

## *A Self Rightly Directed*

*November 28, 2020*

In the discourse on blessings, there are two of the blessings that go together. You see them in other lists, and the two of them go together there as well: One is having made merit in the past, and the other is directing yourself rightly.

The first one, of course, is one over which you have no control right now. The merit in the past is showing itself in the opportunities you have right now, and that's the connection. You've got opportunities. You've got opportunities to practice, and you want to make the most of those.

So the question is: Where are you directing your opportunities? The merit that gave you these opportunities required work. There's always effort in being generous, observing the precepts, meditating, developing goodwill. So you're living off the fruits of your past merit, your past work, and you don't want them to go to waste.

Ajaan Fuang had a talk, one of the few talks of his that was recorded, where he talked about using merit to make more merit. It's just this point—you've got the opportunity to practice. Even though in Buddhism they don't use the word gratitude for that kind of thing—you should have gratitude to other people—but you should also be grateful, in a way, to yourself for having created those opportunities. And what's the best way to show that gratitude? Make the most of the opportunities that you now have.

Direct your attention inside, and remind yourself that whatever happens in the world, the really important things that you're going to be taking with you when you leave this world are the qualities you develop in your mind. And it's not as if you're just taking, taking, taking from the world and running away. To develop those good qualities, you have to leave something good behind in the world—if nothing more than the good example of someone dedicated to the practice.

When you think in these terms, it pares things down a lot. Many of the issues that clutter up the mind have to do with thinking way off into the future: what's going to happen then, what's going to happen after that? But the future is very uncertain, so uncertain that a lot of your plans for the future are going to be totally useless.

You do know, though, that the best way to prepare for the future is the way you prepared

for the present moment: by doing good things. That's what the principle of karma is all about. That's the part of karma that tends to not get into the heads of Westerners very easily—that your best protection is being good.

There's a passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha. Having a Buddha living in his kingdom got him thinking. You have the impression that before that he wasn't much of a thinker. He had just been interested in power, but now that there was a Buddha down to the south of the city, every now and then he'd stop and think, "What would the Buddha's perspective on my life be?" There was one time he came to the Buddha and said, "You know, those who have armies to protect them but misbehave in their thoughts, their words, their deeds they leave themselves unprotected. They really don't have any love for themselves."

Now, we may not be maintaining armies ourselves, but we have our ways of throwing up barriers, throwing up protections for anticipated dangers. But if your mind is out of control, those barriers are not going to protect you from much. You've got to look into your mind and say, "What good qualities can I develop right now?" That's got to be your top priority.

You put your trust in the Buddha's teaching that if you develop good qualities, they're going to see you through. The goodness you've done in the past has yielded this opportunity to practice right now. Have some contentment around this opportunity. It may not be perfect, but if you wait for the perfect opportunity, you'll never get any practice done.

We develop our internal perfections in an imperfect world. Look at the Buddha himself: He had to deal in an imperfect world, both prior to his awakening and afterwards; trying to set up the Dhamma and the Vinaya, dealing with all kinds of people.

In Thai, they have the term *khon*, which means person, but *khon* can also mean stir. And often they joke about how wherever you have a person, things get stirred up. Well, think of all the many persons the Buddha had to deal with: monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, members of other sects, many of them stirring things up while he was trying his best to set up the Dhamma and the Vinaya, both for them, and for the long term.

So it wasn't the case that he just floated through the world three inches off the ground, and all the problems just disappeared at his approach. He dealt with some very difficult people. There are some issues that are recorded in the Canon that never get resolved.

There were certain monks whose misbehavior was really out of line, and there were groups of them, yet we don't know how the issues were resolved. We do know that the Buddha tried

to establish some rules to help prevent that kind of behavior in the future. So even the Buddha himself had to deal with an imperfect world.

What about us? If he had waited for a perfect world, he never would have gained awakening. And it's the same with us. We've got the opportunity to practice right now. Can you breathe right now? Can you focus on your breath? Yes? Then you've got what it takes. You've got what you need, because all the things you need to know are right here.

Of all the strengths we have to develop, the highest one is discernment. And discernment has to do with understanding—or as the Buddha says, having penetrative knowledge of—arising and passing away. That's not just seeing things coming and going; for the knowledge to be penetrative, you have to see where things come from and what they lead to.

You begin to see the varieties of things that can arise in the mind, skillful and unskillful, and you learn how to direct the mind in a skillful direction. That's what it means to direct yourself rightly.

So when thoughts come up in the mind that get in the way of the practice, you have to remember: They're not the direction you want to go in. You want to go in the direction of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and not let yourself get waylaid by petty affairs.

That's when you can say that you have some real appreciation for the goodness you've done in the past to get you to where you are now. Then you direct your attention inward, to the good you can do inside. Now, that goodness will show itself outside. It's not as if we're here just meditating. There's work to be done in the monastery, too.

But remember, the work shouldn't deflect you from the right direction, the direction in which you're developing perfections. Those perfections are meant to nurture good qualities in terms of your concentration and your discernment. So even though we have to look outside, we end up bringing all that goodness back inside, where it can generate the most good.

So have some appreciation for where you are. It may not be perfect, but if it's good enough to practice, it's good enough.

You often hear the question "Where is the best place to practice?" Well, the best place to practice is where you are right now, because if you keep waiting for a better place, time goes past, goes past, and you begin to lose direction. For your self to be rightly directed, it has to be directed right now at what it can clear up in the mind right now, what good things it can build in the mind right now.

That's how you show your appreciation for all the work that it took to get here. And, of

course, the more you focus inside right now, the more you see; the more you see, the more you can clean things up.

This is the direction the Buddha's talking about.