AWAKE AND ALONE

If we live in forgetfulness, if we lose ourselves in the past or in the future, if we allow ourselves to be tossed about by our desires, anger, and ignorance, we will not be able to live each moment of our life deeply. We will not be in contact with what is happening in the present moment, and our relations with others will become shallow and impoverished.

Some days we may feel hollow, exhausted, and joyless, not really our true selves. On such days, even if we try to be in touch with others, our efforts will be in vain. The more we try, the more we fail. When this happens, we should stop trying to be in touch with what is outside of ourselves and come back to being in touch with ourselves. We should "be alone." This is a time to practice conscious breathing, observing deeply what is going on inside and around us. We can accept all the phenomena we observe, say hello to them, and smile at them. We do well to do simple things, like walking or sitting meditation, washing our clothes, cleaning the floor, making tea, and cleaning the bathroom in mindfulness. If we do these things, we will restore the richness of our spiritual life.

The Buddha was someone who lived an awakened life, dwelling constantly in the present moment in a relaxed and steady way. There was always a richness about him — a richness of freedom, joy, understanding, and love.

If we live in mindfulness, we are no longer poor, because our practice of living in the present moment makes us rich in joy, peace, understanding, and love. Even when we encounter someone poor in spirit, we can look deeply and discover that person's rich layers, how his consciousness was in the past, when he thinks of that and gives rise to a mind which is enslaved by those things which belong to the past, then that person is pursuing the rich layers.

When we watch a documentary or read a book or look at someone's painting or sculpture, if we are already poor in heart and mind, and weak in mindfulness, what we are reading or looking at may irritate us and make us feel even more poor. But if we are rich in mindfulness, we will discover what lies in the depths of that art. We may be able to see deeply into the inner world of the person who made it. Looking with the eyes of an art critic, we can see things that most people do not see, and even a bad movie or book or sculpture can teach us. Maintaining the awareness of each detail of the present moment, we are able to profit from it. This is the better way to live alone.

TIED UP INSIDE

The "Knowing the Better Way To Live Alone" gatha begins with the line: "Do not pursue the past." To "pursue the past" means to regret what has already come and gone. We regret the loss of the beautiful things of the past which we can no longer find in the present. Buddha commented on this line as follows: "When someone thinks how his body was in the past, how his feelings were in the past, how his perceptions - the past no longer is." When we are lost in thoughts about the past, we lose the present.
Life exists only in the present moment. To lose the present is to lose life. The Buddha's meaning is very clear: We must say goodbye to the past so that we may return to the present. To return to the present is to be in touch with life.

What dynamics in our consciousness compel us to go back and live with the images of the past? These forces are made up of internal formations—mental formations which arise in us and bind us. Things we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, imagine, or think can all give rise to internal formations—desire, irritation, anger, confusion, fear, anxiety, suspicion, and so on. Internal formations are present in the depths of the consciousness of each of us.

Internal formations influence our consciousness and our everyday behavior. They cause us to think, say, and do things that we may not even be aware of. Because they compel us in this way, they are also called fetters, because they bind us to acting in certain ways.

The commentaries usually mention nine kinds of internal formations: desire, hatred, pride, ignorance, stubborn views, attachment, doubt, jealousy, and selfishness. Among these, the fundamental internal formation is ignorance, the lack of clear seeing. Ignorance is the raw material out of which the other internal formations are made. Although there are nine internal formations, because "desire" is always listed first, it is often used to represent all the internal formations.

My friends, what is meant by dwelling in the past? Someone thinks, "In the past my eyes were like that and the-form (with which my eyes were in contact) was like that," and thinking like this, he is bound by desire. Bound by desire, there is a feeling of longing. This feeling of longing keeps him dwelling in the past.

This commentary could make us think that the only internal formation holding one in the past is desire. But represent all the internal formations—hatred, doubt, jealousy, and so forth. All of these tie us and hold us back in the past.

Sometimes we only have to hear the name of someone who has wronged us in the past, and our internal formations from that time automatically take us back into the past, 'and we relive the suffering. The past is the home 'ground of both painful and happy memories. Being absorbed in the past is a way of being dead to the present moment. It is not easy to drop the past and return to living in the present. When we try to do it, we have to resist the force: of the internal formations in us. We have to learn to transform our internal formations, so that we will be free to be attentive to the present moment.

STANDING FIRMLY
The present contains the past. When we understand how our internal formations cause conflicts in us, we can see how the past is in the present moment, and we will no longer be overwhelmed by the past. When the Buddha said, "Do not pursue the past," he was telling us not to be
overwhelmed by the past. He did not mean that we should stop looking at the past in order to observe it deeply. When we review the past and observe it deeply, if we are standing firmly in the present, we are not overwhelmed by it. The materials of the past which make up the present become dear when they express themselves in the present. We can learn from them. If we observe these materials deeply, we can arrive at a new understanding of them. That is called "looking again at something old in order to learn something new."

If we know that the past also lies in the present, we understand that we are able to change the past by transforming the present. The ghosts of the past, which follow us into the present, also belong to the present moment. To observe them deeply, recognize their nature, and transform them, is to transform the past. The ghosts of the past are very real. They are the internal formations in us, which are sometimes quietly asleep, while at other times they awaken suddenly and forcefully. There is the Sanskrit term “anushaya”. Anu means "along with." Shaya means "lying down." We could 'translate anushaya as "latent tendency." The internal formations continue to be with us, but they are lying asleep in the depths of our consciousness. We call them ghosts, but they are present in a very real way.

FUTURE GHOSTS
Sometimes, because the present is so difficult, we give our attention to the future, hoping that the situation will improve in the future. Imagining the future will be better, we are better able to accept the suffering and hardship of the present. But at other times, thinking about the future may cause us a lot of fear and anxiety, and yet we cannot stop doing it. The reason we continue to think about the future, even when we do not want to, is due to the presence of internal formations. Although not yet here, the future is already producing ghosts which haunt us. In fact, these ghosts are not produced by the future or the past. It is our consciousness which creates them. The past and the future are creations of our consciousness.

The energies behind our thinking about the future are our hopes, dreams, and anxieties. Our hopes can be the result of our sufferings and failures. Because the present does not bring us happiness, we allow our minds to travel into the future. We hope that in the future, the situation will be brighter: "When someone considers how his body will be in the future, how his feelings will be in the future, how his mental formations will be in the future, how his consciousness will be in the future....Thinking in this way can give, us the courage to accept failure and suffering in the present. The poet Tru Vu said that the future is the vitamin for the present. Hope brings us back some of the joys of life that we have lost.

We all know that hope is necessary for life. But hope can be an obstacle. If we invest our mind in the future, we will not have enough mental energy to face and transform the present. Naturally we have the right to make plans for the future, but making plans for the future does not mean to be being swept away by daydreams. While we are making plans, our feet-are firmly planted in the present. We can only build the future from the raw materials of the present.
The essential teaching is to be free of all desire for the future in order to come back with all our heart and mind into the present. To realize awakening means to arrive at a deep and full insight into reality, which is in the present moment. In order to return to the present and to be face to face with what is happening, we must look deeply into the heart of what is and experience its true nature. When we do so, we experience the deep understanding which can release us from suffering and darkness.

To return to the present moment is to discover life and to realize the truth. All the Awakened Ones of the past have come to Awakening in the present moment. All the Awakened Ones of the present and the future will realize the fruit of Awakening in the present also. Only the present moment is real: "The past no longer is, and the future has not yet come."

If we do not stand firmly in the present moment, we may feel ungrounded when we look at the future. We may think that in the future we will be alone, with no place of refuge and no one to help us. "When someone considers how his body will be in the future, how his feelings will be in the future, how his mental formations will be in the future, how his consciousness will be in the future..." Such concerns about the future bring about unease, anxiety, and fear, and do not help us at all in taking care of the present moment. They just make our way of dealing with the present weak and confused. There is a Confucian saying that a person who does not know how to plan for the distant future will be troubled and perplexed by the near future. This is meant to remind us to care for the future, but not to be anxious and fearful about it. The best way of preparing for the future is to take good care of the present, because we know that if the present is made up of the past, then the future will be made up of the present. All we need to be responsible for is the present moment. Only the present is within our reach. To care for the present is to care for the future.

SMILING WITHIN
When we think about the past, feelings of regret or shame may arise. When we think about the future, feelings of desire or fear may come up. But all of these feelings arise in the present moment, and they all affect the present moment. Most of the time, their effect does not contribute to our happiness or joy. We have to learn how to face these feelings. The main thing we need to remember is that the past and the future are both in the present, and if we take hold of the present moment, then we also transform the past and the future.

How can we transform the past? In the past we may have said or done something destructive or harmful, and now we regret it. According to Buddhist psychology, regret is an "indeterminate emotion" This means that it can be either constructive or destructive. When we know that something we have said or done has caused harm, we may give rise to a mind of repentance, vowing that in the future we will not repeat the same mistake. In this case, our feeling of regret has a wholesome effect. If, on the other hand, the feeling of regret continues to disturb us, making it
impossible for us to concentrate on anything else, taking all the peace and joy out of our lives, then that feeling of regret has an unwholesome effect.

When regret becomes unwholesome, we should first distinguish whether the cause was based on something we did or said, or on something we failed to do or say. If in the past, we said or did something destructive, we can call that an "error of commission." We did or said something with a lack of mindfulness, and it caused harm. Sometimes we commit an "error of omission." We did harm by not saying or doing what needed to be said or done, and that brought us regret and sorrow. Our lack of mindfulness was there, and its results are still present. Our pain, shame, and regret are an important part of that result. If we observe the present deeply and take hold of it, we can transform it. We do so by means of mindfulness, determination, and correct actions and speech. All these come about in the present moment. When we transform the present in this way, we also transform the past, and at the same time, we build the future.

If we say that all is lost, everything is destroyed, or the suffering has already happened, we do not see that the past has become the present. Of course, the suffering has already been caused and the wound of that suffering can touch our very soul, but instead of lamenting about or suffering from what we have done in the past, we should take hold of the present and transform it. The traces of a bad thought can only be erased by a bountiful rainfall, and rain can only fall in the present moment.

Buddhist repentance is based on the understanding that wrongdoing originates in the mind.

All wrongdoing arises from the mind.
If mind is purified, what trace of wrong is left?
After repentance, my heart is light
like the white clouds that have always floated over the ancient forest in freedom.

Because of our lack of mindfulness, because our mind was obscured by desire, anger, and jealousy, we acted wrongly. That is what is meant by "All wrongdoing arises from the mind." But if the wrongdoing arose from our mind, it can also be transformed within our mind. If our mind is transformed, then the objects perceived by our mind will also be transformed. Such transformation is available if we know how to return to the present moment. Once we have transformed our mind, our heart will be as light as a floating cloud, and we become a source of peace and joy for ourselves and others. Yesterday, perhaps out of foolishness or anger, we said something which made our mother sad. But today our mind is transformed and our heart light, and we can see our mother smiling at us, even if she is no longer alive. If we can smile within ourselves, our mother can also smile with us.

If we can transform the past, we can also transform the future. Our anxieties and fears for the future make the present dark. There is no doubt that the future will be black too, because we know that the future is made up of the present. Taking care of the present is the best way to take care of the future. Sometimes, because we are so concerned about what will happen the next day, we toss and turn all night, unable to
sleep. We worry that if we cannot sleep during the night, we will be tired the next day and unable to perform to the best of our ability. The more we worry, the more difficult it is for us to sleep. Our worries and fears for the future destroy the present. But if we stop thinking about tomorrow and just stay in bed and follow our breathing, really enjoying the opportunity we have to rest, not only will we savor the moments of peace and joy under the warm blankets, but we will fall asleep quite easily and naturally. That kind of sleep is a big help for making the next day a success.

When we hear that the forests of our planet are diseased and dying so rapidly, we may feel anxious. We are concerned for the future, because we are aware of what is happening in the present moment. Our awareness can motivate us to do something to halt the destruction of our environment. Obviously, our concern for the future is different from worry and anxiety which only drain us. We have to know how to enjoy the presence of beautiful, healthy trees in order to be able to do something to protect and preserve them.

When we throw a banana peel into the compost heap, if we are mindful, we know that the peel will become compost and he reborn as a tomato or as lettuce in just a few months. But when we throw a plastic bag into the garbage, thanks to our awareness, we know that a plastic bag will not become a tomato or a salad very quickly. Some kinds of garbage need four or the hundred years to decompose. Nuclear waste needs a quarter of a million years before it stops being harmful and returns to the soil. Living in in the present moment in an awakened way, looking after the present moment with all our heart we will not do things which destroy the future. That is the most concrete way to do what is constructive for the future.

In our everyday life, we may also product poisons for our minds, and these poisons destroy not only us but also those who live with us, in the present and in the future too. There are three poisons: desire, hatred, and ignorance. In addition, there are other poisons whose capacity todo harm is very great: jealousy, prejudice, pride, suspicion, and obstinacy.

In our day-to-day relationships with ourselves, others, and our environment, any or all of these poisons can manifest, blaze up, and destroy our peace and joy, as well as the peace and joy of those around us. These poisons can linger and pollute our minds, causing bitter consequences in the future. So to live in the present moment is also to accept and face these poisons as they arise, manifest, and return to the unconscious, and to practice observation meditation in order to transform them. This is a practice. To live in the present is also to see the wonderful and wholesome things in order to nourish and protect them. Happiness is the direct result of facing things and being in touch, that Happiness is the material from which a beautiful future is constructed.