

In the Present

December 22, 2014

The verse we chanted just now, *An Auspicious Day*, is one of the few places in the whole Canon where the Buddha talks about being in the present moment: “Don’t go longing after the past, don’t go placing your expectations on the future,” he says, but when he talks about the present, it’s not just being in the present or accepting the present as it is, without any judgment. He says, one, you clearly see what’s happening, particularly in the mind. That’s where you want to focus. And then second, you do your duty with regard to what’s coming up in the mind.

So there’s something you actually *do*. The duties here, of course, come from the four noble truths. If you see that there’s any suffering in the mind, you want to comprehend it. If you comprehend it to the point where you can see what’s causing it, then you want to abandon the cause so that ultimately you can realize cessation; and you do all of this by developing the path: all the good qualities that need to be developed, and that includes abandoning the things that need to be abandoned.

So there are choices to make here. You’re not just hanging out in the present moment. You’re realizing that the present moment has consequences. It leads to the future, and you have those duties to keep in mind. That gives you reference back to the past, so it’s not just pure present awareness. There *are* states of concentration where things get narrowed down to very precise time in the present moment, but you’ve got to maintain the concentration. It doesn’t maintain itself, so even there, there’s a duty. Other times, when the mind is not in concentration, you’ve got to figure out, “What do I need to do? What are my duties right now?”

Here at the monastery, things are pretty simple. You don’t have too many conflicting duties. We’re all here for training the mind. There’s work we have to do, but the work periods are not overwhelming. We don’t have to multi-task. All we have to do is focus on what we’re doing right now, what we should be doing right now.

This ties in with another passage where the Buddha says to remind yourself, “Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?” You become, of course, through your actions, so what are you becoming by the way you act, what kind of person are you turning into by the habits you’re following, and is that the direction you want to go?

So again, the present moment is not an isolated moment. It builds on the past, and it has a certain direction to which it flows in the future. You focus on the present because you have a choice: You can continue flowing in the way you’re going, or if you don’t think it’s wise, you can change the direction of the flow.

The Buddha gives a sense of urgency to being in the present by reminding you: Do your duty *now*, because who knows: Tomorrow may not come. Tomorrow may be death for you.

In other words, you're in the present moment because you're heedful, not because you want to enjoy how nice the present moment is or to squeeze what little bit of pleasure you can out of it. You're here because your choices have consequences and you've got this opportunity right now to make good choices that have good consequences. So what should you be doing right now? At the moment, you're focusing on the breath. If the mind slips off, you bring it right back. That involves the three qualities that the Buddha said have to be brought to the establishing of mindfulness.

There is a popular belief that mindfulness simply means being in the present moment, but the Buddha never said that. Mindfulness is a quality of memory; you remember certain things. In this case, you remember your duties, and they're good duties. The duties assigned by the four noble truths are there for the sake of your own true happiness. They're not arbitrarily imposed by somebody out there who just wants to push you around.

They're taught by the Buddha because he saw that these are the most valuable things that human beings need to know, the most valuable duties they need to keep in mind. So you keep that in mind, whatever your duties are, and then you bring in the second quality: You're alert to what you're doing and what the consequences are right now. After all, sometimes the consequences don't wait until tomorrow or next week or your next life. They appear right now. If you spit into the wind, it comes right back at you. If you put your hand into a fire, you can burn it right now. So you're alert to look at what you're doing and see what the consequences are that you can see right now.

Sometimes nothing seems to be happening, and that's when you have to fall back on your memory to encourage you to stay, and to remember that this practice takes time. The mind has been jumping all around all day. You sit down, and it's going to want to continue jumping because that's its habit. This is where you have to bring in the third quality: ardency. If the mind jumps away, you just drop whatever it is that it was following and you find yourself back with the breath.

And you try to stay here—and you try to stay here with sensitivity. This effort to be sensitive is also a function of ardency.

This is where the pleasure in the present moment comes in as you try to be with a pleasant sensation in the body that you create through the way you breathe, through the way you perceive your breath. Think of the breath coming in and out through all the pores. It can flow anywhere in the body, so anywhere where there's a sense of tightness or blockage, hold in mind the perception that allows your mind to believe, okay, the breath can go through the blockage, no matter how solid your bones may seem. There's a lot of space inside the atoms of the bones, so you can think of the breath flowing through that space, to create a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment throughout the body.

The present moment is not a wonderful moment on its own. It's a good place to stay because you've learned how to remember what to do with the breath, you've learned how to remember to be alert to what you're doing with the breath, and you've learned how to be ardent in doing it well.

At other times, when you're not meditating, there may be other chores you have to do. There are times when you do have to think about and plan for the future, times when you have to remember specific things that happened in the past, so you're not totally abandoning the past and future as you practice. But when you're sitting here doing concentration, you want your attention to be more and more and more totally right here—but still with that sense of mindfulness, of holding the right things in mind. If you lose your mindfulness, the concentration drifts into what Ajaan Lee calls “delusion concentration,” where you lose sense of where you are in time and space. When you come out, you wonder: “What was that? Was I awake, was I asleep?” You're quiet and still, but there's no mindfulness, there is no real alertness—just a minimal amount of alertness—and no real ardency at all.

Now, ardency doesn't mean that you have to sweat and strain. In fact, if you do a lot of sweating and straining, it's not going to be pleasant to be here. Ardency means that you're on top of things: what you're doing right now, what you should be doing right now. Are you doing what you should be doing? If not, what can you do to want to get the mind to *want* to do it?

So the establishing of mindfulness is very intimately related to the duties of the four noble truths. That quality of ardency is what carries out those duties; mindfulness keeps those duties in mind.

Ajaan Mun, toward the end of his life, when he was talking about his teaching style, commented that there were some things that he didn't reveal to everybody. He was very quiet about his psychic powers. We can now read about them in books and magazines everywhere, but when he was alive, he very rarely talked about them. He would mention them to students who were having similar experiences in their meditation, and the lesson was meant for them as to what they should do when they meet up with that kind of problem.

But the teachings he said that he taught to everybody with open hands were two: one, the four noble truths, and two, the four establishings of mindfulness. Those go together. The four noble truths have their duties, and the establishing of mindfulness means using your powers of mindfulness to remember those duties and to carry them through as you stay here with the breath, as you maintain this awareness of the present moment.

There's no conflict between the two teachings. They're intimately related. We always have to keep that point in mind. Mindfulness isn't a state where you're not doing any duties. We're not here just to hang out in the present and enjoy the present moment and think that's all there is. The breath here is part of the path described in the four noble truths. Your concentration with the breath is part of that path. It's going to take you someplace if you keep at it.

So try to keep these points in mind: that we're here to figure out what's our duty right now. Think: "What duty needs to be done? I'll do it today because who knows, I may not have this chance tomorrow." If we die, it takes a long time to get back to the practice. Think how long it took you in this lifetime to find your way to being right here, sitting right here, learning how to train the mind. The next time around, it may be a lot longer than that if you're not careful. So you've got this opportunity right now. Focus on the "right now" because it's a place where the practice is done and where you can make a difference.

That is what it means to be with the present: to see it clearly and—once you see clearly what's going on—to realize what your duties are right now. Then you do them. That's when being in the moment is really auspicious.