An Auspicious Day

December, 2001

Years ago, when I was in Thailand, there was one December when it was a lot cooler than most years. Cold wind, at least cold by Thai standards, was blowing down from the north. And I started thinking about winter back home. I mentioned this to a Chan Foon, and his immediate response was, “Yeah, every culture has its crazy customs, doesn’t it? Why is it that on this one particular day, families have to get together? Why can’t they get together on some other day?” He gave an example of the Chinese custom of visiting a grave on a certain day in Thailand. They call it Tseng Ming, sometime early in August, and all the families have to go to visit their ancestral graves. The roads get very dangerous, because everybody’s out driving down the roads, trying to get to their grave as fast as possible and then get back. And it does sometimes turn out to be their grave. So it’s important, as we’re practicing the Dharma, to step back a little bit from our assumptions, from our conventions, and realize that that’s just what they are. We know in terms of Christmas that it’s an all-likelihood that this was not the day that Jesus was born. And they have reports of shepherds out watching their flocks by night. Well, this is the time of year you don’t watch your flocks by night in that part of the world. It’s too rainy. The reason it was held on December 25th was for political reasons. The Romans liked to have a celebration at the end of December, Saturnalia. So the early Christian Church decided, “Well, let’s take over this holiday and make it our own.” So it’s just a convention. It has very little to do with reality. And then all the customs that got built up around it—again, the manners of different conventions, pagan rites, the need for stores to sell a lot of goods—all kinds of different things have come in to make this a day that is said to be special. And as the Buddha said, a special day is one where you give the whole day to the practice. It has nothing to do with the calendar. It’s discourse, the padekaratha, on an auspicious day. It’s when you’re not tied up in the future, not thinking about the past, just clearly seeing what’s happening from moment to moment as it’s actually happening. And if you’re really ardent in this practice day and night, okay, that’s an auspicious day. It has nothing to do with the calendar. It has nothing to do with the stars. It’s made special because you put a special effort into the practice. That’s the kind of special day that has nothing to do with conventions and has everything to do with what’s really going on in your mind. So let’s make it a special day today. Not because the date on the calendar has a special box around it or a special color, but because we really do put more effort into the practice. So that the practice doesn’t depend on whether it’s day or night. It’s a full 24-hour thing, aside from the time when we have to go to sleep. You want to be mindful. You want to be clear about what’s arising, noticing what’s skillful and what’s unskillful, and nudging things in the skillful direction. Most people think that being mindful or alert to the practice of the present moment is just a matter of watching whatever happens to arise, good, bad, whatever, just noting, noting, noting. But when the Buddha talks about developing right concentration, that’s not what he’s talking about at all. When you look at the fourth foundation of mindfulness, mental qualities, when he talks about unskillful qualities like the hindrances or skillful qualities like the factors of awakening, in the case of the unskillful ones, he says, “You notice when it comes. You notice when it goes.” You notice why it comes, and you notice what you can do to stop it from coming. So it’s not just allowing things to come and go, come and go on their own, without you doing any direction at all. You watch to observe cause and effect, and then try to test it in various ways to see what kind of causes really are causes. How else can you know cause and effect unless you play with the process, unless you experiment and fiddle around with the causes? When scientists are conducting experiments, they don’t just sit there and watch. They change the conditions to see what their reaction to any change is, to see what changes make a difference and what changes don’t make a difference. That’s all part of right mindfulness, too. So it’s not just simply being kind of willy-nilly in the present moment. When you’re in the present moment, you’ve got an agenda. You’ve got a purpose for being in the present moment. You want to understand what’s going on, and you want to be able to adjust things to get the kind of results you want. This principle applies not only to unskillful mental qualities, but also to skillful ones. You see when mindfulness is there. You see when it’s not there. You see when the mind is clearly analyzing things in terms of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. And you see when things are confused. You see when there’s persistence, when there’s no persistence. You see when there’s serenity, no serenity. Concentration, rapture, equanimity. You see these things as they’re coming and going. You observe them to the point where you can see cause and effect. And then you try to adjust the causes so that these skillful qualities can become more solid, can grow stronger. So again, there’s an agenda. It’s not that you don’t have any sense of right or wrong, good or bad. It’s just that you’re a lot more subtle about it, and trying to really understand what’s going on so that you can adjust things in a way that really gets good results. The reason so many people are turned off by ideas of right and wrong is because they’re based on a lack of observation, a lack of noticing what’s actually going on, what actually works. People come in with a lot of preconceived notions. That’s where notions of good and bad have gotten a bad name. But again, if you just sort of react, “Well, we don’t want to have any sense of good and bad,” that’s just a reaction, too. It’s not very careful observation. You want to have a sense of skillful and unskillful that really is based on what’s actually going on. So you’ve got to observe. You’ve got to watch. You’ve got to be patient. Again, not patience in the sense of just letting anything happen, but patience in the sense of waiting and watching, like a hunter. John Cumdee made an example. He said, “When you meditate, you’ve got to be like a hunter. The hunter has to be very, very still, but his eyes have to be very sharp and alert.” Because otherwise you miss the little clues that let you know when your prey is near. In the sense that you’re hunting down your unskillful qualities, you’re also hunting down skillful qualities. So you’ve got to be very still and very alert. When the unskillful qualities come, you want to do what you can to shoot them down. When the skillful qualities won’t come, you want to do everything you can to feed them, strengthen them, nourish them. That’s what the quality of ardency means. You’ve really got a purpose in what you’re doing. Some people say that having a goal causes you to suffer because you sit there and stew about how you have not gotten to your goal yet. Well, what kind of life is it that doesn’t have goals? It’s a pretty shiftless and aimless life. What kind of happiness is there in that kind of life? A life that has a direction. That’s where you can find real happiness, as long as you have a sense that the direction is where you really want to go. It’s a wise direction. It’s well-considered, and it’s within your power to do. The Buddha was teaching something about not aiming at lazy people who just sit around and moan about the fact that they haven’t attained their goal. It’s for people who really have a strong sense that there’s a lot of suffering in life, and there’s something that can be done about it. A life well-spent means one that works on this problem of suffering to get beyond it. A life that gets diverted into other directions, that’s a life that’s wasted. So again, you’ve got to have a sense of direction. You’ve got to have a sense of purpose. You’ve got to have your agenda. Just make sure your agenda is wise, skillful, and then apply it to the present moment. Stay right here. In this way, every present moment becomes an important one, an auspicious one, and a special one, because it’s taking you where you want to go.

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