

Making Progress

November 27, 2011

Close your eyes and watch your breath.

The breath comes in, think “bud-.”

The breath goes out, think “-dho.” Buddhho.

Try to stay right here with the breath. Make this the foundation for your mind right now. If you notice that your thoughts move away from this, just move them right back. If your awareness or attention moves away, bring it right back. If you want a good foundation, you have learn how to stay with it and to build it so that it's strong.

The Buddha says there are basically four foundations for bringing about progress in your life.

The first two are things that you've already done. You have good karma from the past and you're living in a civilized country. Those are two things that are really important to have. They're something you can fall back on.

But you can't fall back just on those because we know a lot of people who've done good in the past and lived in a civilized country and yet have ended up doing a lot of damage to themselves.

So we need the other two. The first is to associate with good people: people of integrity, people you can trust so that you can pick up their values.

The second is to set your life in the right direction. So you have to ask yourself, what direction are you focusing your life in right now?

Those two things are related. You hang around with certain types of people and they start telling you that this is the good life or that's the good life and this is what people should do and shouldn't do. You start picking up their values, sometimes without even realizing it.

So you have to look at who you're associating with. Make up your mind to associate with people you can really trust so that you can pick up their trustworthy values.

That helps you set your life in the right direction. After all, where do you want to go?

As the Buddha said, we can go to good destinations, we can go to bad destinations both in this lifetime and in lifetimes after this. So what kind of destination really is a good one? What can you take with you when you go on to the next life?

Basically the Buddha says you have four treasures. You have the treasure of your virtue, you have the treasure of having conducted yourself well with other people in areas outside of the precepts. You have your livelihood: Is your livelihood a good livelihood?

And then finally there are your views: Are your views right? If your views are wrong, they can send you off in all sorts of directions.

So you want to make sure that you're aiming, at the very least, at not harming anyone, finding a happiness that's reliable and trustworthy that doesn't require that you harm anybody else, doesn't require that you harm yourself. Ultimately you want to be able to find a way to put an end to suffering. That's the right direction in which you should aim your life.

So you should ask yourself, “The people I'm associating with: Is that where they aim?”

How about myself: Is that where I aim?” Look at where you’re aiming your life. If you see that you’re heading off in the wrong direction, you’ve got the wrong target, try to change the target. Change so that it’s the right direction, so that you’re not causing any suffering—you’re not causing yourself suffering, you’re not causing anyone else any suffering. At the same time, you’re developing those treasures you can take with you. Because in your next lifetime, you’re also going to want to have good karma in your past. Right now is the past of your future.

So what are you doing right now in terms of developing your views, developing your precepts, your behavior around other people, and your livelihood? These are the things that you really have to look at carefully.

If there are things you need to change, it’s not too late to change. If you decide that you have to change the direction, it’s not too late to change. Just make sure that right now your direction is going in the right direction.

This is one of the reasons why we stay with the breath. The breath is a good friend to stay with because it’s one of the things that alerts us. When something wrong is going on in the mind, there’s going to be something wrong in your breath. So it’s a good friend to have. It helps keep you pointed in the right direction.

Try to maintain this state of mind that’s settled in right here, that can see things clearly for what they are and where they’re going. That way, you can see for yourself what you are and where you’re going. And if you’re going in the right direction, fine, maintain that. If not, it’s never too late to change direction.