

Virtuous Beginnings

December 31, 2002

According to the calendar, a new year begins tonight at midnight. It's just a convention, we could actually begin the year any time at all. Because the year is like a circle, it's pretty arbitrary where you make your beginning point. But even though it is just a convention, it's wise to learn how to make use of the convention. We often think of the new year as a time to make new beginnings. Even though it's actually telling us that we're getting older, there's a sense of newness about it. We're starting afresh.

And this corresponds to the Buddha's teachings that every moment is an opportunity to make a new choice, to make changes in your life. There's that element of freedom in every moment we have. So we don't have to follow old habit patterns, old ways of doing things. If we find that they're giving bad results, we can change. And it's in our changes that our life gets better. It doesn't depend on the year changing or the season changing or anything outside. It depends on our own choices.

So it's good to reflect on what makes for a good new beginning. As the phrase goes in the chant we chanted just now, *adi-kalyanam*, admirable in the beginning. The Buddha's teachings are admirable in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end.

And what does it mean to have an admirable beginning? We start out with virtue. Often the texts say that virtue is the beginning of the path, the beginning of all skillful qualities, all good qualities of the mind. We start out with virtue, and it's a quality that gives both worldly benefits and noble benefits. In other words, it's listed in that list of four qualities that make for a good rebirth: We're consummate in virtue, consummate in generosity, consummate in conviction, consummate in discernment. If we aren't able to make our way out of this continual round of coming back, coming back, virtue at least makes sure that we arrange a soft landing for ourselves, that we come back in good circumstances, circumstances that allow us to take up the path again with as few obstacles as possible.

But when combined with concentration, discernment, all the other factors of the noble eightfold path, virtue turns into a noble quality. It turns into one of the aspects of the path that leads us outside of the circle, to true freedom.

So it's a good beginning. And even though all of us here practice the precepts to some extent, there's always more work to be done, more refinement. Because the principle of virtue doesn't stop just with the five precepts. They're just the beginning. So when you're reflecting on improvements you want to make in the new year as it comes, it's good to reflect on the principle of virtue. If you're having problems with a particular precept, okay, that's something you want to focus on. Whichever one you find most difficult, tell yourself *that's* the one you're going to work on this year.

For most of us, the hard ones are the precept and principles surrounding right speech. There's the precept against lying; but there are also the principles against harsh speech, divisive speech, idle chatter. There's so much of that kind of speech in the world. So much of our conversation gets made up of these wrong kinds of speech. And so it's good to focus on that as something to improve.

But the texts talk about virtue as covering not only the precepts but also three other qualities as well: right livelihood, restraint of the senses, and reflection on the requisites. These are all aspects of virtue, too.

Right livelihood means that we make our living in ways that are not harmful to anyone, that don't exploit anyone unfairly; in ways that are honest. We choose honest ways of making a living because the way we make a living permeates through our whole life. So that's another topic we can reflect on. Are there any areas in our livelihood that need work?

The third area is restraint of the senses. This is a really important aspect of the practice that many of us miss. As we're sitting here and meditating, our eyes are restrained simply because they're closed. The problem is that when we open them, they go back to their old business of looking for trouble. The same with our ears, our nose, our tongue, our body, our mind. It may be that while we're in meditation our senses are well-restrained, but as soon as we leave it's very easy to get back to our old habits. So this is an area of life where we have to be heedful, because it's in keeping restraint over the senses that we create that sense of continuity from one session of meditation to another. In other words, we're constantly in training. There's no point when we're out of training.

It's like athletes who are in training not only while where they're exercising or working on their sport, but also in how they eat, how they spend their time, how much sleep they get. Being in training means your whole life gets shaped around the training. And that's the way it should be with the Dhamma. And it's right here that we see it. When you look at something, do you let your eyes focus on things that give rise to greed? Or do you hold them in check? Do you let them focus on things that give rise to anger? Delusion? Any of the defilements? Or do you hold them in check? Holding them in check doesn't necessarily mean that you don't look at anything or that you're afraid to look at things. It means that you learn how to look at things in a way that doesn't give rise to defilements.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, "If you see something beautiful, look for its ugly side as well." In other words, with anything that would tend to give rise to passion, you look for the aspect that would kill passion. The same with anger: If you look at something that would ordinarily make you angry, try to look at it in a way that would kill the anger. And so on down with your other senses.

So restraint doesn't mean that you have to be blind. It means that you have skill in your looking, skill in your listening, skill in your smelling, tasting, touching, thinking about things. So reflect that this is an aspect of virtue as well: the virtue of your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body,

mind. In other words, you have principles in your looking and your hearing. You use tactical skill in how you look at things.

That old word “skillful means”: Actually, the Sanskrit means “tactical skill,” that you’re wise in how you use the powers you have. All too often that idea gets abused into meaning indulging your defilements at the same time you claim it’s Dhamma practice. Well, that’s not skillful means. That’s clever dishonesty. It’s not tactical skill. Tactical skill means learning how to get through life without creating unskillful states in your mind. Even though you may be subject to things that would ordinarily encourage unskillful states, you learn how to get around them.

It’s like a person who knows how to eat a fruit that has poisonous seeds, or a fish that has a lot of bones—without swallowing the seeds, without swallowing the bones. Life is full of bones; life is full of poisonous seeds. Tactical skill means knowing how to work our way around them so we don’t give rise to defilements, either in ourselves or in other people.

The fourth aspect of virtue is reflection on the requisites. This relates to that chant we have every evening. And the reason we have it every evening is in case we happen to have missed our reflection during the day. It’s even better when you reflect on things as you use them. Why are you using them? Our life is based on consumption, and we need principles in how we consume: That’s what this reflection is all about.

Once we’re born into this world with a body, there are lots of needs that come along with the body, and we spend most of our life catering to those needs. If we’re not careful, they overwhelm us. They take over all of our attention, all of our time. It gets devoted to getting a good place to stay, good clothing to wear, good food to eat, the right medicine and medical care we’re going to need.

So on the one hand, we need to learn to put some restraint on our consumption so that the mind has more time for itself. You have to ask yourself, exactly how much do you really need to eat? That’s why we reflect on the fact that we don’t eat for beautification, we don’t eat for entertainment purposes, but simply to keep the body going so you can practice. The same with clothing: We wear clothing to protect ourselves from the heat and the cold, to cover it properly. We have shelter to protect us from the elements, and medicine to keep the body functioning properly.

But for most of us, our desire for clothing goes beyond that, our desire for food goes beyond our basic needs, our desire for shelter goes beyond our basic needs. And we have to reflect on that the more we consume, the more we’re placing a burden both on ourselves and on other beings.

Take food for instance. Think of how far it has to come to get here, how many people are involved, from the production of the food on into the preparation. Then we eat the food, and then we have to clean up after ourselves. And for most of the people in that line, it’s not a pleasant activity. Even if you’re a totally strict vegetarian, the people involved in getting the

food to you have to work hard, have to put up with all sorts of hardships. You're in debt to those people. How much debt do you want to incur? That's what you have to ask yourself. When you think in those ways, it makes you more reasonable in what you consume.

And as you're more reasonable in what you consume, you find that you can be more honest with yourself in how you live your life. The more honesty there is in your life, the easier it is to practice the Dhamma. The Buddha once said that this is *the* prime requisite for practicing the Dhamma: that a person be honest. And this goes not only into what you say to other people, but also into how you live your life, so that it doesn't require a lot of denial.

Reflection on the requisites is good in another way as well, in the sense that it makes us reflect on what human life is like. When we get taken by the desire to come back in another form, a better condition next time around, think of that first question the novice is supposed to answer: "What is one?" "All life depends on food"—food here being both physical food and mental food. Life is an activity of eating. Out Interbeing is Inter-eating. You have to ask yourself: Do you really want to come back for that again and again and again? Because there's nobody around who simply gets to eat without being eaten. Everybody gets eaten one way or another. And how much longer do you want to participate in that process?

You realize that birth requires that you feed on others. Once there's birth, there has to be feeding. Otherwise you'd die. And it doesn't end there. You get born again and there has to be more feeding over and over and over again. And it's not always a pretty sight. In fact, mostly it's not a pretty sight at all.

So in this way the quality of virtue—as you develop it with the precepts, with right livelihood, restraint of the senses, and reflection on the requisites—is not only an opportunity to live with good principles but also an opportunity for reflection. As you work on restraint of the senses, it gives you time to reflect. You begin to see exactly where the things are that set the mind off. You gain insight into the mind. Because after all, the eye is not the problem, the ear is not the problem. It's what the mind does with the information that gets fed into it. You start asking yourself, "Why does the mind have to take things which are perfectly neutral and turn them into big issues?" It's in this way that the practice of virtue turns your attention inward.

The same principle goes with right livelihood and with observing the precepts. As you observe the precepts, you have to develop mindfulness, you have to develop alertness, you have to develop compassion. All of the qualities that are essential for getting the mind to be concentrated get developed as you practice the precepts.

So virtue is not simply a matter of learning how to live with restraint so that you're not harming yourself or other people. The practice of virtue also gives you the foundation you need for deeper practice going into the mind.

Above all, it teaches you the principle of karma: that you're constantly producing, you're constantly acting, you're constantly making choices. And it raises the question: Okay, what choices are really worth making? What choices are skillful? What counts as an action that

leads to true happiness? The Buddha gives you standards for judging them. Is the happiness constant and sure? Is it totally under your control? Or is it threatened by things? Is it threatened by change? If it's threatened by change, you've got to learn how to dig deeper and find a better happiness that's more dependable. This is what the practice of insight, the practice of discernment is all about: applying these standards to your actions, so that your actions do start getting more and more skillful all the time—leading from the skill that leads to a pleasant rebirth, to the skills that take you beyond rebirth altogether, that lead the mind to total freedom.

So virtue is an admirable beginning, because in and of itself it's an admirable quality and it leads you to things that are even more admirable. This is how we want to start off the new year, start out with something that's good and gets better. So take some time to reflect, as we move from 2002 to 2003, on what you would like to meet with in the new year. And then focus on the things that are under your control that allow you to bring that better state of mind, that better state of being about.

Because it's here in your power. Some things here are not within your power. Your body's going to be older next year. A lot of the things that you use are going to get run down. But make sure that there's something to compensate for that: the fact that you've gained in wisdom, you've gained in well-being, you've gained in really solid qualities in the mind. You start right here with the practice of virtue and build on that.

Because when you have virtue as your foundation, it's a solid foundation. You don't have to worry that other practices that are more advanced will start leading you astray. You've got this quality of honesty; you've got this quality of clarity that builds on your sense of human worth. Your actions are things you can be open about, your words are things you can be open about, your thoughts are things you can be open about. That sense of openness means that your foundation isn't crooked, it doesn't have any hidden weaknesses. And that's the kind of foundation you can really build on with confidence.