think of going all the way to nibbana?" or whatever. Learn how not to fall for the tricks that delusion can sometimes play on you. In that way, you can be true to your own best interests, true to the interests of people around you.

This, of course, will involve giving up certain things. Because we all would like to have all of our goals, all of our desires fulfilled, but it turns out that some of our desires would cancel out other ones. You realize that there really are some either/or choices in life. So balance things out: Which happiness is greater? As the Buddha once said, if you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, be willing to forego the lesser happiness. Think of it as a trade.

Of course, there will be part of the mind that will object to this. You have to learn how to calm the mind down in cases like that. This is why concentration practice is so helpful. It's not the case that the path to true happiness saves all its happiness for the end. The path involves a lot of kinds of happiness: There's the happiness that comes from virtue, when you realize that your behavior isn't harmful to yourself or to anyone else. There's the happiness of concentration, where you can tap into a sense of ease and well-being simply by breathing. And there's the happiness of discernment, where things that used to be fuzzy and unclear suddenly become very sharp and very clear, and they no longer have you confused.

So when you're making progress in the path, learn how to appreciate that progress. That will calm the mind down. This is how you learn how not to regret the things you have to renounce, the things you have to give up. You keep in mind that there really is a possibility of a true happiness and that you've chosen that direction. And when your choice of a direction involves these four qualities—discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calm—you find that not only does your life have a direction but it has a direction that you really like. It's meaningful.

So the choice is yours. But always try to make that choice with the knowledge that true unconditioned happiness is possible. That's the challenge that the Buddha places in front of us: He says human beings can do this. And so always take that fact into account. When you do, you can make the most of the possibilities of this human life.

In this year that we're about to begin, who knows how it's going to end? But if you know that you're determined to make the skillful choice each time you think, each time you act, each time you speak, it'll all go in the right direction.