A Self Rightly Directed

December 31, 2017

In a few more hours, the old year will end and the new year will begin. It’s a conventional course. Tomorrow morning, when the sun comes up, it’s not going to say 2018 or 2561, which is the Buddhist number for the year. There’s nothing particular about this day. It’s not a solstice. It’s not an equinox. It’s all pretty arbitrary. We’ve chosen that this day is the beginning of the new year. But even though it’s a convention, it’s good to make use of it. One way is to look back on the past year. What went right? What went wrong? In terms of going right and going wrong, of course, they’re your own actions. The world outside goes up and down. It’s the nature of the world. The question is, how about your mind? Is it improving? There’s that reflection the Buddha has that monks make every day, “Days and nights fly by fast. What am I becoming right now?” Of course, what you’re becoming is based on your actions. The desires you act on have an effect on what you become as a person. What desires have you followed? Where have they taken you? What can you change in the new year? It’s good to think about this. We often think that meditation is all about being in the present moment, but it’s good to do these things once in a while, just to take stock of where you’ve been, where you’re going, to decide what needs to be changed, what needs to be maintained, so you can have a sense of direction. One of the blessings the Buddha talks about is having a self that is well-directed. In other words, having direction for your life. And choose a direction that really will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. What would that be like, a life lived for the sake of long-term welfare and happiness? Give it some thought. Don’t just muddle through your life. Here’s another day you get up and just do what you did before. Try to have a sense of direction. The time you have is time well spent. We’ve got a few more hours before the year ends. Let’s stuff some goodness into the year by meditating, by getting the mind more under our control, learning to find a sense of well-being inside, learning to develop some understanding inside. When the mind feels compelled to go off and do something that it knows deep down inside is really not good, you can understand how it happens, how you can get in the way of those impulses so they don’t take over, so you can take charge of things, so you can be the one directing your life, rather than just letting events direct things. As someone once said, it’s good to make a distinction between things that are pressing and things that are important. Because not everything that’s pressing is really important. There may be a sense of urgency about some of the things you have to do. But you have to have your own priorities. Otherwise, your cravings take over. As that passage just now said, we’re a slave to our cravings. Cravings are pretty blind. We live in a world that’s subject to aging, illness, and death. That’s what those reflections are all about. The world is swept away. That’s inconstancy. Also, aging offers no shelter. The possibility of disease is always there. It’s a truth of stress. That’s nothing of its own. You have to abandon things and leave everything behind. We keep coming back to this. Why? It’s because of our craving. We want something out of this that’s not there. But that doesn’t mean there is no hope for happiness. It’s not where we’ve often looked in the past. The Buddha said there is a way of giving direction to your life. Otherwise it goes around and around and around, like the earth going around the sun, or the earth going around again and again. And they get quicker and quicker as you get older and older. You have to keep asking yourself, “Do you want to keep going around like this?” Time goes around like this and it just eats away at us. As they say, time eats away at beings at the same time it eats itself away. It’s a time that’s past. You can’t bring it back. It’s gone. And we’re getting older. So what are we going to do with what time we have left? That’s an important reflection. And what direction do you want it to go? It is possible to get out of the cycle. That’s what the Noble Eightfold Path is all about. To have a right view, the realization that our actions really do make a difference between whether we’re going to suffer or whether we’re not. And it is possible to act in a way that leads to the end of suffering. It’s important to hold on to that view. Otherwise we just give up and say, “Well, this isn’t as good as it gets,” or, “This is okay. I can put up with this.” I once heard a Western Dharma teacher say that she had her third and a half noble truth. In other words, suffering is manageable. But suffering is really bad stuff. You look all around you at all the suffering that’s going on in the world and all the suffering that people are inflicting on one another. It’s as if aging, illness, and death were not enough. People feel compelled to inflict additional suffering on top of that. That’s something you want to get out of. You don’t want to just manage it. So you’ve got to comprehend it. And you can find that the source of all that suffering is inside. In a way, that’s good news. It means you don’t have to depend on other people to solve the problem for you. But it does mean that you have to take responsibility through your own actions. So if you have a right view like that, then you have right resolve. In other words, resolve to act and think in ways that are not going to cause harm. Then look at your speech, look at your actions, look at your livelihood. Are they in line with that principle? If they’re not, then you bring them in. This provides the foundation, the virtue, together with the right views, to provide the foundation for your mindfulness, to see what’s going on in the mind, and remember to recognize when something unskillful is coming up, what to do with it. When something skillful comes up, what do you do with it? In this way, right mindfulness and right effort work together to get the mind at the right concentration. Instead of looking for your pleasure in sensuality, you look for your pleasure inside, the sense of the body as you inhabit it from within. That’s a safe pleasure. Nobody else can take that away from you because nobody else can access it. The Buddha gives analogies for that. The dangers of sensuality, a lot of them have to do with the fact that you gain something and someone else wants it. Like a hawk has a piece of meat, and there are other crows and hawks and other raptors that want to get that little piece of meat. Or you find a tree that has fruit and you get up in the tree. And someone else comes along and says, “Well, I can’t climb the tree, but I do have an axe. I can cut it down.” That’s the danger of sensuality. Sensual pleasures are out there where everybody can grab at them. Nobody can really own them. When you gain something, it’s always easy for somebody to grab at it. But your sense of your body as you feel it from within, nobody can take that. They can’t even sense it. It’s something you have for yourself. So try to find your pleasure here, with the breath as you feel it from within, and the various energies of the body as you can detect them. You can coordinate them with the breath. This puts the mind in a position where it can look more carefully at itself. This way, the path revolves around back to right view again, looking more deeply into where there is still stress in the mind, even when the mind is still like this, or when it feels compelled to leave concentration, or why. What are the steps in the process where the mind detaches itself? They happen very quickly. They don’t even seem like steps. They seem like one sudden whoosh and the mind is out. But there are decisions that are being made. There are choices being made. The more you can have a sense of stillness and well-being right here, inhabiting right here, the more clearly you can see them, then the more you’ll be able to resist them. And it’s through this way that you develop the mind. And it is possible for us to develop the mind in this way. That’s the path that gives some direction to your life. Otherwise, you just keep meandering around and around and around. So the choice is yours. What’s the direction you want? Do you want to direct your life, as the Buddha said, in a way that’s well-directed, self-directed? Or do you want it to be pushed around by events outside, like those little boats in the air? You see the Brownian motion where they get pushed around here and there just by the movement of the other molecules and other dust boats, without any real direction at all. So the choice is always available, that you can make up your mind that you want to be in charge of the direction, or do you want to simply let events push you around? When the issue is framed in this way, it’s pretty obvious what you want to do. But all too often we frame the issue in other ways to get in the way. That’s why right view is so important. That’s the beginning of the path that gives direction. And then the virtue that builds on this. The two of these together are what allow your mindfulness to be really solid. Because if your virtue is good, then you can look back at your actions, you can look back at the year and say, “Well, there’s nothing there that I did that I really harmed anybody.” And so it’s easy to remember the year. If you harm this person, harm that person, there are things you want to put up a wall. And that’s going to make it harder to remember. That’s one of the reasons why we don’t learn from our mistakes, is we wall them off. And the reason we make the mistakes to begin with is because our views are wrong. So try to straighten out your views. And that’ll allow you to develop better virtue, better mindfulness, better concentration. And you can see that your life really does take a direction. And it goes in a direction you want to go.

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