

Count Yourself Lucky

October 11, 2004

There's a passage where the Buddha says you should count yourself lucky that you're following this path. There are beings that have so much suffering that they can't. There are other beings that have so much pleasure that they can't. They're too carried away with their pleasure, enjoying it too much, taking the pleasure as an end in and of itself, and that gets in the way of the practice.

So think about that when things don't seem to be going well. Remind yourself that you haven't reached the point where you're suffering too much to practice. And you're fortunate that you don't have so much pleasure that you can't practice. You're in a good spot. As long as you have the will to practice, the desire to practice, you're in the right spot.

As for what's coming up in the present moment, look at it as raw material for you to shape the present moment out of—a good present moment, as good a present moment as you can, given the material you've got.

It's like being a good cook. A good cook isn't someone who demands only the best ingredients. A good cook is somebody who can walk into a kitchen, open the fridge, see what's in there, and make something good out of whatever's there in the fridge or the pantry.

So look what you've got. You've got the body sitting here breathing; you've got the mind thinking and aware. That's plenty right there. Think about the breath; be aware of the breath. Do what you can to make that thinking and that awareness as continuous as possible. When they're continuous, the thinking turns into mindfulness: In other words, you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. The awareness turns into alertness: You see what the breath is doing, you see what you're doing with the breath.

Because you *can* fashion it. It's not that you're not allowed to change your breathing. If you're not consciously changing the breathing, then all the adjustments of the breathing become subconscious where you can't see them.

So take your desire for immediate happiness and focus it right here. We talk about the path having a goal, but it doesn't save all of its good things for the end. As the Buddha said, the path is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. That means that—given your physical condition, given the state of your mind—you work with it to make it as comfortable as possible, as pleasant as possible.

The more pleasant the breath in the present moment, the easier it is to stay here. When it's easier to stay here, your mindfulness and alertness can become more and more consistent. As for what's going to happen with the next breath or what you've been doing with the past breath, don't worry about it. Focus on this breath. Give yourself totally to this project right here.

This is looking at what you've got right here, right now and making the best use of it.

One of the Buddha's most radical insights is seeing how much our experience of the world is simply fabricated. It's all activities. Even these five khandhas, these aggregates: The word "aggregate" makes it sound like pieces of rock, but they're not. They may be as heavy as rock but they're actually activities. Everything is a means to something else. And the "something else" that it's a means to becomes a means as long as it's fabricated, too. The only thing that can stand as a really admirable goal, a real end in itself, is nibbana. Everything else should be regarded as a means.

So when there's pain, look at it as a means, something you can work with, whether it's physical pain or mental pain. The same for pleasure: When there's pleasure, look at it as a means. Once the breath starts getting comfortable, be careful not to wallow in the comfort. Stay with the breath and then think of the sense of ease spreading throughout the body, through all the energy channels in the body: the head, the shoulders, the chest, the abdomen, the back, down the legs out to the tips of the toes, down the shoulders, down the arms to the tips of the fingers. Allow that sense of well-being to spread. As for the uncomfortable sensations, you don't have to focus on them. Think of the breath spreading through them and seeping through them, softening them up.

In other words, work with whatever good you've got. Try always to be coming from a position of strength. We all have our strengths; we all have our good aspects here in the present moment. It's learning to focus on them and to make the most of them that makes it easier and easier to stay here, to develop stronger powers of concentration, to develop the path.

When obstacles come up, learn how to recognize them as obstacles. All too often we tend to identify with them, "This is the real me, this is how I really think about things." Well, again, if everything is fabricated, the question is, what is the real you in there? It's one of the feelings coming up in the present moment that you've happened to focus on. We're not asking you to deny its presence, just to realize the presence of other things in the present moment as well, things that may be more useful to focus on, more worthwhile to cultivate, that can act as means to better things.

This is why the Buddha has us think of our sense of self in terms of aggregates, activities. There's nothing solid really in there. So the question is, what are you going to do with these activities? Learn how to direct them, learn how to channel them in the right direction. In that way you don't get weighed down with your sense of who-you-are; of whether you're a competent meditator or an incompetent meditator, or a good monk or a bad monk, or a good lay-meditator, a bad lay-meditator. Those thoughts, those images of yourself, are activities. You can ask yourself, "Is that a good activity to follow through with?" Think of it as a tune: Is it good tune to sing along with? Or are there other tunes in the present moment you can sing along with? You've got your choice.

Because who-you-are, what you identify with, is not really a unitary thing. There are lots of things going on in there: lots of voices in the mind, lots of sensations in the body. You have your choice: which of the voices you want to encourage, which sensations can you work with, that'll lead you in the direction you want to go.

As you get more and more familiar with the present moment—more and more familiar with the principle of cause and effect, what kind of results different activities have in the present moment—you find yourself gaining a wider and wider range of raw materials to work with. You can work with pleasure; you can work with pain. You can work with happiness; you can work with discouragement.

That's because these aggregates you've got here have got lots of different potentials. They've got the potential—if you grab onto them and identify with them as yourself—to weigh you down. If you identify them as potential elements in the path, you can work with them, and they can take you where you want to go.

The pain is part of the first noble truth. The pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind is part of the fourth noble truth. Other kinds of pleasure, you've got to watch out for, because they can lead to the second noble truth, which of course leads to more of the first noble truth. But everything here is all there in the noble truths. If you learn to look at these things in the right way, you can work with them in a productive way.

So regardless of what raw material your past karma keeps popping up in the present moment, as long as you're not in the hell of totally unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, and as long as you're not in the heaven of totally pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas, you're in a good position to practice.

And don't think of how long you've been on the path or of how long you're going to have to be on the path. It's a good thing to be on the path. Some people get discouraged, thinking about how far away the goal is at the end of the path. But the way to deal with that is not to stop having goals. It requires learning to have a more mature attitude about being on the path: learning how to enjoy the path, remembering what life would be like if you didn't have this path—and how lucky you are that you have this opportunity to practice it.

So keep the goal in mind. After all, if we didn't have a purpose in being here, why would we be here? There are a lot of other places we could be right now, a lot of other things we could be doing. We're here with a purpose. If you have the right attitude toward that purpose, then it's easy to stick with it, no matter what pops up in the present moment.

That way, the pain doesn't derail you, the pleasure doesn't derail you. Whatever comes up can be raw material for the path.