Your New Home

June 23, 2024

When we go into a new lifetime, the Buddha compares it to going from one house to another. And the house we end up at will depend on two things. One, our karma from the past. And two, the karma at the moment of death. Since we’re not dying right now, we’re creating the karma that will at that moment be karma from the past. And that’s the karma that creates the different houses that we could go to. In other words, certain options will open up to us at the moment of death. And the options that are available will depend on what we’ve been doing in the past. Our actions and thought, word and deed will create good houses or bad houses. And if we have our wits about us, we’ll be able to choose a good house to go. The best house out of the options. The problem is, at the moment of death, we often don’t have our wits about us. Our mindfulness gets scattered. The things we pay attention to get diverted in all sorts of strange ways. Which is why we meditate, to develop the skills of the mind we’ll need to keep some control over our minds. Meditating or taking care of both options or both possibilities. One, creating a good house to go to. And two, working on the skills you’ll need in order to be mindful and alert and to make the right effort at the moment of death so that whatever possibilities are available, you’ll choose the best. For the past month or so, we’ve been building the new ordination hall, the new monk hut. Up at the top of the hill. And I found myself involved in all sorts of little details that we never would have imagined. Building a building, building a house, requires a lot of decisions, tells a lot of different things. As you go through life, remember you’re building a good house for the next lifetime. What kind of house are you building? Different people focus on different details. Some people focus on being generous, which means that you’ll have a comfortable house. Others focus on meditation, which means that wherever you live, you’ll be wise in how you live there. And you want a combination of all things, a good house materially, but also a good state of mind. Of course, the state of the mind is the most important thing, which is why when the Buddha talks about the various ways you can make merit, generosity, virtue, and goodwill, the development of goodwill, he says, is much greater, much more important. than the others. Because you’ve probably seen people who are wealthy and are very stingy and very miserable. Their houses are beautiful, but their minds are a mess. And they live in discomfort even though the house is comfortable. Their minds are not comfortable. And they may abuse their power. They get very jealous of their wealth, resent people who might want to take their wealth away. They’re not willing to share. That kind of house, talking about the house of the mind, is a miserable place to be, which is why we work on developing goodwill every day, every day, every day for all beings. It makes the mind expansive. And it reminds us of some very basic principles. If you want other beings to be happy, how are they going to be happy? Not just because you wish them goodwill, wish happiness for them, wish goodwill for them. They’re going to have to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. So this gives you an idea of how you can be most helpful to other people, is to help them see things rightly. This is going to require a lot of tact and a lot of diplomacy, a lot of strategic thinking, because a lot of people don’t like being taught these things. Of course, the best way to teach these things is to teach by example. You look for happiness in the right way. You understand that it comes from being skillful in your thoughts, words, and deeds, not harming anyone, not harming yourself, not harming others. And you base that both on goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others. And that way you’re creating a good house, a good place to go. You also realize that goodwill is not our innate nature. Sometimes you hear it said that when you spread thoughts of goodwill, you’re getting back to the innate qualities of your own mind. But the innate qualities of the mind are many. There’s the potential for goodwill, there’s the potential for illwill. The reason they call universal goodwill a Brahma Vihara is because the Brahmins naturally, by the time they’ve developed their mind to reach that state, they’ve developed goodwill for everybody. They don’t call it a Mandu Suhihara, a human dwelling, because human beings can be very partial. As the Buddha said, they’re people you love. And if someone treats the people you love well, you like that person, regardless of how they are otherwise. If they mistreat someone you love, you hate that person, regardless of how they might be otherwise. If they mistreat someone you hate, you’re going to like them. If they treat someone you hate well, you’re not going to like them. It’s a lot of partiality in the mind. It’s not very reliable. So we have to work on making our goodwill universal for everybody. When you remind yourself of what it means, “May this person understand the true causes for happiness and be willing and able to act on them,” then you realize it’s a lot easier to have goodwill for people you don’t like, people you’ve seen behave in horrible ways. You want them to change their ways. You don’t want to see them suffer. From their own actions. That makes it easier to have goodwill all around. And when goodwill is all around like that, then you’re safe. Because you’re not going to do the things or say the things or think the things that would create bad karma for yourself. So you realize that having goodwill all around is your protection. It’s like having a fence all around your house. There are no empty spaces where thieves can come in or wild animals can come in. You’ve got yourself protected on all sides. So think about developing a house of goodwill. That’s why they’re called a vihara, a dwelling place for the mind. So you develop a house for your future lifetimes. It comes from the house you’re developing for your mind right now. Some people say that they don’t have to think about future lifetimes as they practice. Well, the Buddha says that’s being short-sighted. But fortunately, developing a good place for the mind right now and developing a good place for the mind in the future are not two separate activities. By creating this good state of mind right now, you’re creating the conditions that will lead on into good places in the future. That’s taking care of one of the things that will happen at death. The other course is learning to be more mindful and alert regardless of what’s coming up. Because there’ll be a lot of pain, there’ll be a lot of anguish around separation at the moment of death. And you want to have your good qualities strong. So you develop them now while the body is relatively safe and healthy, where your mind is clear. So that you can keep that clarity going, even in the face of pain, even in the face of loss. And at the same time, you’re creating a good place for the mind now. The same principle holds here. Train the mind well now, there’ll be a sense of well-being that comes from that training. There may be some difficulties, but you put up with them because you know it’s for a good cause. And that way you’re more likely to have these skills available to you when things get difficult and when they’re really needed. So have confidence then, and straighten out your mind right now. It’s going to be good not only right now, but also far into the future. And remind yourself that the state of your mind is the most important thing you have. You look at people who practice generosity, sometimes they have more wealth than you do. When they practice the precepts, some people have a life where it’s easier to observe the precepts. But developing the mind from within, that’s something that we all have the potential for. It doesn’t depend on our wealth, it doesn’t depend on nice circumstances outside. Nice circumstances outside can make it easier, but then there are people who get caught up on their nice circumstances outside. So try to work on the qualities that you can generate from within. Because those are your genuine wealth, those are your genuine protection. They provide you with a good home for the mind right now, and provide you with good options for homes in the future.

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