Blessings

October 3, 2015

One of the terms to describe the Buddha, pangawa, is often translated as “blessed one.” The question sometimes comes, “Well, who blessed him?” The answer is, he blessed himself through his practice, through his actions. He gave lessons in how blessings are things that we can bring on ourselves through our actions. Virtue, concentration, insight, discernment—these things bless us. They make us happy, and they provide a protection. In the Mangala Sutra, the Buddha talks about thirty-eight different ways that you act that can bring a blessing on to you. One of the primary ones is heedfulness with regard to all your states of mind. In other words, you don’t just allow your mind to wander around wherever it wants. You realize that the mind tends to wander in certain directions, and if it keeps going in that same direction, many times it’s like a car going down an old muddy road. Many, many times you develop these big ruts, and once the ruts get deep, then it’s hard to get out of the ruts. So you have to ask yourself, “Where does your mind tend to go when you feel that you’re free to let it wander anywhere?” You’ve got to watch out for that. You’ve got to do what you can to counteract that, because if you don’t watch out for the mind, it’s going to take you who knows where. This is why we meditate, to get the mind in one object, a safe object, the breath, so we can develop a sense of well-being from the breath. So breathe in a way that feels good. Ask yourself, “What would be the most nourishing way to breathe right now?” If the body needs energy, how to breathe in a way that’s energizing. If it needs to be relaxed, how to breathe in a relaxing way, or both relaxing and energizing at the same time. We do this because the mind needs to feed. And if it’s not well-fed through the breath or well-fed through another Dhamma theme, it’s going to go out feeding on other things outside. It’s taking whatever it can get. So we do this because we realize the mind can be dangerous. It can give us blessings, but it can also put a curse on us. It can also create a lot of trouble. So we’ve got to be very careful about the mind. The Buddha said that heedfulness is the beginning of all skillful qualities. It’s the root of all skillful qualities. It’s when you realize that there are dangers in your own mind that you’re looking to how to train it. The Buddha said it’s a sign of a wise person knowing that the mind needs training. You can’t just let it follow its instincts or follow its feelings. Because its feelings have reasons of their own, but they’re not really good reasons. They’ll whisper a little bit and it sounds good. But just because something sounds good or feels good doesn’t mean that it really is good. You’ve got to look at where your planned actions are going to lead you. What kind of results do you expect? And then when you’ve acted on it, check to see if you really did get those results. If they’re good results, okay, fine. If not, then you’ve got to go back and reconsider your actions. So it’s our habits that bless us, or otherwise. If we realize that the way we tend to act is not a blessing, okay, you’ve got to look at all the areas of your actions. As in the mangala sutta, it goes for everything from just who you hang out with to trying to find wise people to hang out with. That often isn’t our criterion for deciding who we’re going to spend time with. We have other reasons for liking this person, liking that person. That person is entertaining. That person is fun. How many times do you ask yourself, “This person is wise. I should spend more time with this person”? We do that to some extent. But we should do it more, because the kind of person you hang out with tends to be the person you’re going to become. The lessons the Buddha gives go all the way up to training the mind so it’s not shaken by any changes in the ways of the world. There’s game and there’s loss. There’s status and there’s loss of status. There’s praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. These things shake us up quite a bit. So we have to look into our minds and see why we’re shaken up by them. Why do we identify with these things that can cause us a lot of trouble? That’ll learn not to be shaken by the changes in the world. That’s why we have to meditate. Not only getting the mind comfortable with the breath, but getting it really solid with the breath. Have a sense that this is where we belong, this is where our source of well-being is. Let’s be rooted here. And don’t make your happiness, or don’t try to make your happiness, depend on gain or status or praise or physical pleasures, because those things are going to change. It’s like building your house on a cliff overlooking the ocean, and the action of the waves is digging away at the base of the cliff. The house is going to fall down at some point. Don’t put your happiness in a place like that. Try to put it in something that’s more solid inside. That is a blessing. So as we’re sitting here meditating, look at it as a blessing. All aspects of the practice are ways that we bless ourselves. They’re the teachings on virtue, acting in ways that don’t harm yourself, don’t harm other people. The Buddha said this is not only good into old age, but it’s also beautiful into old age. There are a lot of things in the world that look good on young people, but they don’t look good on old people. Just the other day I was in the optometrist and saw these pictures of models wearing ridiculous-looking glass frames. Yet the models were good-looking, and so the glass frames started to look good as well. But if you put the same glass frames on yourself, especially as you get older, they look ridiculous. There’s so much in the world that’s like that. But virtue, the Buddha said, is beautiful into old age. A virtuous old person is really inspiring. An old person who’s not virtuous is really ugly. So we think about how we dress our bodies, but we also should think about how we dress our minds. We can dress the mind with virtue. We can dress the mind with composure. In other words, regardless of what happens, you don’t let yourself get shaken. This, too, is beautiful into old age. So these are some of the blessings that the Buddha blessed himself with, and he left his examples for us to bless ourselves with as well. Remember, as you’re sitting here meditating in every aspect of the practice, it’s a blessing. In other words, you’re bringing happiness to yourself and you’re training yourself how to bring happiness to other people. In ways they may not notice, but as the Buddha said, if you want to help other people, you try to encourage them to follow the precepts. Now, this is difficult, telling people that they should observe the precepts, but it’s a lot easier when you yourself are observing the precepts. You set a good example. You can harm other people, the Buddha said, by encouraging them to break the precepts or encouraging them to develop greed, aversion, and delusion in various ways. Think about how much our culture is designed, especially the media, to give rise to greed, aversion, delusion, and passion. All kinds of unskillful things. The media here harm us. Many of the values of the culture harm us. You don’t want to play along with those. You want to find your own set of values and be a good example of the Buddha’s values. Tell other people, seeing that example, will inspire them to follow it as well. So if we want blessings in our life, we learn how to bless ourselves, and then through that example we can be a blessing to other people. That’s what makes the fact that we’re born a gift to the world.

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