

## *Protection from Fools*

*January 1, 2005*

Today is the first day of the New Year. People came here this morning for blessings, and just now we had a chant on blessings. It's interesting that the Pali word for blessing, *maṅgala*, can also mean protection. And where do we need protection more than anywhere else, if not from our unskillful intentions inside? These tend to run rampant through the mind. They, more than anything else, cause us trouble.

The chant on blessings starts with not consorting with fools, and consorting with the wise instead. The main fools are inside our own head: the opinions we have that we picked up from who knows where—either from other people or from our own reasoning—that tend to take on. Some of the most powerful ones are ones we barely articulate. We don't notice them. They seem to be in the background all the time. So they move in like stealth bombers. They slip in and do their work and then slip out, and you hardly notice that they've been there.

This is why we need a lot of mindfulness and alertness to see them. And this is why the mind is to be very still, because if you're not still, you don't notice the waves that come through the mind. If you're moving around all the time, another wave comes in, and you don't notice it because you're obsessed with the motions you're already making. A few extra motions don't register.

So the skill you need is to be still, and keeping the mind still requires mindfulness and alertness to protect it: mindfulness to keep your meditation object in mind, and alertness to see how well you're staying with it.

Then comes discernment, the ability to see how you can maintain that still state in the midst of your other activities. For most of us, either the mind is very much in meditation or very much out, and there's no in-between. Or if there is in-between, it's not skillful. It's just a mess. We should try to find a level that we can take with us, in terms of the causes that we develop, so that no matter where we go, we've got this place to stand and where we can trust our perspective.

As we all know, so much depends on where you're standing. How you see things depends on what angle you're looking at them from.

As the Buddha pointed out, what better angle, what better perspective to have than the one that's gained from standing right here in the present moment, right where the mind and the body meet at the breath? When you're here, you can see what's going on in the mind; you can see what's going on in the body. You're fully present. As the Buddha said, everything starts from here. All your potentials for

happiness and unhappiness lie right here. There will be things coming in from the past, past karma, but it's how you deal with those things in the present moment: That's what makes all the difference.

So the skills you need to learn are skills to be learned right here. The place to stand to watch things is right here. The breath provides the space you can use to get out of some of the obsessions of the mind, so that when fools come into the mind, you can step back. You don't have to go consorting with them. You can just watch them from a distance.

This, more than anything else, frees you from a lot of things. One of the basic principles of meditation is that when something dangerous comes into the mind, and you don't know your way out of it, just stay with a sense of being the observer, watching things. You don't have to act on what's happening. You don't have to do anything. Eventually, it'll go away. No matter how strong a desire may be, no matter how strong your anger may be, it can't last forever. All too often these emotions worm their way into us. We think, "If I don't act on it, it'll explode."

Well, exactly what's going to explode? Your mind doesn't explode. There may be some tension in the body, some pressure on your blood vessels, but you can work through that with the breath.

So why do we feel compelled to act on things just because they come into the mind? Often it's because we don't see any alternative. Yet when you step back like this, you begin to see that this is one very useful alternative: the ability to step back. When you have a different perspective, you begin to see other things as well. These voices that come hounding you, telling you to act in this way, or to worry about this, worry about that: You can watch them, too. You don't have to sing along with them as we so often do. You don't have to see things the way they do.

One of the Buddha's greatest insights is that you have to watch out for the questions that are implicit in a thought. When someone says you've got to do things this way, you've got to do things that way, exactly what question is that way of acting supposed to resolve? Look at it that way. Then you realize also that you don't have to answer every question that comes into the mind. Some questions do nothing but entangle you. Only a few sets of questions liberate you: the questions dealing with, "Where's the stress here? How can I comprehend it? What's the cause of stress? How can I let go? And to let go, what qualities need to be developed to put an end to the stress?" Those kinds of questions deserve answers.

Other kinds of questions: "What's going to happen if you don't control this situation? What's going to happen if you don't try this, don't try that?" Those are not questions you necessarily have to answer. You can just let them hang in the air until they go away. They may come back again, but they'll go away again.

You have to decide which questions are the important ones to answer in life. And it's best to do that from a perspective that lets you know that you don't have to answer everything. When something comes up in the mind, look at the question implicit behind it. That helps you see through a lot of false issues. The real issues in life are not all that many. They are complex enough, so they require your full attention, but there are not that many of them. Once you start with this issue of stress and its ending, and focus on that, then you can sort everything else out from that perspective. Where is stress seen? It's seen right here. Where it's cause seen? The cause is seen right here, too.

Another reason why it's good to take your stance right here in the present moment is that it allows you to step back and look at all the dramatic issues the mind tends to build out of this issue of stress. When you reduce it to stress, it's right there, it's the immediate present. All too often, the issues we're worried about are things that spin out from our sensations in the present moment: Our expectations, our memories can create all kinds of things. But look at the raw materials. What have you got here? Well, there's the stress. That's the problem. There's a sense of stress, dis-ease. And the Buddha keeps reducing it to stress.

That also helps de-romanticize it. It makes it a lot less dramatic. So many people carry around their pain and suffering as if they were their most precious possessions. It's their identity, and they're afraid that they'd be nothing without it. This was the Buddha's great insight: that you're *not* nothing without it. Whatever you lose by letting it go is nothing to be regretted.

First reduce it to these very basic issues. Look at the issues in life with a minimum of dramatization, of giving them excessive importance. Everything gets reduced to these very basic things: just plain old stress, nothing dramatic—something everybody has, everybody can talk about. But it takes someone focused like the Buddha to really look at it and tease out its implications, that this is the big problem in life. What does that mean in terms of other problems? Some of them you have to work on, but a lot of them you can learn to let go. If you focus exclusively enough on this issue, then once this issue is taken care of, he said, that covers everything.

So try to get to this level where there's just the issue of stress arising and passing away in the present moment. When you can stand at that spot where you can see this, and everything else falls into perspective, then you have your magic protective skill that protects you from all the fools in the mind. When they spin all their complicated issues, you can see it's just cotton candy, a lot of fluff but no real substance. The real substance is just a little bit: a little stream of sugar. Once you dissolve the stream of sugar, there's nothing else left.