Practice Full Circle

December 31, 2011

Tonight we end one year and begin another. Of course, that’s just a convention. There’s nothing written in the sky at midnight that says we’ve passed from one year to another. And of course, different cultures around the world have had different points at which they begin and end their years. It’s like asking where a circle begins and ends at every point. But it is useful to have a spot where you say, “Okay, we’re going to count this as the beginning and the end,” and try to make use of that, reflecting back on the year that’s passed, looking forward to the year that’s coming, asking ourselves, “How well did we shape the past, and what are our plans for shaping the future?” Because a lot of that does lie within the scope of the mind’s powers. You may not have control over events in every way, but you do have control over the question whether you’re going to suffer from those events. And you have choices about how you’re going to act in ways that are going to influence the future. This is the power of the mind, and it’s a power that you want to use well. If you use it without reflecting, you can create all kinds of havoc and do a lot of damage. But if you use it well, as the Buddha showed, you can arrive at the end of suffering, total release. This is why the path begins by looking at your actions and reflecting on their results. What kind of intention do you have? Is an intention worth acting on or not? While you’re doing something, the Buddha has you look at what results are coming from your actions, because some of the results do come immediately. And if you see that there’s harm, you stop. If there’s no harm, you can continue. After the action is done, you reflect on the results over the long term. If you notice that you did any harm, then you resolve not to repeat that mistake. If you saw no harm, then you take joy in it. You take joy in the fact that the practice is developing, and you continue practicing night and day, the Buddha said. These are the instructions that he gave to his son when his son was seven years old. But they apply throughout the practice, regardless of how young or old you are. What’s really striking here is that the Buddha’s not telling you just to be aware of the present moment and leave it at that. He does have you reflect on the past. You listen and anticipate the future. Anticipate the results of your actions and reflect on the actual results that you got from your actions, and learn from that. Insight is not just a matter of seeing things arising and passing away and leaving it at that. You have to look for the patterns, and particularly the patterns that come out of your own intentions. Greed, aversion, or delusion—what are the results? If you do your best not to act on greed, aversion, or delusion, what are the results? Can you see a difference? Delusion, of course, is the hardest one to know, because when you’re deluded, you don’t know you’re deluded. So you have to keep checking things again and again and again, which is why you don’t want to wait until the end of the year to check things out. You want to reflect on your actions, and if something comes up that’s bothering the heart, or you see that you’ve done something that’s causing trouble that you didn’t expect, you want to turn around and reflect on your actions again. This is a continual process. If you don’t have any source of inner strength, though, the process gets very old very fast. I was reading recently in a book on willpower that a lot of people, if they have to exert their willpower for an extended period of time, break down and get very self-indulgent after a while. They seem to have a willpower limit. But that’s because they don’t know how to maintain their strength. So you can keep the practice going for a full circle. There’s that teaching that Ajaan Mun gave to Ajaan Chah. He said you have to practice in a circle. The practice has to be a circle, and the circle doesn’t end. It keeps going around and around and around throughout the year, throughout the day. It’s not something you simply do when you’re on retreat or during the rains retreat. Or when you come to the monastery. It has to be 24/7. Your virtue has to be 24/7. Your concentration, your discernment, have to be developed 24/7, so that on the one hand they develop momentum, and on the other they provide protection. Your virtue, basically, is restraining yourself from acting in ways that are harmful. Concentration is keeping the mind centered. And discernment is what allows you to see the differences between what’s skillful and what’s not, and also see the connections between causes and results. And for that you have to be very observant. You have to be observant continuously. Because if you’re not continuously observant, the result will be one spot, but the cause will be another spot far away, and you don’t really know how they’re connected. It’s like connect-the-dots. You can draw lines in any way at all and come up with all kinds of shapes. But if you’re really following things through, you see this line connects that dot to this dot and this dot to this dot. It connects to that dot, and it’s a line. It’s not just isolated dots. And you really begin to see that your actions do have an impact. The things you’re choosing to think about right now have an impact, both on your experience right now and down the line. So you want to be able to keep up this ability to observe things and to maintain restraint. This is where the concentration comes in. Because even though there is a fair amount of work involved in keeping the mind centered, there comes a point where the amount of energy that comes out of the concentration is greater than what’s put in. This way your willpower doesn’t run dry. There’s a sense of ease, a sense of fullness. There’s a sense of refreshment. When you settle down with a breath, you begin to realize that there in the body are these what you might call refreshment potentials, areas of the body where the body doesn’t feel tense and you actually feel a sense of fullness. And you learn to relax around those, so that the fullness spreads. And so the little isolated pockets of full energy can nourish one another and give you strength, give you the stamina you need in order to keep going. So it’s not enough to know that you’re practicing, or what skillful or what not skillful. Because sometimes you can know what’s skillful, and you still don’t have the power to do it. Or you know that something is unskillful, but you don’t have the energy to resist it. So this is one of the reasons why we practice concentration—with a sense of conviction, with persistence, and mindfulness. And using our discernment, we’re talking today about how to keep focused. It might be difficult to practice concentration if you’re tense about it all the time. You can’t be tense. You have to realize there’s a certain amount of effort that needs to go in, but in some ways you’re putting in too much effort, or effort that’s actually counterproductive. And you have to learn how to sense that, how to stay relaxed around your center, whatever it is that you have to pay attention to. You want to relax everything else. So you’re not using up too much energy and you’re actually replenishing the energy you’ve lost so that your contemplation can be continuous. Because the other strength, in addition to conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration, is discernment itself. And it’s not just looking at things continuously or watching things. You have to think about them. What is this related to? Skillful or unskillful? If it’s unskillful, what alternatives do you have? If it’s unskillful and you find yourself repeating it again and again, why? Is it a lack of imagination, a lack of strength? What gratification do you get out of this unskillful thing? When the Buddha talks about the kind of knowledge you need to have about things, it’s not just seeing things arising and passing away. You also have to see the gratification, the allure. Why do you like doing this, even when you know it’s unskillful? Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks. If you follow through with this behavior again and again and again, where is it going to take you? And you have to realize there’s also an escape. There is an alternative. You don’t have to keep repeating that unskillful action. There are alternatives. There are choices you have. This is one of the reasons why we listen to Dhamma talks and read the Dhamma books. We listen to Dhamma to give ourselves a sense of the options that are out there, that the same old way of doing things is not the only way of doing things. For it’s only when you see that something is unskillful and you have an option, you don’t have to do it, and you have the strength not to do it, that’s when you can really let it go. So this is why the factors of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—all come together. And you want to make them a circle in several ways. On the one hand, realizing that it’s not simply the case that virtue is a condition for concentration and concentration is a condition for discernment. Discernment can also strengthen your virtue. Concentration can strengthen your virtue. Discernment can strengthen your concentration. These things strengthen one another in a circle. That’s one type of circle. The other type of circle, of course, is that you want to stick at them continually, all day, all week, all month, the whole month, all year. This is how your practice becomes a circle. Like those cyclotrons, as the particles go around the circle, they get stronger and stronger and get a lot more energy. You can smash right through your defilements because of the momentum that builds up. So when you think about the year coming full circle, make sure that you make your practice full circle as well. Because only then does it get the strength that can actually sling you out beyond the orbit to the point where you don’t have to come back and you get beyond the circles. You get to something that’s undefined. But until that point, you want to learn how to use the conventions of the world in a way that’s helpful, that strengthens your practice, and gives you the impetus to keep on going. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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