New Year’s Blessing

December 31, 2006

It’s New Year’s Eve. We’re sending off the old year and starting the new. It’s just a convention, of course. There’s nothing about tomorrow that’s going to say “2007,” aside from what human beings say about it, when the sun comes up. It’s not going to say January 1st, New Year, or anything like that. But we need conventions in order to get along. If we didn’t have a new year, we’d have trouble with dates. So we need these conventions. Days of the week, names of the months, numbers for the years. The question is what you do with the convention. That’s what matters. You can use it in an unskillful way, or you can use the conventions in a skillful way. So tonight, we’re trying to use the convention in a skillful way. Mark the passage of time by putting some extra effort into our practice, realizing that it’s through the practice that we find happiness. So sit and meditate. Close your eyes. Focus on your breath. A very basic way of developing skillful qualities in the mind is to keep with one object for a long period of time. Doing that requires mindfulness, requires alertness, requires a certain amount of ardency that you really stick with it. And it develops concentration and it develops discernment. You have to understand your mind in order to keep it with one object. You have to be up on its tricks, because the mind has lots of ways of changing the subject. You’re sitting here, inhabiting your body here in the present moment, and all of a sudden you’re back five years ago, or up ahead ten years from now, or off someplace else. And unless you can catch the mind, you can’t do anything. And as it does that, you’re going to keep falling for those changes of scenery. So this simple exercise of sticking with the breath helps you develop lots of important qualities in the mind, qualities that you need in every activity in life, any activity that’s going to shape your life. Because, after all, all your intentional activities do shape your life. We tend to misunderstand things. We think that what somebody else does for us, or just random events from outside, have a big impact on our happiness. And they can. But what really matters is how you react to those things. That can make all the difference between the mind being perfectly fine even in difficult circumstances, or being miserable in the midst of what everybody else would say are really comfortable circumstances. In other words, it’s what you do, and particularly how the mind reacts to things, how it responds to events, how it tries to shape events. That’s the big factor in your life. And so the mind needs to be trained, because otherwise it just keeps creating messes for itself all the time. It’s like a puppy. If you don’t house train it, it just creates a mess every time you turn your back. So you need to train the mind so that it can create happiness for you instead of suffering, distress, anguish. Everything we do is based on a desire for happiness. So you would think that we would all be happy by now. But you look at yourself and you realize there are still areas in life where you have trouble finding happiness. And many of those areas are things that you actually created through your own actions, under the deluded thought that doing this particular action or saying these particular words or thinking in a particular way would lead to happiness. But then it didn’t. So you’ve got to learn how to learn from your mistakes. That requires alertness to notice when you’ve made a mistake. And it requires your ingenuity to figure out other ways of reacting, other ways of acting in situations. Fortunately, there are teachings that the Buddha left behind, that his Noble Disciples left behind. We can try those out. We can experiment with them to see what works, or to see how those teachings might be applied to our lives, to see how they could work in actually leading to happiness. One of the chants we did just now on blessings or protection, the Maṅgala Sutta, was a whole list of ways which are a blessing or protection for your life. We tend to think of blessings as coming from someone else. Someone else blesses us or someone else protects us. But you look at the list, and everything in the list is something that you do, beginning with associating with wise people and avoiding fools. All the way down to the end, when the mind is totally unshaken by anything that happens in the world, once you’ve trained it to that point. These are all things you do. These are all things that you have to take the initiative. In other words, these are ways in which you bless yourself. You provide protection for yourself. There’s a list of thirty-eight in all. It would take all night to go over the whole list, but it’s interesting just to look at a few of them. Like that first one, associating with wise people and avoiding fools. Of course, you’re going to meet up with fools every day. “Fools” here doesn’t mean someone with an A.D.I.Q. It means people with really screwed-up values. You look at the world around you, and the values really are screwed up. We have a society now where the global society is totally devoted to greed. Everything is being done to take the leash off of greed. And you see what happens. People’s values get warped. When their values get warped, then their lives get warped. Everyone knows deep down that material things can’t bring you happiness, and yet everything in society seems to be devoted to buying as many material things as possible. It’s like getting on the exchange where you can make a lot of money and then spend a lot of money on things or on experiences. But you keep finding that what you buy doesn’t really provide you that much happiness. So you have to step out of that set of values. This is why it’s good to come out to a quiet place like this. Seclusion, in general, is always good for this. Step out from the values of society and look at how much you’ve been sucked into a system of values that you yourself, deep down inside, may not really believe in. You want to find wise people to associate with, to keep reminding you that what’s truly of value in life is how you develop the mind. So that in the course of the day, while you’re dealing with fools, you don’t get sucked into their foolishness. Everybody has to deal with fools. This is part of life. But you learn to deal with them in such a way that you can help them and be kind to them, and yet not get sucked into their way of seeing things. This right here is a real blessing because it helps protect you from a lot of unskillful behavior. You keep reminding yourself that what they say about developing the mind really does make a difference. You learn how to be content with just a few material things, with just your basic needs taken care of. It frees the mind for lots of other good things. Once you internalize this message, then you’ve got wise people inside. Otherwise, your system of values is such that you can maintain that. You maintain a sense of seclusion even when you go in and deal with people. You’re independent enough so you can recognize insanity when you see it and not get sucked into it. That’s one way you provide protection for yourself, one way that you provide a blessing for yourself. Respect for things that deserve respect. This is another blessing in the list. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that if you live without respecting anything at all, you live in misery. Everything seems cheap, tawdry. Good people aren’t really good. Kindness isn’t really worth the effort. When you start thinking in those terms, life gets miserable. Do you want to find something worthy of respect? Outside, you look for people who are free from greed, anger, and delusion, people who embody genuine goodness in their actions, in their thoughts, their words, their deeds. Internally, you learn to respect what’s worthy of respect within yourself. The desire for true happiness is something you really want to respect. The message of the world is that ultimate happiness is pretty questionable, but we can sell you something really good in the meantime that’ll keep you occupied, help you forget that you want something more than just trivial pursuits. But you’ve got to learn that your desire for true happiness is what really makes life worth living, if you follow it through wisely. You have to find that it develops all sorts of good qualities in the mind. Because as you reflect, true happiness, if it’s going to be true, can’t depend on anybody else’s suffering, because they’ll try to destroy it. It has to depend on wise actions. It has to depend on your having a strong sense of integrity in what you do, all of which are good qualities to develop in the mind. The message of the Buddha is that the Buddha’s life is that ultimate happiness, a happiness that doesn’t change on you, a happiness that doesn’t change when conditions change. It’s possible. Your belief in that is something you want to nurture. It’s something you want to respect. As the Buddha said, it’s possible. It doesn’t just come floating through. It’s something that you can really work on by developing the mind. Your belief in that principle is something worthy of respect as well. It gives shape to your life, it gives meaning to your life, it gives direction. So you don’t just live aimlessly or randomly, but your actions really do come together in a way that provides and fosters true happiness. The rest of the list deals with various ways that you can train the mind, all the way to the point where it’s fully trained, as they say, a mind that’s unshaken when faced with the events of the world. That’s your ultimate protection. When you’ve found that solidity inside, by developing the mind, by training yourself in all the aspects of the practice, that’s when you’re totally protected. In other words, no matter what happens, the mind is untouched. It has its own happiness, its own solid happiness already. That’s a true blessing, and it comes through training the mind, starting out as we’re doing here, working with the breath, trying to make the breath comfortable. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath and then noticing how the breath feels. Because if the breath is not comfortable, you’re going to have trouble staying here. So explore to see what kind of breathing feels refreshing, what kind of breathing feels gratifying. Learn to become a connoisseur of the breath energy in your body. What is the breath energy? You close your eyes and you have a sense that the body is sitting here. That comes from breath energy. It’s something that’s already there. We often don’t look at it in those terms. But the simple presence of the energy in the body, whether it feels good or doesn’t feel good, that’s what lets us know there’s a body here. So you work with that direct sense of your immediate experience of the body. That’s the breath energy. Then you can start to notice what ways you have of making it comfortable, what ways you have of making it uncomfortable. Think of it being able to flow freely throughout all the limbs of the body, all the organs of the body. If you notice any sense of tension or tightness or blockage in the body, just think of the energy moving around that. And as you think in these terms, you find that it gets more comfortable sitting here. You can actually induce a sense of fullness, a sense of ease, just sitting here. If you work with the energy unskillfully, you can induce all kinds of uncomfortable feelings as well, which is what we tend to do. We don’t really pay attention to this level of energy in the body, even though it’s our most immediate experience of the body. We tend to look past it. It’s almost as if it’s too close for our eyes to focus on. But if you learn to focus directly on your sense of the body sitting here right now and try to see how your sense of the whole body is influenced by the way you breathe, explore that. There’s lots to work with. It helps train the mind in the qualities that you need to find that true happiness, to reach that point where the mind really is unshaken by anything, totally sufficient within itself. It’s the ultimate blessing that you can give yourself, and it’s a blessing you can give to other people as well. When the mind is trained, you’re less likely to do or say or think things that are going to harm anybody at all. You become more trustworthy, both for yourself and for other people, and that’s a gift. There are very few people in the world who are really genuinely trustworthy. So make yourself someone who’s trustworthy. That’s a real blessing.

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