

Ask the Right Questions

December 31, 2009

Here we are, approaching the end of a year. In a few hours it'll be midnight. The old year will end and the new year will begin. Of course, if you go outside at midnight and look up at the sky, it's not written across the sky—a line passing over the earth marking the new year, or any words appearing on the full moon. It's just a convention that we mark our years, but we need to mark them. So it's good to make good use of the convention to look back in the past year, to look forward to the new year, to learn lessons from the past year that we can apply to the new year, and to think about what we might like to do differently.

Often when we say Happy New Year, we're saying, "May circumstances in your life be comfortable, convenient; may you prosper, may you be healthy." And although we recognize the pleasures that come from having nice circumstances and the convenience that comes from having good circumstances, it's also important to realize that these things come from causes. Where do the causes lie? They lie in your heart. They lie in your mind. This is why we train the mind. And so the source of a happy new year is here in the mind: the qualities we develop in the mind.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about an auspicious day, or an auspicious night. It's interesting that back in his time, when they used the lunar calendar, when they'd talk about 24 hours, they would mark it as a night. So the sutta is about the auspicious night, but it means the whole day, the whole 24 hours. And what makes a day auspicious is not the alignment of the planets or the stars, it's that you're very alert. You see what arises in the mind from moment to moment. You're ardent, unshakable, doing what needs to be done, having a sense of your duties. Of course, the duties here are not imposed from outside. The Buddha gives you a very good framework for what might be called a healthy super ego. The oughts in Buddhism, the shoulds in Buddhism are based on a desire for you to find true happiness.

The duties come down to trying to develop skillful qualities, those that lead to happiness, and trying to abandon unskillful ones, those that lead to suffering. That principle gets further parsed into noticing that if an unskillful quality arises, what do you do to get rid of it? If it hasn't arisen, what do you do to prevent it? If a skillful quality hasn't arisen, what do you do to give rise to it? And once you've given rise to it, how do you allow it to develop as far as possible? In this way, the Buddha finally leads you to the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to

those as well: to comprehend stress and suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation of stress and suffering, and to develop the path that leads there.

When the Buddha talks about doing your duties, these are the duties he's talking about. Now, he's not imposing these duties on you. He's not trying to exert power. He is simply pointing out that if you want to cure the problem of suffering, this is how you have to approach things. These duties are built into the way things are. This is how you have an auspicious day, and from the auspicious days, as they add up, they become auspicious years.

So it's good as you practice to take stock every now and then of how things are going: what you've noticed that you haven't been doing skillfully so that you can learn how to change it, and what you *have* been doing skillfully so that you can maintain it, keep it going, and see in what ways you can improve it. This is how you make good use of the convention.

We often think of meditation as being something you just do without thought, i.e., you just have an exercise to do where you're not thinking, you're just being aware or alert to the present moment and otherwise not thinking about things. But that's not how the Buddha taught meditation. There is an element of reflection that has to go into developing this skill: one, looking at where you are in the practice to figure out what you need to do next; and then, two, looking at what you're doing, seeing the results of what you're doing, and then learning how to gauge those results. Are you getting the results you want? If you are, keep it up. If not, what should you change?

We need this element of reflection because in teaching meditation, the Buddha wasn't setting up a hot dog factory—in other words, a method where you just put your mind through the process and it's guaranteed to come out standardized hot dog at the end. He's trying to train your discernment, so he gives you an exercise and he asks you to look at how you're doing the exercise, and whether you're getting more and more skillful at it. And it's through gauging the results of your actions that the discernment arises. That's how discernment gets developed, those are the questions you pose in your mind.

If you find that the mind is not settling down, your main questions are: How do you get it to settle down? How do you get it to become more unified? If it's not settling down, why is that? Is there a sense of discomfort in the body right now? What can you do with the breath to make the body more comfortable? If there's a sense of discomfort in the mind, what's irritating the mind? Is it something somebody else did today? Something you did today? Is it an attitude you've picked up? And how do you learn how to question those things, counteract those irritations? If it's something unskillful you did, just make a resolution that you're

not going to do that again. And realize that that's the best you can do as a human being.

Then, the Buddha says, once you've made a resolution not to repeat your mistake and to act skillfully instead, spread a lot of goodwill around for yourself, for other people, other beings. Goodwill for yourself is there to correct the tendency we have to want to punish ourselves for our past mistakes. Goodwill for other beings reminds you that if you're going to act skillfully, you have to keep other people's well-being in mind. Your true happiness cannot depend on their suffering. And if you've been acting in a harmful way, think of the people you've harmed through your harmful actions and realize that you don't want to do that again. You don't want to harm them again. That reflection helps to nourish your determination to refrain from unskillful actions in the future.

If the irritant that's keeping you from settling down is something someone else did today, the Buddha has lots of reflections. One is the simple reflection: Hey, this is the human realm. What do you expect? There are going to be people who will do things and say things and think things that you don't like. Are you going to go around wanting everybody to be the way you like before you can settle down? Would that be the human realm? And if you need everybody to be a certain way before you can let the mind settle down, you're never going to get the mind to settle down.

There's a story they tell in Thailand of the hungry ghost up in the rafters of a sala. A group of people have come. Tomorrow they're going to give a donation to the monastery, so tonight they're sleeping in the sala, all lined up. And the hungry ghost looks down at the people lined up on the floor as they're sleeping and he notices that their heads are not in a line. So he goes down and he pulls their heads so they're all in a nice, even orderly line. He goes back up into the rafters and looks down and realizes now that their feet are not in line. So he goes down and he pulls their feet so they're all nicely in line. He gets back up in the rafters and sees, oh, now the heads are out of line. So he goes down, he pulls their heads again. All night long. There's no way you're going to get everybody in line. And if you want the world to conform to your desires, you're just going to go crazy and drive them crazy, too. Can you imagine what it's like having a hungry ghost pulling on your head and your feet all night long?

So you learn to think in these ways and you forgive people for being different. And not just different: There are people who really do have ill will; there are people who really are motivated by very unskillful desires. You have to accept that that's part of the human realm. But you can't let that aggravate the mind. You realize that's their business. It's a sorry thing that that's the way they are. If you

can help them change their ways, you try. But if they're resistant to your help, you just have to let them go.

Work on developing wisdom in your own attitude. Just because someone else's been unskillful is not an excuse for you to be unskillful, too—and it's also not an excuse for you to get your mind all worked up. You've got to look after the quality of your mind, because the quality of your mind is what determines what you're going to do. If you let other people's attitudes infect your attitude, you're behaving irresponsibly. So think in those terms until you get the mind ready to settle down.

These are some reflections you need to do if you find that the mind has trouble settling down. Once it's settled down, the next question, of course, is how to maintain it, how to keep it there. This means being very watchful, trying to learn how to read the signs of when the mind is beginning to waver. Even before it's left the breath, there will be a series of signals that the mind is beginning to get bored or to get kind of loose with its object. It's scouting around to see some other place to go. So you've got to learn how to read the signs and then figure out: What does the mind need? Does it need deeper breathing? Does it need more shallow breathing? Does it need a little lecture?

Ajaan Lee compares training the mind to living with a child. You have to learn how to read the child. When the child is crying, what does it need? As you get to know your child, you begin to realize: This kind of cry, that's hunger. This kind of cry is the diaper needs to be changed. This kind of cry is the child's just cantankerous, nothing you do is going to please it. This kind of cry, it just needs to be picked up and carried around a little bit. Then you figure out what to do.

It's the same with the mind. Learn how to read the mind for when it's getting ready to leave the breath, so you know when to comfort it, when to be stern with it, when to use the breath, when to use other reflections to keep the mind solidly in the present moment so that its concentration develops and has a chance to grow, deepen, become more solid.

When you become skilled in keeping the mind solid, then the next set of questions is: What do you do with this concentrated mind? The questions the Buddha recommends that you ask are: How do you comprehend fabrications? How do you look at them? If you've been doing breath meditation, you've already got some experience in dealing with fabrications. The Buddha talks about becoming sensitive to the bodily fabrication, i.e., the in-and-out breath, allowing it to grow calm. And then there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. How do these to grow calm? That's part of getting the mind to settle down.

But this time you go back to the same issue, and the question now is: How do you look at fabrications? How do you begin to see when they're skillful, when they're not? To what extent is it good to identify with them? To what extent do you begin to need to learn not to identify with them? It's good to become sensitive to when you begin developing a sense of self or a sense of identity around these fabrications. And as we were saying earlier, it's good to ask that question: What is this particular sense of self for? What's the intention behind it? Is it a useful tool for what you need?

Sometimes you need a screwdriver and what you've got is a wrench. So you learn to put the screwdriver down and look around: Can you create a wrench out of these aggregates? And when comes the point where you don't need any of these tools at all? When do you have to put down those tools, and let go of all fabrications entirely?

These are some of the questions you hold in the back of your mind. And it's good to have a sense of which questions are appropriate and when. Basically, the questions come down to, "What is skillful?" and go further to "Which set of questions are skillful now?" When you're trying to get the mind to settle down, to what extent do you have to identify with things? When is it good to identify with things and to put aside those questions of not-self? When do you pick up the questions of not-self? When do you not want to do much analysis at all? When do you want to just maintain things with a sense of focus and solidity? These are skills you have to learn. You learn them from trial and error, and from keeping in mind the fact that meditation progresses. It is a skill. It's not simply just following orders and doing what you are told.

Several years back I was looking into various teachings on the Buddha's teachings on heedfulness. I was amazed at how many teachers talked about heedfulness simply as, "You know what you've got to do, just do it. Don't think. Don't ask questions. Just do it." This is especially true of schools of practice where they teach a set technique: Just do the technique. Don't ask any questions, and your mind will come out enlightened in the end. Like the hot dog factory. Whereas the Buddha never talked in those terms. Heedfulness for him was a strong sense of the importance of your actions and the desire to do things skillfully, so that you can avoid the dangers that come from acting in unskillful ways. And he would teach it in a way in which you would learn how to question your actions, to look for yourself.

So the skill of learning how to question things, when to question things, what sorts of questions to ask yourself: This is an important part of the meditation, developing the skills of mind that we need in order to provide the happiness we

want. The Buddha has you take that desire for happiness very seriously, along with the sense that we are suffering, and there is something wrong in the way we're living, in the way we're thinking, in the way we're acting. He doesn't have you simply accept, "Oh, that's the way things are. This is the way I am. I have to learn how to be nice to my anger, nice to my greed, nice to my delusion. Otherwise I won't be accepting of the way things are." The Buddha never had you just accept the way things are. That's not one of your duties. You have to learn how to comprehend the way things are, and where there's suffering in the way things are, so that you begin to see: What are you doing that doesn't have to be done? What can you do it in a different way, so that you don't have to suffer?

These are the issues that he has you take seriously. And when you take these issues seriously, you find that your life does become more auspicious. You're causing less suffering for yourself, less suffering for other beings. There's a greater and greater sense of well-being that becomes established inside.

So this is how we develop a happy New Year: developing the causes for a happy New Year by making sure that every day is an auspicious day in the Buddha's sense of the term—a day in which we do auspicious things. This is why we train our mind, because what's auspicious and what's inauspicious comes out of the mind. So stay focused right here as much you can, and as you ask the right questions of what's right here, you'll find the happiness you're looking for. And you reach the point where you can put those questions aside.