

## *An Auspicious Birth*

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In the Buddha's teachings there are two kinds of birth. There's the birth when you take on this human body, this set of five aggregates, and that kind of birth happens once in a lifetime. There's another level of birth, though, that happens on a momentary level and can happen many times a day. That's when the mind gets tangled up in desire for any of the five khandhas. It takes on an identity. It wants this kind of experience of form. It wants this kind of feeling, these kinds of perceptions, thought constructs, this kind of consciousness.

We talk of the first kind of birth being auspicious when you're born into a family that's got material comforts and you have an opportunity to meet with the Dhamma. But it's really made auspicious by this other kind of birth, the momentary attachment, because not all attachment is bad. There are good attachments to the aggregates, as when you latch on to the path. After all, that's what we're concerned with as we practice. Sometimes we commemorate the first kind of birthday hoping that it's going to be an auspicious day—although it's interesting that here in America, for birthdays, the birthday person is the one who gets the presents, whereas over in Thailand they have a more Buddhist attitude toward birthdays, which is that when it's your birthday you give the presents, you make donations, you practice the virtue of generosity.

This is in line with the Buddha's teachings on what makes a day auspicious. It's what you do with the day, not so much what you receive or get. It's what comes out of the mind, the kind of identity you take on in the course of the day. In his teachings on the auspicious day, he says that you don't hanker after the past, you don't hanker after the future, you're just clearly aware of what's arising in the present moment. *Paccupanañca yo dhammam, tatha tatha vipassati*: Whatever dhamma, whatever phenomena is arising in the present moment, you see it clearly, right there right there. Then you ardently do your duty because who knows, tomorrow, death may come. If you keep this up, both day and night, then you have an auspicious day.

The term "duty," here, relates to the four noble truths, and their duties were the Buddha's purpose in the teaching the four noble truths: that you have different duties depending on what's arising. If there's suffering, the duty is to comprehend it. If there's craving or clinging, the duty is to let it go. As for the cessation of suffering that comes when craving is abandoned, you have to realize that, even on a momentary level. You should try to be very clear that when you let go of a particular craving, the corresponding suffering ends right at that point. It's something we usually miss because we go from one craving right to another. We drop one craving so we can pick up another. We never see that moment in the crack in between where the craving is gone and there's a momentary release of suffering.

Then finally, as for qualities of the path, those are to be developed. Of the different duties,

this is the primary one because you can't really clearly see or comprehend suffering or let go of the craving, until you've developed the path. This is something a lot of people miss. I've heard many people start out with the duty of comprehending suffering and it gets them strung out because the mind isn't strong enough to keep looking at suffering and stress all day long. It needs the strength that comes from all the factors of the path, everything from right view down to right mindfulness and right concentration.

So you try to develop these things. It's not the case that, when a moment of mindfulness comes you say, "Here it comes, there it goes," or a moment of concentration comes, "Here it comes, there it goes." You want to understand why it's coming, why it's going, so that you can bring it back again, and again, and again, and again until it becomes more continuous, more habitual. That's how you develop it.

The word for developing, *bhavana*, is related to the word for becoming, *bhava*. So as we develop these qualities, we're also taking on a state of becoming. In other words, there's birth—and this is the auspicious birth. In the beginning, it may last just a few moments and then disappear, but you do what you can to bring it back, and bring it back.

There's an interesting passage in one of the Majjhima suttas where the Buddha goes over the duties of the four noble truths in slightly different terms. He says the five clinging aggregates are to be comprehended, craving and clinging are to be abandoned, the ending of craving and clinging is to be realized. That's all in line with what he says in the sutta in setting the wheel of Dhamma in motion. But then for the fourth one, for developing, he focuses on tranquility and insight, which are the two main factors in right concentration. These are things you want to develop.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like your left leg and your right leg when you walk. You have to lean to the left a little bit, then lean to the right. In other words, sometimes the emphasis will be on developing tranquility and sometimes it'll be on developing insight. When you want the mind to be really, really still, you don't want the analysis of insight to get in the way. So you focus on just holding on to the breath, holding on to your object of concentration, learning how to relate to it in a way that makes it easier to hold on. This kind of attachment is a good attachment.

It's like being thrown overboard in a stormy sea, and you've got a plank of wood to hold on to. You're going to hold on to that regardless, because what's going to come up in the present moment is not just past moments. All kinds of karma—past karma, present karma—get all mixed together. You want to be clear on the fact that you want to keep your focus on what you're doing right now—that's what your present karma is—and make sure that it's skillful because the other things, whether they're good or bad, are karmically neutral. Painful feelings can come up. Pleasurable feelings can come up. Painful emotions, desires: These are like waves coming over you in the sea. If you try holding on to them, you get washed away. You've got to hold on to your plank.

Now, it's to be expected that you'll lose your grip every now and then. But what's special about this—and this is where the analogy breaks down—is that as soon as you decide, “I'm going to go back to that plank,” the plank reappears. It's not the case that if you let go of the plank then the plank gets washed away and you're totally lost. This is why the momentary nature of this kind of birth is so important. You may have lost your attachment to the path as you get attached to all kinds of other things, but when you come to your senses and realize, “I don't want to be here, this is not where I should be,” the plank reappears and it's simply up to you to hold on.

Because this question of identity is a lot more fluid than we tend to think. You may have a bad history of bad attachments in the past, but that doesn't mean that that has to be your identity now. A lot of addiction programs talk about appealing to a higher power because when you look at yourself and your addiction you realize, “Boy, I'm pretty hopeless.” If you think in those terms, you *would* have to look to a greater power.

But the Buddha's approach is not that at all. You can change your identity simply by changing what you latch on to. It's your choice. In the beginning, there may be some difficulties in trying to figure out which is the plank and which is the wave, but as you get to recognize the plank, you realize it's always accessible. The potential is always there, so the potential for skillful identity is always there as well.

So as you're up sitting late tonight, keep this point in mind, that whatever comes up, you've got the choice of what to focus on, what to latch on to. There may be many things happening in the present moment, but the Buddha says to focus on four types of things, and particularly on the factors of the path, getting the mind to be still. Even a moment of stillness can be the beginning of longer moments of stillness, so you latch on to that and in doing that, that's an auspicious birth. The more continually you learn how to develop those auspicious births, the closer you get to the point where the mind doesn't need to take birth anymore. Remember that the choice is yours and a new identity can be taken on at any time. So do your best to ensure it's an auspicious identity and that every day is an auspicious birthday.