Year-end Accounting

December 31, 2010

Here it is, the end of the year, and we’re about to begin a new one. That’s the way it is in this life of ours. Things don’t really end. Some things end, but then they’re replaced pretty much by the same source. Unless we make up our minds to make it different. That’s the whole reason why we practice. We see that the way we’ve been acting has brought some pleasures, but also a lot of pain. Then we’re wondering if there’s another way. And so we’ve been practicing, because we hear the Buddha says there is another way. There’s a way that you can think and act and speak that actually leads to the end of suffering. And so as you’re on a path like this, it’s good every now and then to stop and take stock. And the end of the year and the beginning of a new one gives you a good time to do that. This is called a good use of a convention. Because you notice, tomorrow morning when the sun comes up, it doesn’t say 2-0-1-1. You go out tonight in the sky at midnight, and you would see the numbers of the letters scrawled across the stars. It’s all purely conventional. You notice this especially when you go to another country like Thailand, where they have at least four new years in the course of the year. There’s the Western New Year on January 1st, the Chinese New Year early February, the Thai New Year late March, early April, and then the Indian New Year in the middle of April. It gives you four chances to start the new year. But it is good to make good use of the convention. We have to live with conventions, so let’s use them well. Let’s look at all the pluses and minuses of our practice, where we’re doing well, where we’re not doing quite so well, where there’s room for improvement. An image they often use in Thailand is of a monk and a nun. They’re adding up your accounts at the end of the year to see whether you’ve gotten a profit or a loss. It may sound crass and materialistic, but the Buddha uses similar imagery himself when he talks about noble treasures, where we look for wealth in life. And in external terms, he teaches contentment, learning to do with material things. What’s enough to keep going? Because if we look for happiness in things like wealth or status or fame and praise, physical pleasures, one, there’s only a limited number of those things. So when you gain something, somebody else loses. Then you look at those things. Wherever there’s wealth, there’s going to be loss of wealth. Status is loss of status. Wherever there’s praise, there’s also criticism. Where there’s pleasure, there’s pain. And a life devoted to trying to find these things and hold on to them, on the one hand, is bound for defeat because you can never hold on just to the good side. You’re going to get the bad side, back and forth, back and forth, like this. And it creates divisions in society. When one person gets something, somebody else has to lose it. And so the more you try to amass, the more you’re impoverishing other people. And that approach can’t last. It leads to all kinds of conflict and strife. So the principle of contentment is a very important one. Contentment with external wealth. In terms of the clothing we wear, the food we eat, the shelter where we live, the medicines we use to treat the body, to treat the illnesses of the body. It’s good to learn how to have a sense of enough and to look at what ways you can get by in as little as possible. That’s where the Buddha teaches contentment. As for internal wealth, that’s where he teaches you not to be content, or at least not to rest content, until you’ve reached the ultimate. He once said that the secret to his awakening was that he never let himself rest content with skillful qualities. If he saw that there was still some stress in his mind, still some things he was doing that were not quite skillful, he wanted to improve. And he worked hard to improve. So in that area, the more you want, there’s no problem at all. It’s not counted as greed. It’s counted as sincerity, this desire to be as skillful as possible. It’s part of the path. So it’s good to look at the qualities that the Buddha said really do count as internal wealth, or what he called noble wealth. They fall into two main categories. One is the ability to abandon unskillful behavior, and the other is to develop skillful behavior. We usually don’t see abandoning unskillful behavior as a form of wealth. But think about it. If there are things that you’ve done that you really regret, no amount of money can wipe them away. Which means, if you avoid them to begin with, you’ve done something really valuable. So the Buddha teaches conviction and the principle of action as the major form of wealth. And then followed up on that, there’s virtue, a sense of shame, and a sense of compunction. These three are the ones that protect you from doing unskillful things. Virtue is learning how to abstain from killing, stealing, illicit sex, taking drugs, alcohol, lying, speaking divisively, speaking harshly, engaging in idle chatter. That sort of behavior either wastes your time or is very destructive. And once it’s done, you can’t call it back. When you’ve harmed other people, when you’ve harmed yourself, it leaves big scars. You can’t wash away the stains. Like the old story of Lady Macbeth with the murder on her hands. She was always washing, washing, washing her hands to get the blood off. When you’ve done things you’ve regretted, it’s really hard to wipe them away. And you can’t buy them back. So this is an area where external wealth can’t help you at all. The only thing is that you can resolve not to repeat the mistake. This is where the shame and the compunction come in. We usually think of shame as being an unskillful mental state, especially when you’re ashamed of yourself or you think that you’re shameful. But that’s not the kind of shame the Buddha’s pointing to. He’s pointing to the sense of shame that comes when you have high self-esteem and you look at a certain action and you remind yourself, “I’d be ashamed to do that. It’s beneath me. It’s not up to the standards that I’d like to live by.” That kind of shame is healthy because it comes with a healthy sense of pride, a kind of pride and esteem that are an important part of the path. As the Buddha said, that sense of conceit, “If other people can do this, so can I,” is an essential part of the path. It’s what keeps you going. It gives you the confidence that you can follow this path. Self-esteem is the sense of shame that certain things are beneath you. And then there’s compunction in the sense of thinking of doing something you know is unskillful and you realize this is going to have bad consequences down the line, both for yourself or for other people. As the Buddha said, the sense of shame and compunction are things that protect the world, keep us civilized. And they protect us from doing things that we’ll later regret. So when you say no to an unskillful urge, remind yourself that that ability to say no and to stick with it, that is really a form of wealth. And it’s really worth amassing. In other words, keep practicing it when the temptation comes to do something unskillful. On the other hand, there are the skillful qualities you want to develop. The standard list has learning, generosity, and wisdom. But that’s just a shorthand for many, many other skillful qualities that there are. Learning here in the sense of learning how to understand the way you cause suffering, and learning how to understand the ways of putting an end to it. The Pali term “listening” refers to the fact that back in those days that’s how you learned. These things weren’t written down in books, so you had to listen and listen carefully. But it applies to listening in all kinds of ways. Listening to your actions, listening to the results, that’s an important form of learning, too. And there was always being willing to acquire new knowledge. As the Buddha said, when you realize that you’re foolish, that right there is a sign of wisdom, or the beginning of wisdom. You realize that there’s more you need to know. And so you look, you learn, you listen. Then there’s the principle of generosity, which includes material things, being generous with physical gifts. But more than that, being generous with your kindness, being generous with your time, being generous with your knowledge, being generous with your forgiveness. All of these count as generosity. As you say, when you want to gain something really valuable in life, you have to be willing to give. You can’t simply make demands on life and feel entitled to get what you want. You realize that you have to give of yourself. When you bring this attitude to the meditation, it helps you get over a lot of rough spots. Because if you’ve had practice being generous, you realize that the rewards of generosity don’t necessarily come right away. There is, on the one hand, the sense of well-being that comes inside. You realize that you’ve helped somebody else, that you’re not just a dead weight on the earth. On the other hand, there are other benefits that come over the long term. The simple practice of generosity is a really good lesson in learning about karma, what it really means to be skillful, and where to look for the deepest genuine results, genuine wealth and life that can come from your actions. Being generous with your kindness is an important part as well. You’re talking about developing goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. What it comes down to is that when you give to others, you’re also giving to yourself in important ways. The gift is a kind of trade. We like the idea of a purely selfless gift. But even looking at the joy that comes from selfless giving, you realize that that joy in it is a repayment, and you’re being repaid in something that’s really valuable. John Lee would compare the value of the actual gift to the value of the virtue that comes from giving, to taking a coconut and squeezing the cream out of the coconut. The cream is the virtue that comes from giving, and then the dregs of the coconut, that’s the actual material gift. When you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, both sides benefit. When you learn how to act on these attitudes, you’re protecting yourself from unskillful action, unskillful karma. And the people around you are benefiting from not being victims of your greed, aversion, and delusion. So this is a kind of wealth where boundaries are actually erased rather than being underlined, marked with walls and barbed wire, and carved with boxes, which is the way it is with material wealth. Noble wealth erases those barriers, both inside and out, even more so with wisdom, which is the ultimate inner wealth, because it can bring true freedom. Wisdom comes in many ways, from listening, from thinking, and from actually developing good qualities in the mind. And this is an experience. Because you take that motivation for universal goodwill, then you really want to act on it. How can you find happiness in a way that doesn’t harm anybody else? We really have to look into training the mind, being more mindful, more concentrated, so you can discern where it is that you’re doing and saying and thinking things in a way that’s going to lead to suffering. What other alternative ways do you have of finding happiness? So the wisdom here learns how to comprehend the stress that you’re causing in the mind. So you can see the cause. When you see the cause, you can abandon it. And we strengthen this wisdom as we develop the path. And we get to the point where you’re not creating any unnecessary burdens for your mind. You find that you’re not creating any unnecessary burdens for anybody else. And it’s those unnecessary ones that really hurt. So it’s in this way that as you develop noble wealth, it’s a gift both to yourself and to the people around you. It’s a kind of wealth that doesn’t create the barriers that material wealth creates. So it’s good to take stock every now and then as to where you’re wealthy in these qualities and where you’re still lacking, and what you can do to develop them. Because they are things that are within the power of anyone, if you really pay attention, if you’re really earnest and serious about your desire for true happiness. This is one of the big ironies in life. We think that everybody would be serious about true happiness, but most people don’t have the patience. Because it requires that you train the mind. And a lot of people don’t want to hear that. But as the Buddha said, this is the mark of a wise person. You realize that true happiness requires that you train the mind in these qualities. And the qualities themselves become a form of wealth that can bring you happiness that’s really true, really solid, really lasting. So there’s the list. It starts with conviction. Actually, it’s conviction in the fact that the Buddha actually gained awakening. But that means conviction in the principle that human beings can find true happiness through their actions. And based on that conviction, you learn how to avoid unskillful actions and the mental qualities that can keep you away from unskillful actions. And then you work on developing the skillful ones, the gifts you give to yourself, the gifts you give to other people, in developing good qualities of mind. And you find, as you work on noble wealth, that the barriers that we feel between ourselves and others, the barriers that create huge gaps and divisions within society, begin to get healed. And even if we can’t take care of all of society, at least we take care of our contribution. That’s the only place you can begin, because that’s the area where you’re responsible. We have this power of action, we have this power of choice. We have our time and we have our energy. How are we going to invest it? What kind of investment brings the best returns? What kind of returns cause trouble? What kind of returns bring happiness, not only for ourselves but for the people around us? Those are the questions the Buddha has us ask. And ask not just in an idle way, but so we can put the answers into practice and gain that true happiness. And this is an area, as I said, where there’s no question of resting content with just a little bit. There is a question of how hard to push yourself at any one particular time so you don’t break down. This is where you have to learn your own resilience, your own abilities. But you want to keep in the back of the mind that whenever there’s a chance to improve your skills, you want to take it. And the taking here is not a selfish thing, because it’s giving as well.

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