An Auspicious Day

July 25, 2022

There’s a sutta, the Maṅgala Sutta, where the Buddha lists various blessings that basically come from your actions. And it’s interesting that a couple of the blessings there, auspicious blessings, have to do with things that are really not auspicious. In other words, having the right attitude for things that are not auspicious. Two of them in particular stand out. One is called having your self rightly directed. The word self there, atta, can also mean mind. Have your mind rightly directed. The other has to do with eatfulness. They go together. Eatfulness is what directs your mind in the right way. Because otherwise, we get easily distracted by the flowers and the sky and the birds and the other pretty things of life. We forget that we’re on this earth for a very short time. And at the end of our time here, we’re not really sure where we’re going to go. We take advantage of the fact that we’ve developed good karma from the past. That’s why we’re human beings and have the opportunity to practice. But you want to make sure you use that opportunity well. And the Buddha said, skillfulness, the realization that your actions are important and they’re going to make a difference, comes from heedfulness, seeing dangers. So it’s auspicious to see dangers. If you pretend they’re not there, then you’re going to fall into them. There’s a Thai textbook for the Dhamma exams that laypeople take. It explains the different religious ceremonies that you can invite monks to your house for and that monks can perform. And they divide them into two categories, auspicious and inauspicious. It doesn’t mean the ceremonies themselves are inauspicious, but it means that they have to do with inauspicious events in life, i.e., death. But that’s a Brahmanical idea, the idea that you have to protect yourself when you go to a funeral from contamination. And you see this all over the country. When I was a professor at Tsinghua University, one of my students had a brother who died. So a group of us went to the funeral. It was way up in a little village in northern Thailand. And after the funeral was over, we returned to the house, and the mother wouldn’t let us into the house unless we had sprinkled our heads with holy water. There’s also a belief that when you go to a funeral, you should have a little chant that you say to yourself to protect yourself. Again, that’s all Brahmanical. As the Buddha said, “Heedfulness is auspicious.” And when you go to a funeral, you should remind yourself again, “This can happen to you, too.” In that particular case, it was especially sad. It was the eldest son. He had just gotten a job so he could get his younger brothers through school. That was it. The family was quite poor. So it can happen. It can happen to somebody who’s in his twenties. And where are you? If you’re still in your twenties, it can happen to you. If you’re in your teens, it can happen to you. At the moment we’re born, sometimes even before we’re born, we can go. So you think about that. Not to get depressed. And notice, in inauspicious thought, that people were afraid to think of it because it’s inauspicious, but they’re cutting themselves off from what is actually auspicious, ahi, heedfulness, which leads to skillfulness. So you have to make it a reality. It can happen to you. It’s going to happen to you. The only question is, you don’t know when. And the typical reaction is, “Well, it’s not going to happen anytime soon.” But there’s no guarantee. So the Buddha has you reflect on that. Every time there’s a sunset, you can go to night. It can happen very easily. Something can go wrong with your body. Dangerous things can come from outside. And so what’s going to happen when you go? Think of that image the Buddha gave of a house on fire. And then the fire gets carried by the wind over to another house. In the same way that he said, your mind clings to craving, and that will take you to another house. Do you still have cravings? Where do your cravings go? The Buddha compares craving to thirty-six rivers or a stream that breaks into thirty-six streams. They can go in any direction. They can go to the past. They can go to the future. They can go to things you like, things you don’t like. If they go to the past, you find yourself wanting to go back to someplace where you were when you were younger. Oftentimes, those places don’t exist anymore. What are you going to do then? Or they’re not the same as they were. And it’s so easy for the mind to latch on to a thought like that and then find yourself wanting to run with that thought wherever it takes you. Think about a fire going from house to house. The fire has no control over where the wind is going to take it. Once you’ve given rise to a craving, it’s going to take you who knows where. When the Buddha talks about rebirth, he doesn’t talk about what gets reborn, because you’re not really responsible for that. You are responsible for the process, how it’s going to happen. This is going to happen based on what the Thais call the currents of your mind, which corresponds to the Pali concept of asava, things that flow out of the mind. There’s sensuality, there’s becoming, and then there’s ignorance. For most of us, sensuality is what directs us. We want certain sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. This means sometimes having relationships with certain people that we’ve loved in this life. But sometimes your mind can focus on people you get really upset about. You can go back and think about all the injustices that you suffered at the hands of that particular person. You have to go at that point. Who knows what kind of life you’re going to have. Then there’s becoming, the sense of who you are. In the sense that you have to find a world in which to live so you can survive as a being. That can flow out, too. And then there’s ignorance, which basically masks all the other forms of suffering that can happen when you follow sensuality, when you follow becoming. So you have to ask yourself, “Do you have those things in your mind?” As the Buddha said, you should be able to read your own mind. Even if you can’t read the minds of other people, read your own mind. If you see any unskillful qualities in your mind, you realize that those pose danger. All too often you see them as your friends, your cravings, or people you like, your clingings to things that you cling to because you like them. You feel compelled to cling. But if you’re not able to read your own mind, you cling in ignorance, which is what we do. You have no idea where this is going to take you. So if you see that you have these qualities in the mind, you should regard them as a fire on your head. Your hair is burning. You’ve got to put out the fire. First thing, you are relentless and you are mindful. This is one of those passages that shows that mindfulness is not an open, accepting quality. You’re not just enjoying the colors of the flames as they burn. Mindful here is that you keep in mind that you’ve really got to work on these qualities of the mind. You’ve got to get rid of them as quickly as you can. This may involve developing all the factors of the path. It will involve all the factors of the path, some of which take time to develop. But you keep at it. Steadily, steadily, steadily. As I said before, it’s like planning a prison break. Lots of details have to be taken care of. But you keep at it persistently, even though you can’t just run out of the prison. You’ve got to figure out how you can get past the guards, how you’re going to get past this, that, and the other thing. You plot it out. You work at it. It’s the persistence with which you take each step that’s what’s going to make the difference. Because even if it so happens that you do pass away before the escape comes, at least you’re headed in the right direction. And that counts for a lot. What this means is that when you reflect on death, it’s not meant to have you thinking about death, death, death, death, death all the time. You think about it and you realize, “Okay, I’ve got work I’ve got to do. I’ve got these qualities in my mind that pose real dangers.” That fire in your head can get blown over into another head. Just as a fire in the house can get blown into another house. So you work on the qualities of your mind. This is why we’re sitting here meditating. Every distraction that comes up, you’ve got to say, “That could pull me away and pull me away to a place I really don’t want to go.” Even if it’s a thought that you like to think, it’s good sometimes to think about all the pleasant thoughts that can turn on you to remind yourself. Just because a thought seems nice doesn’t mean it’s going to be a nice, entertaining way to spend the hour. There’s work that has to be done. When you’re thinking in these ways, that’s auspicious. You direct your mind in the right direction. That’s auspicious. So this is the Buddhist sense of what’s auspicious. It’s not just simply thinking about nice sights, smells, tastes, sounds, touching, tactile sensations. There was a belief back in that time that you had to see certain things or hear certain things every day to indicate that that would be an auspicious day. But remember the Buddhist verses on what constitutes an auspicious day when you reflect that death could come at any time. So you’ve got to do your duty. The duties here, of course, are the duties of the Four Noble Truths. You focus on the present moment, not because the present moment is a nice place to be, but it’s because the work is done here. This is the place where the work has to be done. So think in these ways, and today will be an auspicious day. Each breath you breathe in and out, when you have this attitude, it’s an auspicious breath. So it’s within your power. There are people who are afraid of the stars, that this planet means that, that planet means this. What determines whether the day is auspicious or not is going to depend on forces totally out of your control. The Buddha places power in your hands. So make the most use of it, the best use of it. You’re the one who decides whether the day is auspicious or not.

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