Auspicious Year, An

December 31, 2004

We’re meditating tonight to give a good end to the old year and a good beginning to the new year. The Buddha once was asked about what makes for an auspicious day. His answer applies to the question, “What makes for an auspicious beginning to the new year? What makes for an auspicious year?” Basically, as I said, it’s not hankering after the future, not feeling longing for the past, but focused on seeing what’s arising right now, right now, here in the present moment. Being ardent in what doing has to be done. So it’s not just watching, but also realizing there are qualities to develop in the mind, things to let go. Then doing what has to be done to develop the path. That’s a day that’s spent auspiciously. It has nothing to do with the stars, nothing to do with good things happening to you from the outside. It’s basically seeing clearly what’s happening in the present moment and realizing what has to be done and going ahead and doing it. You stick with that, as he said, day and night, that’s an auspicious day. You stick with it seven days a week, that’s an auspicious week. Stick with it for the whole year, that’s an auspicious year. This is always the pattern of the Buddha’s answers to this sort of question. Another time he was asked, “What’s an auspicious good blessing?” It turned out the answer was doing good things, starting with doing good things and learning how to avoid hanging around fools, learning how to associate with wise people, all the way up to the realization of nirvana. It’s what you do where you give yourself a blessing. So we’re going to be very clear about what we’re doing, and this is why we meditate. We bring the mind into the present moment, not just to hang out in the present moment, but to look very carefully at what are your intentions right now. Where do they lead? The results of past intentions that you’re experiencing right now, are they satisfactory? If they’re not, the Buddha says, don’t be content with them. Figure out some way to make them better. In other words, you accept the fact that this is what happened and these are the results you’re getting. You don’t deny that. But you also accept the fact that if you’re not satisfied with things, if you’re not happy with the way things are, you’ve got to do something new, do things better, be more skillful in how you approach what you do and say and think. So you accept past karma, but you realize that you’ve got the opportunity right now to make better karma this moment, this moment, this moment. The more you focus on making the right decisions, encouraging the right intentions right now, right now, right now, it becomes a habit. And that habit is the most important thing you can take with you as you practice day in and day out. Sometimes people come to the monastery and the mind begins to calm down and they wish they could wrap up that sense of peace, that sense of calm, and take it home with them. But there’s no box. You can put it in. There’s no package you can put it in. What you have to learn is this habit of trying to do what’s skillful, no matter what the situation is. Always realize that no matter how bad things are outside, there’s always the opportunity to do something skillful. And you want to figure out what it is. Because after all, your happiness is at stake. There’s no other way it’s going to come aside from doing the skillful thing. And sometimes this means doing things you don’t particularly care to do, things you don’t like. But this, as the Buddha said, is a sign of your wisdom, your ability to talk yourself into doing things that you don’t like, when you know that they’ll give good results. And your ability to talk yourself out of doing things that you do like doing, when you know they’re going to give bad results. In other words, you can’t take your likes as your standard, because your likes and dislikes are like a ruler that’s made out of rubber. You can stretch it, you can squeeze it. What’s one inch today may be something else when you stretch the ruler tomorrow. And even though you may try to measure things very precisely, the fact that the ruler is made out of rubber, like a rubber band, means that all your measurements are worthless. That’s what likes and dislikes are like, measuring things with a rubber band. When you’ve got the principle of cause and effect to measure things with, then it becomes a more reliable ruler. What’s one inch today is one inch tomorrow. In other words, you look at your intentions. If there’s any sensual passion, any ill will, any desire for harm in those intentions, you know these are unskillful intentions. No matter what you do based on them, it’s going to lead to suffering in one way or another. If you see that your intentions are imbued with greed, anger, and delusion, again, that’s a clear sign that if you act on them, there’s going to be suffering down the road, sometimes suffering right away. So this practice of focusing on your intentions, regardless if it’s something you’re going to be doing here at the monastery, something you’re going to be doing at home, at work, it keeps you focused on your mind, because the mind is the important factor. So this is a practice you can take with you all the time. This way, it makes every day an auspicious day, as you stick with it, just noticing your intentions and acting only on the skillful ones. When you do this, you’ll find that your sensitivity to what’s skillful or not is going to grow. So this is how you make a year auspicious. You do this by filling it with moments like this, when you’re being very careful about what you’re intending to do and being careful to act only on the good intentions, the skillful intentions. So right here, we’ve got the opportunity to meditate. Try to do it skillfully. The plan is to sit until the hour is up and then take a short break. Then come back and sit until midnight. If the thought is daunting, don’t think it. Just sit from breath to breath to breath. Keep focused on the breathing. If you find you really need to change positions, sit with it for a while and then get up quietly. Go out and walk outside for a while and come back in. But also, if you want, you can work with the pain. This is always an excellent way of getting to know your mind. People sometimes complain about the Buddha’s teaching on the Four Noble Truths, and here he is focusing on a really basic, elementary issue like suffering. Why doesn’t he deal with larger issues like oneness or interconnectedness? We found that if you really want to know your mind, it’s not by contemplating oneness or interconnectedness. It’s by contemplating your pains, your suffering. Because all the tricks and all the deceits the mind has, all its ways of making itself miserable, you’re going to find right here where there’s pain. The point is that even though there’s pain in the body, it doesn’t have to make the mind suffer. The suffering of the mind is optional. And for some reason, we’ve taken that option to the point where it’s become habitual, largely out of ignorance. Because we don’t know if there’s pain, how not to identify with it. But the Buddha gives us the tools. Focusing on the breath, working with the breath. And also focusing on what the mind is doing with the pain. Exactly what point is it giving a label? What kind of labels is it giving the pain? What kind of mental image does it have of the pain? Can you change the image? Can you change the label? See what happens. In other words, become more and more sensitive to all the different choices you’re making. Which thoughts you focus on, which thoughts you ignore. Which thoughts, when you focus on them, cause suffering, which ones don’t. Maybe you’re focusing on the wrong thoughts. Maybe you’re conceiving of the sensation in an unskillful way. There are all kinds of approaches you can take to seeing how the suffering of the mind really is optional. And it’s something that you created through your own actions. This is why you can’t separate the teachings on karma from the Four Noble Truths. They’re intertwined. Because we’re doing something based on craving and ignorance to create suffering, where there doesn’t have to be suffering. So this way, when you catch yourself in the act of creating suffering, when it’s not necessary, that’s when you can let it go. Again, this is why the Buddha has this focus on our intentions, all the way from very basic levels of what you’re going to do, what you’re going to say to this person and that person, all the way down to how you’re going to relate to the pain, what you do to the pain. Then once it becomes habitual to look for the skillful approach, then the practice becomes seamless. Sitting here with your eyes closed, there are bound to be pains in the body. There are bound to be skillful reactions to those pains. And when you can take it as a challenge that you’re ready for, as your sport, as your game, keep looking for the skillful approach, keep looking for the skillful choice. You don’t get discouraged when you make mistakes. Just chalk them up to experience and keep on looking. When that’s your attitude, you find that everything you do is auspicious. Everything you do is a blessing, bringing an end to suffering where it didn’t have to be in the first place. That’s what makes tonight an auspicious night, tomorrow an auspicious day, every day an auspicious day, if you keep following through with that program. Even the more refined teachings the Buddha has have emptiness. When he talks about dwelling in emptiness, it’s largely looking to see when you get into a particular state of stillness in the mind, where there are still disturbances. What are you doing to cause those disturbances? It’s largely through the way you perceive things, the labels you put on things. When you catch that act of labeling in the act, see how it’s causing stress, you stop it, you drop it. The mind moves to a deeper state of concentration, and it follows this all the way up through awakening, through the various stages of what the Buddha calls dwelling in emptiness, seeing where the mind is empty of disturbance, and seeing where the disturbance is still present. The disturbance here being the manifestation of the principles of stress and inconstancy. That, too, is part of this practice of looking for the skillful choice, looking for the skillful action. So you can apply this principle on all levels of the practice. That’s what makes your practice a blessing.

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