Songkran

April 13, 2025

Today is Songkran, the beginning of the Thai New Year. We’re starting a new year. Of course, the idea of a new year is a convention. In fact, in Thailand, we have four new years. There’s Western New Year, there’s Chinese New Year, there’s the old traditional Thai New Year, which most Thai people have forgotten, and then there’s Songkran. So we have four chances every year to start the new year right. This is your last chance. Compared to a bus, it’s the last bus of the evening. So you want to ask yourself, what are you going to make out of this year? Because as the Buddha said, an auspicious day, an auspicious year, it has nothing to do with the planets, it has nothing to do with numbers. It has everything to do with what you do. It’s your actions that make it auspicious. You focus on what needs to be done right here, right now. Because you don’t know how much time you have left. There’s a lot that needs to be done. To straighten out the mind, so that we live well and when the time comes to die, we die well. And the question is, have you done that work yet? Almost all of us, the answer is no. So we want to stop and take stock of what was good in the past year, what was auspicious about the past year that you want to continue, what things you want to improve. And one of the ways of doing that is also to reflect on the people who’ve passed away. This is one of the reasons why. The Buddhist component of the Songkhan ceremony is the dedication of merit to past ancestors, or just anybody you want to dedicate merit to, who’s passed away. Because you want to think about the goodness they did for you. You have a sense of gratitude for what they’ve done. As the Buddha said, that’s the sign of a good person, is gratitude. Because it means you appreciate goodness, you realize how much goodness requires extra energy, extra determination. And then you’re likely to be willing to put forth some of that extra energy as well. But you have to realize that there are other good things that people have done in the past, and they’re in danger of dying. Because the people have died already, but if their goodness dies, then what’s left? You want to think about ways in which you can emulate their goodness, to carry it on, to keep their goodness alive. Of course it becomes your goodness as you do it, but it means that goodness stays alive in the world. So as we do the ceremony of dedicating merit to those who’ve passed away, stop and think about the good things that they did for you, or that you saw them do for other people. Have a determination that you want to pass it on. And then you might want to think of things you want to do even better. Look in terms of your generosity, your ability to hold by the precepts, your ability to have goodwill for all. Which area is that lacking right now? We live in a topsy-turvy world right now, and it’s very easy not to have goodwill for everybody. So it’s important to think about what does that goodwill mean? We’re wishing for happiness. But again, happiness comes from what? It comes from your actions. So if you’re wishing for other people to be happy, you’re wishing that they become skillful in their actions. So when you extend thoughts of goodwill, it’s telling yourself that you want others to be happy, and you want yourself to be happy. You’re not saying, “Well, I want you to be happy just as you are.” If people are misbehaving, if they’re doing things that are unskillful or harmful, you want them to see the error of their ways, and be willing and able to correct themselves, without having to think about how you would like to see them punished or suffered first, before they start turning around. Because punishment very rarely works. In the sense that most people don’t see that the punishment was just. I’ve had the experience of having a lot of correspondence with people in prison, and it’s very few people who admit that, “Yes, I deserve to be here.” And so when people are punished, it very rarely induces them to think, “Well, maybe they should change their ways.” So whatever way you can be of helping other people, seeing the error of their ways, you’re happy to do that, so that they become skillful, and so that they find happiness. This is a kind of goodwill that you can have for everybody, without hypocrisy. It’s not just a cloud of pink candy, or pink cotton candy, that you spread out in all directions. It’s really precise, thinking about when you meet up with a person every day, do you have goodwill for that person? This applies to everybody you meet with. Hoping that they become skillful, so that they become happy, happy in a way that’s based on the goodness that provides for long-term welfare and long-term happiness. So this might be something you want to bring into the world now. The world needs a lot of goodwill. There’s so much ill will flowing around right now. So your contribution can be, “Well, they can send ill will my way, but I’m going to send goodwill back.” And you try to expand that to all beings in all directions. So as we enter the new year, look back on the old year, think about what goodness we were able to develop in this past year, and how we want to maintain, and we want to develop further. Think also of the good examples that people have set in the past. Because we’re not having to reinvent the Dhamma wheel all the time. The Buddha set forth the Dhamma wheel as to why we’re suffering, how we can stop suffering. He laid out the duties very clearly. So it’s good to reflect on that. What good lessons can you derive from the past? Because that’s what mindfulness is all about. Remembering those good lessons and then trying to apply them as you go forward. So we look back and we look forward. Try to take the best from the past. Anything that’s not really good from the past, just let it go. Focus on making the future as good as you can by focusing on making the present moment as good as you can. And that way this convention of a new year really will serve a true purpose. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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