Bless Yourself

January 5, 2025

In translations of the suttas, they often call the Buddha the Blessed One. The question sometimes comes up, “Who blessed him?” And the answer is, “He blessed himself.” He had asked himself, “What does he really want in life?” He realized that he wanted nothing less than the highest happiness. He also realized that if it was going to happen, he had to do it. He had to create the causes. The problem was that when he started out, he didn’t know the causes. He tried various paths before he found the true path. And when he had found the true path, he looked back and he realized that the happiness he’d found did come from his own actions. There was a path of action by which he blessed himself. There are so many ways in the canon in which he describes the path of practice. Because each of us is coming from a different place. Some of us have a lot of generosity in our background. Some of us tend to be more intelligent in a book-learning sort of way. Others have intelligence in other ways. And part of his wisdom was realizing that he could take you from where you are, and if you follow his instructions, he’ll get you to where he was. This is what ties all the practices together. Not that they’re coming from the same place, in the sense of the same starting point, but they do go to the same ending point. Which means that for some people, they’re to the south of the goal. The instructions are to go north. For those people who are to the north of the goal, the instructions are to go south. You can understand how, in practice, what sounds contradictory is actually not. So the question is, how do you find your path among the many paths that the Buddha gave? Well, part of it was, he said, they all come down to the Eightfold Noble Path. They’re all just variations on this one. It’s another one in which they’re all consistent. He practiced the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. He says, how do you develop these Establishments of Mindfulness? Well, you develop the whole path. There are people who say you can do mindfulness and get wisdom and gain insight and gain awakening without concentration practice. But as the Buddha said, if you want to develop mindfulness, you’ve got to develop concentration as well, because it’s part of the path. If you’re simply mindful of what you should do and don’t do anything about it, that doesn’t take you anywhere. This is why the Buddha said there are extra qualities you have to add. Like ardency and alertness. Alertness is knowing what you’re doing while you’re doing it, and ardency is wanting to do it well. In fact, it’s the ardency that makes all of these part of the path. It’s the wisdom factor of those three. And you’re ardent in doing what? Trying to get the mind to settle down. So as you’re sitting here right now, try to be mindful of why you’re here. And then focus on doing what you need to do. In some cases we come to the meditation wired, tense, nervous. So there’s a huge emphasis on getting the mind to settle down and be quiet. Other people come and they’re kind of dull to begin with, and they have to be energized. This is where there’s a difference between someone coming from the north and someone coming from the south. So check your state of mind right now. What do you need? Do you need more energy? If so, think about the things that would give rise to a sense of really wanting to do this. Think about all the factors that would motivate you to want to practice. The realization that even though we have a new year coming on, we’re getting older. We don’t know how much time we have. We don’t know how much time we have right now. This breath coming in, this breath going out. And we can take advantage of that. This is one of the good things about the Buddha’s teachings on meditation. They don’t require a lot of background study, but they do just require that you be really true in realizing that you need to do something good and it can be done right here. So whatever way of thinking gives you energy, learn how to think in those ways, because thinking is an important part of the meditation, especially when you need to be energized. If you’re already kind of wired and need to calm down, think about topics that are soothing, goodwill for all. We’re just thinking about what a good dharma we have here, founded by someone who wanted nothing but the highest happiness, had the highest standards. And then when he found it, taught it for free. Not only that, he would seek out people. He had a sense of people being here, people being there, who would be ready for the teaching, and he would go. He ended up walking all over northern India. Can you imagine anyone nowadays doing that? Even on the very last day of his life, he knew there was one more person he had to teach. In a distant area, he walked all day to where that person was, and then he passed away. So that kind of reflection is calming. Realize that there are good people in the world, and they’ve left their goodness behind, and they’ve left instructions on how to become good like them. And those instructions have lasted over 2,500 years. And that thought calmed you down, at the same time that makes you want to practice. This is a large part of the strength of persistence. It’s learning how to motivate yourself, and figuring out what kind of motivation you need right now. The strength of persistence is part of a whole set of five strengths. There’s conviction, and conviction that the Buddha really was awakened. And he taught the Dhamma well, and that there have been people who’ve practiced the Dhamma well and gotten results. That thought gives you energy. Because otherwise you live in a world where no one has found the end of suffering. The Buddha had just a few interesting ideas, but they might be right, they might be wrong. That’s the kind of world it is if you don’t have conviction and there’s awakening. And it’s a miserable world. But when you have the conviction that the Buddha was able to find an end to suffering, and he was able to do it through his own efforts, that motivates you to want to put forth your efforts, so you too can get the same results. And you realize, as I said, you don’t know how much time you have, so you’ve got to keep these teachings in mind. You don’t need to develop skillful qualities in mind. Keep in mind the need to abandon unskillful ones. That’s how reflecting on the need for persistence is. You see, the need for mindfulness, that too is a strength. When mindfulness develops, it turns into concentration. The mind settles down and has a sense of well-being, being right here. It’s solidly right here. It doesn’t go away. So you can stay focused right here. Your mind takes on so much work in the course of the day, dealing with this person, that person, this duty, that duty, this job. And the body has its needs. Then your emotions come up, you have to deal with them. So many different things the mind has to deal with. It’s good to be able to tell yourself, “I don’t need to deal with those things right now. I can stay right here.” If my mind is going to deal well with those things, it needs to be cared for. It needs to be allowed to rest. In this way it’s like the body. You hire somebody to do work. You don’t expect them to work 24 hours a day, because you realize the quality of the work will go down. So you give them a reasonable amount of work and then a reasonable amount of time to rest. So the mind needs a reasonable amount of time to rest too. I recommend to people that they meditate at least two hours a day. Some people say, “That’s a huge chunk of time.” But two hours out of 24. It’s just barely enough to keep abreast of what you need to do. And a lot of times those two hours have to clean out the rest of the mess that’s been made during the other 22 hours. So realize this is something that you don’t keep your mind focused only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through the day. As the word for meditation in the Pali language, bhavana, doesn’t mean just meditating with your eyes closed. It means to develop good qualities in the mind. And that’s something you want to do all day long. It’s when the mind settles down like this that it can see things clearly. This is where your real strength lies, the strength of discernment. When you see clearly what you’re doing, you see the results. Part of our discernment is alertness on steroids. You’re very clear about what your actions are. And you see where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering, and you can see how you stop. Again, this is where ardency comes in. You remember what the Buddha said about how true happiness comes from letting go of anything that causes suffering. You draw on your conviction, what the Buddha taught, and you try to let go of the things that you see are causing suffering. Now, if you didn’t believe that letting go of those things would lead to a greater happiness, you wouldn’t let go. There are people who think, as I said, that this is as good as things get, so you might as well hold on. But when you’re convinced, what the Buddha said, and your conviction has been verified many times as you practice, as you are persistent in the practice, mindful, develop concentration, you get more and more trust in the Buddha that letting go really would be good to things that are very dear to you inside. A lot of your attitudes, a lot of your sense of who you are, once you see that it’s stressful, you can let it go. It’s in this way that all the strengths come together in discernment. As the Buddha said, they’re based on heedfulness, the realization that your actions really are important, and you’ve got to be careful. But also, based on that heedfulness, once you develop conviction, you’re more likely to be able to develop the discernment that you need. You’re more likely to let go of things that otherwise you wouldn’t be able to let go. So think of all five of these strengths as working together. The Buddha’s image is of a house. You put up the rafters, and the rafters are not really solid until the ridge pole is in place. They support the ridge pole, and the ridge pole is what makes them solid, too. So think of all five strengths as working together. And that we, too, can develop the strength that the Buddha’s had. As he said, whenever he tried to master a path that was taught in those days, he tried to develop these five qualities. Because it was through developing them that he was able to test them for sure, to see how far they went. When he found that they were lacking, he realized that the lack was not in him, the lack was in the path. And when he got onto the right path, again, he brought these same five qualities. In this case, they worked. He made a conviction in the right thing. He made a persistent effort in the right way. He was mindful of the right things, concentrated in the right way, and gained discernment in the right way. And so all these things worked together to bring him the happiness that he searched for. He was able to prove for himself that, yes, through human effort it is possible to find the highest happiness. And he spent the rest of his life teaching that. And the people who listened to him and benefited from practicing based on his teachings, they passed that teaching down to us. Here we are, one more year to add to the life of the Buddha’s teachings. What keeps them alive is not the fact that they exist in books on the shelves. They stay alive in our practice. So think of this as a good year to extend the life of the Buddha’s teachings one more year at least. As I said, we don’t know how much more time we have left. As the John Swett once said, the human realm is going to get pretty bad for a while. If you have to die and come back, well, come back as a deva, but better than as a human. Because devas can practice too. And how are you going to get that opportunity? Well, practicing as much as you can right now. A woman once came to see him in the buddhun and said, “You didn’t want to practice now, because practicing under the current Buddha was really difficult, and she was going to wait until the time of Maitreya, the next Buddha, when it’s said that people will find it a lot easier to practice.” And as he told her, “If you don’t practice now, you’re not going to get an opportunity to come back then. If you’re lazy now, there’s no opening for lazy people in the time of a Buddha like that.” So, think about time in whatever way encourages you to practice right now. Because where else and when else are you going to practice? This is the time, this is the place. So keep doing your best right here.

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