June 17, 2024

Tonight’s New Year’s Eve. It’s a good time to meditate. Of course, the whole idea of a New Year is simply a convention. When the sun comes up tomorrow morning, it’s not going to look any different from the sun coming up any other day this past year. And yet it’s a useful convention. It’s a good time to stop and take stock of our lives. Think of where you were last year at New Year’s and the distance you’ve come since then. And think not so much of the things that have happened to you this past year, but the things you’ve done. Have they brought you closer to where you want to be, or have they taken you further away? That’s an important question. Because the whole idea of an auspicious day or an auspicious year doesn’t depend on the things that have happened to you. It depends on the things you do. It’s the things that you do that shape the future. This is one area where we have freedom to choose to do the best thing in any given situation, or what at least appears to be the best thing. That requires strength, because many times the best thing may not necessarily be the thing we want to do or that’s easiest to do. But when you look at a situation in terms of what you might say or do or think, always try to think of what’s the most skillful way to deal with a situation, and then develop the inner strength you need to carry through that skillful course of action. This is why we meditate. We’re developing good qualities in the mind. We’re developing as part of right effort in all areas of our lives. Recognizing unskillful habits, learning to let go of them, and then trying to prevent them from coming back. Recognizing skillful habits. If they’re not there yet, you try to give rise to them. If they are, they’re already. You try to strengthen them, bring them to fullness and completion. This is one activity that gives meaning to our lives. Otherwise, it’s just a cycle of growing up, working, working until you get too old or too sick to work, and then stopping, and then you die. You look at your own life, you look at the lives of other people, and you ask yourself, “Is this all there is?” This is the question the Buddha asked himself when he was still an unawakened Buddhist. He sought for aging, illness, and death. “Is that all there is to say about life?” And he was inspired by the example of a forest contemplative, someone who went out into the forest to meditate. “That must be the way,” he said, “to find something that’s more than the ordinary way of living.” So he left home, left family, in search of a happiness, in search of a way of living that didn’t just simply get ground up in aging, illness, and death. When he found it, he came back to teach us to show that the way is possible. So there is that possibility in our lives that by developing skillful habits and thought, word, and deed, we can attain a happiness that’s pure, a happiness that’s solid and stable. So ask yourself, “Is that what you want in life? What are your priorities?” And think of the totality of your life, not just the time spent sitting and meditating, as if the rest of your life were not but also part of the practice. It’s all part of the practice. This is one of the reasons why the teachings on the perfections were developed as a way of encompassing everything you can do in terms of generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, or patience, truthfulness, determination, goodwill, and equanimity. These are qualities that are part of the practice. Qualities we can develop in all parts of our lives. Qualities that give meaning to our lives, things that we can develop from lifetime to lifetime. Sometimes you talk to older people and they look back on their lives and say they have nothing to show, they say, for their lives. Either the work they had to do was just to get by in order to make a living, or whatever accomplishments they had were swallowed up by things that other people did later. Or they spent their time chasing after things that really didn’t have any real bearing on the development of the mind. Ask yourself, “Is that the kind of life you want? Or would you like a life that builds up the perfections?” Reflect on the various ways you can develop these perfections. Of all, determination seems to be the most central, making up your mind where you want to go. That’s followed by persistence and truthfulness. In other words, you have to stay true to whatever it is that you’re focused on. Don’t lose your focus. Be willing to give up whatever needs to be sacrificed for that goal, and try to keep the mind on an even keel. That brings in renunciation and equanimity. All of these factors are needed. If you’re going to give direction to your life, if you’re going to have a clear sense of priorities, these are the ones you need to develop. These are the perfections you need to develop, and the other ones follow on top of that. So this evening, when we have time to meditate, try to get the mind still. And maybe towards the end of the session, as we get toward midnight, think about where you want your life to go over the next year or the years after that. And which of these perfections you need to develop in order to get it there. This willingness to step outside of your daily life is an important part of the practice. This is why monks go out in the forest to begin with. To get away from their daily concerns and their daily responsibilities and get some perspective on their lives. To see what really is of true importance. Then, as they go back into society, they want to take that perspective with them. And if you’re coming out here for the evening, you can still have that. On a smaller scale, you can do the same sort of thing. Just step outside of your normal concerns. That’s what meditation is for. You could almost say it’s like a rite of passage. Step outside of your daily life and really look at it. How are you acting? How are you speaking? How are you thinking? Are these habits the things that would shape the kind of life you really want? Or are they getting in the way? And what do you really want? How much of what you want is conditioned by things you’ve picked up from the people around you? Is it really what you’d like deep down inside? Try to sort these things out. This sense of priorities is a very important part of the meditation. Otherwise, meditation is just a technique that you squeeze into a few spare moments of the day, and it gives some rest and relaxation. It helps to put your mind on an even keel. But as long as it’s stuck into the cracks or into the corners like this, it really doesn’t have that much of an influence. You want to be able to step out so that there is a sense of independence from your daily life. You want to get away from all the influences around you. So you can see your heart. You can see the wishes of your heart, the aspirations of your heart. Where do they want to go? This is why stillness of mind is so important, because it gives you the chance to sit with this question for a while. And see what unexpected answers might come up. So, pose that question and then put it aside for the time being and focus in on your breath. It helps get the mind out of its ordinary conversations. If you’re going to talk about something to yourself, talk about the breath. How is the breath going right now? It helps pull you out of your head. It helps ground your thoughts in reality, ground your thoughts in the present moment. Think of it as going into the wilderness. On the one hand, there’s a lot of unexplored territory there, but there’s also the sense of freedom. You’re out of your ordinary constraints. Your only responsibility right now is to breathe. That doesn’t require all that much. And then to just be with the breath. You don’t have to go very far. Meditation isn’t creating things that aren’t there. It’s actually looking at what you’ve got right here, right now, each breath coming in right here, right now. All you have to do is just be with it, be with it again and again. Notice which ways of breathing feel good, which ones don’t. You can change. But again, your change doesn’t come out of nothing. It’s built on what you’ve been noticing, built on what you’ve been doing. It’s staying with the breath. And as for your other concerns, you can let them go. Let your awareness get totally immersed in the body right here, right now, so it doesn’t have room to go running out after other things, grabbing onto other things. Have your awareness grab onto your hands right now, your feet right now, your head right now. In other words, lock it into the body right here, right now. Be very sensitive to the breath energy all around you. And as you cut off your other concerns, there’s a sense of ease and well-being that comes from that sense of seclusion, where you really are cut off from other things, all your worries and concerns of the day. You don’t have to touch them. They don’t have to come anywhere near you. Just be right here with the breath. The longer you can stay here, the better. Because when you do return to your normal concerns, you’ve been away from them for a good while, you really do get a much better perspective. And the perspective that comes from having the mind still and with the breath like this is a good, solid perspective. When you reflect on your life, it’s not doing it out of a sense of being trapped or being neurotic. It’s more a balanced look at what you’ve really got, what’s really happening in your life. And, again, not just what’s happening to you, but what you’re doing. Is what you’re doing really in your own best interest? The way you act, the way you speak, the way you think? Or could things be changed? People like to make themselves feel like they’re making New Year’s resolutions. Well, it should be done after a lot of quiet time. Those qualities that are necessary for good determinations, they start with discernment. And discernment has to come from a still mind, so you can watch and think and contemplate from a position where you have a really good perspective, a reliable perspective on where you are and where you want to be. And what you have to do in order to get there. So think of this as an opportunity to step outside. It goes against the way of the world. Very few people are meditating tonight. A lot of people are doing totally crazy things. But you’re pulling out of that. You’re coming to give some space for the mind. There’s going to be a New Year. So greet it from a position of balance, from a position of clarity, a solid mind, so you can be very clear on what you’ve been doing for the past year and what you would like to change for the New Year, focused on the things that really are under your control and where you really can make a difference, an important difference in your life.

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