Grasping Handfuls of Water

December 31, 2022

Tonight we’ve come together to get the New Year off to a good start. Of course, the idea that this is a New Year coming up is a convention, and it’s hard to see exactly why they chose this particular day. Several days after the solstice, a couple of days before the earth reaches perihelion to come, the only thing I’ve been able to figure out—and probably isn’t the reason—is that Sirius is going to be overhead at midnight. When the sun comes up tomorrow morning, it’s not going to say 2023 or 2566, which would be the Buddhist era. But still, that’s the convention. So let’s use the convention. Everyone’s wish is for a happy New Year. So we stop and think about what causes happiness. The causes come from our own actions. Look at what the Buddha had to teach about what leads to happiness. He talked about what leads to happiness in the present life, what leads to happiness in future lives, and what leads to the ultimate happiness. I’ve mentioned before that there was a time when they were having the commemoration for Chandli’s passing. Each year when they would do that, they would invite a senior monk to come and give the final talk. Some years, it would be a senior monk from Bangkok. Other years, it would be one of the Ajahns from the Northeast. That year, it was supposed to be a senior monk from Bangkok. As the time for him to come was approaching, he wasn’t there at the monastery. He received a phone call that he was stuck in traffic and rushed to go ahead and invite somebody else to give the talk. So one of the Ajahns was there, so we asked him to give a talk. He talked about how Buddhism is all about suffering. The Buddha wants us to appreciate how much suffering there is in life, and to understand the suffering. After he got done from the sermon seat, the senior monk from Bangkok arrived. So he was invited up to give another talk. He started right out saying, “Buddhism is all about happiness.” Of course, they’re both right. If you really want to be truly happy, you have to face suffering directly, comprehend it, understand it. You can’t just pretend that it’s not there. It’s there. But it’s still possible to find true happiness, even though the world has a lot of suffering. So what does the Buddha have to say about happiness? For happiness in this lifetime, he talks about very practical things, being industrious, looking after your things. Making sure that your expenditures are in line with your income. But the most important of those factors in that list is the last one, having admirable friends and engaging in admirable friendship. An admirable friend is someone who has the qualities of conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. And to enter into an admirable friendship, you try to develop the same qualities in yourself. The reason this is the most important is that when the Buddha gives the list of qualities that lead to happiness in future lifetimes, it’s just exactly that list—conviction, generosity, virtue, discernment. So, conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, that what he awakened to was really true. And he really did gain awakening through his own efforts. The message there, of course, is that true happiness is possible, but it’s going to be through our efforts. And we have to consider what true happiness is. As the Buddha said, it has to be long-term. After all, because it depends on your efforts, it has to be worth all the energy that goes into it. You look around and there are a lot of things that are not worth the energy. We grab after things. It’s like grabbing after a fistful of water. The water goes right through our fingers, and all we’re left with is the tension of trying to hold on. That’s the way it is with so many pleasures of the world. Worse than that, with many of the pleasures of the world, we do unskillful things to gain them. So even though the pleasure goes, the karma stays for a long time. And it’s not that the mind has a memory of sensual pleasures and pleasures of the world. It’s going to be a pleasant memory. There’s always the fact that the pleasure is gone. That nostalgia is what leads you to want to come back. So we want to look for something that’s longer-term, something that really is worth the effort that goes into it. And the Buddha says you start out by being virtuous. Learn how to find happiness in being harmless. And you develop qualities of generosity and learn how to be happy in giving things away. If you don’t have things to give away, you give your energy, you give your time, you give your knowledge, you give your forgiveness. Learn how to find happiness there. Because the happiness that comes from generosity and virtue is something that we need. When you look back on it, it is a happy memory. There’s a sense of self-esteem, self-worth, that goes with that, which is very different from sensual pleasures. Then finally, discernment. The Buddha calls it penetrating discernment into arising and passing away, leading to the right ending of stress and suffering. Basically seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. It’s not just watching things coming and going, learning how to be okay with their coming and going. As the Buddha says, your discernment is penetrative. When he uses the word penetrative, it means that you see distinctions. Some things, when they arise, lead to happiness. Other things, when they arise, lead to suffering. So you don’t just watch them arise and pass away. That kind of thing leads to suffering. If they’ve arisen, you try to get rid of them before they would go away on their own. Those are the kinds of things that would lead to happiness. You try to give rise to them when they’re not there, and when they’re there, you try to maintain them. That’s what it means for your insight to be penetrative. So go ahead and look into that. What’s going to lead to happiness? What’s going to lead to suffering? As the Buddha said in the four noble truths that we chanted just now, it’s the three kinds of craving that lead to becoming. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. These three forms of craving can be really strong, and the ability to step back from them and to see, “Okay, they cause suffering. I need to abandon them.” That’s a noble act. This is one of the reasons why these are called noble truths, because they require that you take a noble attitude toward your cravings, toward your clingings. Instead of just going for what you like, you stop and think about the consequences of what you like. And you oftentimes see that the things you like are precisely the things that cause you to suffer. Which sounds pretty stupid, but as Ajahn Suwat used to say many, many times, it’s because of our stupidity. When we talk about ignorance causing suffering, it’s because we’re stupid. We should know better. In fact, when people gain awakening, that’s one of the first things that hits them. They should have known better when they see the ways that they’ve behaved in the past that led to suffering. It wasn’t that they didn’t know at all. They knew better, but they didn’t follow through with that knowledge because they thought they could work their way around it. That was the stupidity. That was the ignorance. So this ignorance leads to what kinds of craving? There’s craving for sensuality, but sensuality here has to do less with the sensual pleasures themselves and more with our attachment to our fantasies about them. And sometimes our fantasies focus on the object that we want. An object can either be a material object or it can be a person or a situation. We can fantasize about these things for hours and hours. Think about a meal that you might take. You can fantasize about how good the meal is going to be, and after the meal you can talk about what a great meal it was. You can do that for long periods of time. But the actual eating of the meal doesn’t take all that long. And while you’re eating it, the food is delicious only for that brief moment that it’s in your mouth. And then when it goes down, you don’t even want to think about it. It didn’t happen to you. It didn’t come up again. You’d have to spit it out. That’s the way it is with the pleasures of the world. They’re very, very fleeting. And so it’s the embroidery that we put around them that’s the problem. That’s what causes us to crave these things. That’s what we have to learn how to abandon. And so you do that by looking into, well, what is it that you crave? This is why we have the contemplation of the body in the thirty-two parts. The canon says thirty-one, and then the commentary adds the brain. It’s as if there’s nothing much there. Why lust for it? Why go for it? But as we’re saying today, oftentimes it’s not the object, it’s our role in the fantasy that entertains us. This is where we get into craving for becoming. There are certain identities we would like to take on. Because that’s what becoming is, an identity in a particular world of experience. And that world of experience can either be the outside world that we live in. It could also be the world of your imagination. In your imagination, all kinds of things can happen. The worlds of your imagination have lots of different rules from the world outside. Things that are totally unrelated to the reality of the outside world can take place in the world of your imagination. You can take on certain roles. The world can be a certain way. The other people in the world can be a certain way. But again, you’re grasping after water. You’re trying to hold water in your hands and keep it from going away. What’s going to slip through your fingers? You have to learn how to poison the fantasy. Think about reality. Because so many of the fantasies we have are attractive because they’re unreal. So you have to ask yourself, if you actually tried to act on that fantasy, where would it take you? What kind of disappointments would there be? What would be the possibilities for there being a lot of things to go wrong? Think about this human life that we took on years back. There was something about the human realm that attracted us. We didn’t pay attention to the facts of aging, illness, death, separation, all the diseases that the body can have, all the ways that human society can fall apart. The fact that you have a body means that you’re open to being attacked, either by diseases or by other people. We don’t look at the fine print of the contract. All we see are the pretty pictures that come to our imagination. So you have to ask yourself, is the role you want to take on really worth it? John Foong used to comment that the things that we anchor for in this life, especially in terms of sensual pleasures, have a really strong appeal because we used to have them at some point and we missed them. Then he added, “Think about that for a bit.” That should give rise to a real sense of sanghvega, because if you get them again, you’re going to leave them again, and you’re going to miss them again. You keep coming back with these things that disappoint. That’s the third kind of craving, craving for non-becoming. That’s the craving for obliteration. You decide that life is really bad, and you just rather get away from it and not have to do anything at all, and be willing to go out of existence. But the Buddha discovered that that desire leads to more becoming as well. There are becomes where the mind is obliterated and blanked out, but it’s still there. It hasn’t gotten rid of the craving that would lead you to want to come back. At some point you’ve had enough of that obliterated state and you want to come back. So those are the causes of suffering. Those are things we’ll have to learn how to separate ourselves from. Because, as the Buddha said, we take craving as our friend. It’s our companion wherever we go. We listen to its advice. We listen to its recommendations. It’s always there in our ear. And it’s a false friend. That’s what we have to learn how to see. So we have to replace that craving with a different kind of desire, the desire of right effort, the desire to give rise to skillful qualities in the mind, to abandon unskillful qualities. Sometimes you hear that the cause for suffering is wishing for things to be different from what they are. But that’s much too vague and general, and it certainly doesn’t say much for what our potential for true happiness is. It’s just saying, “Well, just be okay with whatever comes up, and you’ll be okay.” But you won’t really be okay. You may tell yourself you’re okay. But it’s a certain low-level grade of depression. Because, as the Buddha said, the path to the end of suffering does require desire, and the desire to follow the path. That’s desiring things to be different from what they are. You’re not on the path yet. You want to get on it. If you’re on the path, you want to get better at it. And that desire is perfectly legitimate. In fact, you need that desire in order to practice. This is why we’re here meditating. We’ve learned about the Eightfold Path and realized that it is a noble Eightfold Path. It requires us to take responsibility for our happiness. We’re trying our best to foster the two main factors that the Buddha would highlight most of all the factors in the path, which are, on the one hand, right view and, on the other hand, right concentration, which is based on right mindfulness. Of course, right mindfulness is based on right effort. All the factors of the path are necessary, but the ones that require a lot of work are the concentration and the right view. Because the mind is so easily misled by its likes and dislikes, and it’s so used to traveling around, taking a little nibble here, a little nibble there, feeding on this pleasure for a bit. Then you get tired of that and you look for something else. Here we are learning to feed off of the pleasure concentration. We’re learning to find our well-being right here. So this is the centerpiece for any quest for happiness in the Happy New Year—getting the mind under your control. It’s a scary idea, the fact that the way your life goes is led by your mind, and your mind is like a pair of wild horses pulling your chariot, and they’re getting out of control. They’ve been out of control for who knows how long, and you’re trying to get them under control. So it would be one good thing to wish for in the New Year, learning how to bring your mind under control. As the Buddha said, you want to learn how to think the thoughts that you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. And you want to raise your standards for what you want to think. That’s how happiness is found. And whether it’s happiness in the New Year or happiness for however long it takes, we can comfort ourselves by reminding ourselves that it is a good path. It’s a path that involves virtue, it involves generosity, it involves all the good, noble qualities of the mind. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha’s teachings are so satisfying. The happiness is related to what we know is good and dignified and noble in ourselves. The message of the world is that you have to grub for your happiness. That, though, the Buddha says, is the recipe for disappointment. You lift the quality of your mind, and that lifts the level of happiness. That’s why the happiness he offers is so satisfying. So when you think about a happy New Year, try to raise your sights, raise your standards. Think about the Buddha’s standards. And even though you may not be up there yet, take satisfaction in the fact that you really are headed in that direction. Try to keep that direction in mind as you make your choices from day to day to day. Because, of course, the New Year is going to be made up of individual days, and the individual days are going to be made up of the decisions that you make as you think, as you talk, and as you move the body. Remember that you’re headed in that direction. Even in a world where there has been a Buddha, the Dhamma is still alive. The Sangha is still here to pass the Dhamma on. So the opportunities for genuine happiness are still there. Make the most of them while you can.

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