

The Flow of Time

April 9, 2016

Tomorrow we'll be marking Songkran, the Thai New Year. It's not specifically a Buddhist holiday, but some Buddhist features have been added to it. According to the Indian astrological calendar, the year begins when the Sun moves into Aries. In the way they calculate the houses and the constellations, it'll be on the thirteenth.

There's nothing specifically Buddhist about that.

What *is* Buddhist is the little ceremony where people dedicate merit to ancestors who've passed away, because that's something you have to think about when you mark time. You think about the people who've died. Of course, you can't help but thinking as well, "They died. You're going to die."

Time slips away. Each time we have a New Year, it means we're that much older. And you have to ask yourself, what do you get out of it? The body wears down. You don't function quite as well as you used to. As they say in Thailand—I think it's from a passage in the Canon but I'm not really sure—"Time consumes all beings as it consumes itself."

In other words, where is last year? You can't really locate it anywhere. And it's taken certain strengths out of your body. So what do you have left?

Time flows like water. It's like trying to catch a river in your hand. Most of it slips right through. No matter how much you cup the hand, the water's going to slip through.

All you've got are your actions. The things you've done, said, and thought. These are the things you gather out of the water as it passes. So you have to ask yourself, what are you gathering? Gathering good things out of the water or just gathering the scum and weeds?

Think of time as presenting you with opportunities. You have choices. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you're making choices—many choices, some of which go under the radar, others of which you're more conscious of. Are you making the best use of your choices, of your time? These are the kinds of things you have to think about.

Because as the Buddha said, even if you live a hundred years, it's a very short period of time. When it's gone, you don't have a hundred years stashed away in a bag someplace. They've gone, gone, gone.

So given that we have a short period of time, limited strength, limited time: What's the best use of those things?

The Buddha said the best use lies in training the mind, because everything you do and say and think comes out of the mind. And you don't want your mind to be run by impulses. You want it to think of the long term.

This is the beginning of wisdom and discernment, when you ask that question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It’s wise because, one, you realize it’s going to depend on your actions; two, you realize that long-term happiness is possible; and three, you want long-term.

So you’ve got to learn how to train the mind not to go just for the short term. What on impulse seems like it’d be fun or interesting, or something that you just feel like you’ve got to do without really knowing why: You want some strength of mind to step back from those impulses and understand where they’re coming from.

One of the reasons why we work with the breath, in addition to giving the mind a place to settle down, is that a lot of impulses come because something strange has gotten into your breath energy: The part of the mind that pushes for greed, aversion, and delusion knows how to squeeze the breath and to make you feel that you’ve *got* to give in.

So you’ve got to learn how to undo the squeeze. Work on breathing in a way that feels spacious, that feels soothing to the body, strengthening to the body, calming you when you’re upset, relaxing you when you’re tense, energizing you when you’re tired.

That gives you a source of strength right here in the present moment. It makes it easier to look at the long term.

There are a lot of issues where we don’t know what the long-term results will be, but there are also a lot where we do. One of the reasons the Buddha gives the precepts is to remind us: killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants—all these are for long-term harm, regardless of the situation.

So once you’ve got the basic principles down, then you have to look more carefully: What little things are not included in the precepts? What are the areas where the skillful course of action is not so absolute and depends instead on time and place? It’s because of these issues that we have to develop mindfulness and alertness so that we can see for ourselves what’s skillful—and to remember that we’ve got to look for the long term.

Whatever lessons we’ve learned from reliable people or from our own experience: You want to be able to bring them to bear in your choices right now.

Sometimes you hear the teaching that each moment is totally unique, and so nothing you learn from the past can help you, that you have to just go by your instinct, the first thought that comes into your mind. Well, that’s a recipe for impulse. It’s not a recipe for wisdom.

The Buddha said there are patterns. This is why he taught the four noble truths. They’re noble because they always apply. The nature of suffering is always the same. The cause of suffering is always the same. The path to the end of suffering is always the same. And what it means to put a cessation to suffering: That’s always the same.

These truths are timeless. They allow us to step back from the flow of time. And to see: What are you doing with your time? What is the best thing to do with the flow of time as it flows away?

We train our minds focusing on the breath, letting the breath be comfortable, trying to develop a sense of feeling at home here in the present moment and not letting ourselves be pushed around by impulses that come in.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image for this. You're sitting here in the one chair in your house. Don't let anybody else slip into the chair, because if they do, they'll start ordering you around. If you're in the chair, you're sitting down. Other people coming into the house have to stand. You can tell them where to stand and you can tell them where to go.

So, sitting here with the breath, fully occupying your body in the present moment: That's the one chair in the house. Don't let greed come in and take over the chair—or anger or lust or any desires that you know are unskillful—because you want to be able to stay in control. Stay here, stable, knowing that you have the skills to undercut any impulses that come into the mind and that at least part of you knows will cause trouble down the line.

This way, you make the best use of time. You take these truths that are timeless and you try to apply them to your life in a timeless way—not just while you're sitting and meditating, but also as you go through the day.

Where is there stress? Where is there suffering in the mind? And what are you doing? It's all too easy to blame your sufferings on people outside, but that's not in line with the four noble truths. You have to turn and look at yourself: What are you doing right now? Where is it unskillful? What can you do to change it?

This is not to say that you're bad, simply that this is the way to solve the problem. If the problem were dependent on getting other people to be a certain way, you'd really be bad off, because other people have freedom of choice, too. They can do what they want.

If you spend your time straightening out the world, it's like that story they tell of the hungry ghost up in the rafters in the meditation sala. A group of people come to spend the night at the monastery, and they're lying in a row in the sala. The hungry ghost, up in the rafters, looks down and sees that their heads are not even. So he goes down and pulls them so their heads are even. Then he gets up in the rafters and looks down: "Oh, no, their feet are not even." So he goes down and pulls them by the feet until the feet are all lined up. He gets up the rafters, "Oh, the heads are not lined up anymore." All night long.

In other words, you could straighten out the world, but it would never get straight. And as in the story: The hungry ghost doesn't get any sleep and the people trying to sleep don't get any sleep, either. But if you learn how to straighten yourself out, realizing that that's where the problem is and that's also where the solution is, things are a lot easier for everyone.

So train the mind. Use the breath as your ally in this so that you're strong enough to see things in the long term, so that with the passage of years you realize that how many years it takes doesn't really matter because you've got a timeless goal and a timeless way of looking at things, of understanding what needs to be done, what doesn't need to be done.

This is how you see the long term: You step out of time and depend on a teaching that's timeless. That's what the Dhamma has to offer.