

Wise attention

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I wanted to keep the meditation a little shorter today, because this is a day of connection and of gift-giving. Conventionally, this is true in the world at large, but it is also true here, among us. Meeting together like this—as a group, as we do from time to time throughout the year—is something very precious. Even as small squares on a screen, it is deeper than we might think.

To come together on this day is itself a gift. To get out of bed on Christmas morning—after whatever we did last night, whether it was sleeping, gathering with loved ones, or singing until midnight—and to meet the day with kind intentions right at the front of our hearts is truly a gift to the world, and to one another. It is very precious to be together today.

For me personally, it is also quite sweet. I have seen some of you recently, just a few days ago; others I haven't seen for some time, and I hold you in my heart. This year I don't quite have the energy to run around much—perhaps next year will be different—but however we connect, whether in person or online, it is essential that we keep doing so. The wishes of this day are about connection, because when we truly connect with another person, we cannot harm them. When we see another as a fellow human being, with the same wishes for happiness and safety as ourselves, harm becomes impossible. From that seeing, peace naturally arises.

This holiday is conventionally about eating together and offering gifts. But I would like us to reflect on a deeper question: what do we want to offer the world this coming year? Not as a story about ourselves, but as a quality of being. What do we wish to give, moment by moment, with these precious lives?

Yesterday, something quite striking happened. I was in an ongoing conversation with friends, arranging a future meeting—talking about hotels and plans—and in the midst of that, one person said a new friend had suffered an aneurysm. Another said they had just received a call that a dear friend had died. In the middle of ordinary life, we are reminded so suddenly: arising and passing away. We never know. It might be someone we love. It might be one of us.

Given how fragile life is, how transient everything is, offering peace, well-wishing, non-grasping, and presence without expectation becomes profoundly meaningful. Most fundamentally, the gift of acceptance is the root of peace in the world.

Most of us are not in a position to make grand, global changes. We live in a personal universe of beings—family, friends, colleagues—and how we are with ourselves and with each other matters more than anything. Of course, it will not always be perfect. But to hold the aspiration of kindness, generosity, and peaceful acceptance—of ourselves and of others—is essential.

This is not always easy, especially in families. Many of us may have experienced this in recent days. There are expectations, misunderstandings, and sometimes we feel like the “black sheep,” living in ways others do not understand. The friction between who we are and who others want us to be can be painful. Yet learning to let people be who they are, without trying to change them, and loving them anyway, is essential. Friction and love can exist side by side.

The gift of peace we offer one another does not come from nowhere. We must find our way into it, again and again. When the world provokes reaction in the heart, there is a quality of mind that is both precious and necessary.

This brings me to what arose for me today as a central reflection: *yoniso manasikāra*, a term from the Pali language, often translated as **wise attention**. In Pali, *yonī* means “womb” or “source,” which feels especially fitting on a day associated with birth. What are we giving birth to in each

moment? *Manasikāra* means attention or presence. So wise attention is presence rooted in the source, in the truth of the way things are.

That truth is the truth of impermanence, fragility, and change: all conditioned things arise and pass away. When attention is rooted in this understanding, it becomes wisdom. And wisdom and compassion always go together—always.

Yoniso manasikāra is the root condition for **right view**, the first factor of the Eightfold Path. It is also what keeps the whole path alive. Importantly, the path does not begin with meditation alone, but with how we act and live—right action, right livelihood. Wise attention is not something reserved for long retreats; it is meant to be applied in every moment of daily life.

This is why mindfulness is so essential. If we are not aware of where the mind is going, what it is attending to, we cannot choose wisely. Daily life moves quickly. We speak quickly, act quickly, often on autopilot. Even so, our deepest aspirations—for peace, for Metta, for compassion—begin right here, with this very moment of attention. Is it wise, or not?

It only takes a microsecond of space. Just enough to choose.

Unwholesome states will arise—irritation, judgment, confusion, wanting, anger. That is human. The beauty of wise attention is that these very states can become the reminder, the mindfulness bell. “Ah—this is here. What do I want to cultivate now?”

It does not take long. It is simply recognition and choice. Perhaps we choose Metta. Perhaps simple awareness. Perhaps humor. Laughter, for instance, can dissolve ill will very quickly. These are all ways of accepting the mind as it is and inclining it toward the wholesome.

As the Buddha taught: refrain from the unwholesome, cultivate the wholesome. This is the whole path.

In daily life this is more challenging than on retreat, because things move fast and we are often identified with what arises. So we work at a coarser level. When irritation or greed arises, let that be the signal: pause, recognize, and choose.

The Buddha was not a savior. He taught the way, but each of us must walk it. “Be a lamp unto yourself,” he said. We are responsible for our actions—*kammassakā*: ownership of action. Each moment we are planting seeds. What seeds do we want to plant?

Wise attention gives us the means to choose.

Togetherness like this supports us in that choice. Each person finds their own way—through kindness, awareness, forgiveness, bodily presence, generosity. There are infinite skillful means. What matters is that we pause, notice what is arising, and respond from wisdom and compassion.

By doing so, moment by moment, we give birth to peace.

And in that way, quietly and genuinely, we make the world a more peaceful place.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.