

Taking a Stance

December 31, 2018

Here it is, the last night of the old year, the first night of the new year; here it is again. The “again” there is important. The Earth rotates, it revolves around the Sun. The Sun revolves around the center of the galaxy, and the galaxy keeps moving in who knows what direction: cycles upon cycles.

And from the Buddha’s point of view, you look back and there’s no beginning point. How many times you’ve been reborn, come back, again, and again, and again? You can’t count them. Then you look ahead: How many more times? When you think of the big cycles like that, it gets pretty discouraging. Because the cycles go up, they go down, they don’t really seem to go anywhere. And they’re not precise circles. They’re more like loops. And as we go through them, we get pretty loopy, too.

Here in the West, there’s the tradition that at the new year we look back and look ahead. That’s what January means basically. It comes from the Roman god Janus: one face facing forward, and another face facing back. When you look back, you want to learn from your mistakes and learn, also, from the good things you’ve done. Looking ahead, you ask yourself: Where do you want to go?

Because you do have that choice. The universe hasn’t ordained it for you. When it’s going around and around, and around like this, it doesn’t seem to have any purpose at all. It just keeps moving. Which frees you to choose your own purpose. If the universe had a purpose, you’d have to sacrifice your true happiness for the sake of whatever that purpose was. But here you don’t have to make that sacrifice. The problem is, you’re sacrificing the potential for true happiness to other lesser potentials for happiness. That’s when there’s a problem. But it’s your choice.

One of the reasons why we meditate is so that we can make the choice better. Because when we meditate, we’re going against a lot of the currents of the mind. You make up your mind you’re going to stay right here. When you begin to notice things in the mind that are pushing you to go away—your old habits, your old desires—you can make up your mind whether you’re going to go with them or not. And if not, you have to figure out how to withstand them.

We develop more mindfulness, more alertness, so that we can catch these currents in the mind and resist them while they’re still weak. That way, we’re taking a stance. Then, from that stance, we’re in a position where we can look ahead and ask ourselves: “What do you really want? It is your choice.”

The Buddha said that it is possible to put an end to suffering. And sometimes you look at

the path to that goal, and it seems like an awfully long path. But then you look at the alternative: not getting out at all. That's even longer. So you try to develop the qualities of mind to change the balance of power inside, so that you don't just keep coming back, coming back.

There's that passage in the Canon where Ven. Raṭṭhapāla, a monk, is talking with a king. The king asks him, "Why did you ordain? Your family was wealthy, you hadn't lost any of your relatives, you hadn't lost your health. Everything was positive, everything was good, you had a bright future. So why did you ordain?" And Raṭṭhapāla said that there were four Dhamma summaries he learned from the Buddha that inspired him to ordain.

The first was, "The world is swept away, it does not endure." You can set your mind on all kinds of goals in the world, but if you're looking simply for the goal of what you can accomplish outside, you just see it washed away.

The second summary: "The world offers no shelter. There's no one in charge." And the king asks him, "What do you mean? I've got a palace here, with lots of shelter." Raṭṭhapāla asks him, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king does. As he says, sometimes he's lying there ill, and his courtiers think he's going to die, and it sounds like they're hopeful he's going to die. Raṭṭhapāla says, "Okay, even though they're your courtiers, can you order them to take some of the pain of the illness and share it out, so you don't have to feel so much pain?" The king says, "No, I've got to experience that pain alone." That's what is meant by "the world offers no shelter."

"The world has nothing of its own." Here again, the king asks, "What do you mean, 'has nothing of its own'? I've got all these treasuries filled with gold." Raṭṭhapāla says, "Can you take that gold with you when you die?" The king says, "No, I've got to leave it all behind." So you really have nothing that is truly your own.

So here it is: The world is swept away: That's inconstancy. It offers no shelter: That's suffering. It has nothing of its own: not-self. It's a pretty bleak picture and yet, he says, we keep coming back for more. We're a slave to craving: That was the fourth of the summaries.

The king says, "What do you mean I'm a slave?" Raṭṭhapāla says, "Well, here you are eighty years old and you have a kingdom. If someone were to come from the east and say, 'There's a kingdom to the east that you could conquer if you wanted.' Would you try to conquer it?" And the king says, "Of course." "How about a kingdom to the west?" "I'd try to get that one, too." "One to the south?" "Take that one, too." "One to the north?" "Take that one, too." "One on the other side of the ocean?" "Go for that one, too." There's no end to human desire.

So, it's this craving to go back to things that are going to cause us to suffer again, again, and again: That's what we're trying to resist as we take a stance. There must be something better.

Now, the Buddha doesn't say just to give up on having any desires at all. He says, there is a path out. Focus your desires there. The goal it leads to is something that doesn't age, grow ill or die. It's not subject to inconstancy, stress, not-self. It lies beyond all these things. That is the possibility.

So tell yourself that this is a good possibility. Maybe you can't reach it in this lifetime, but you want to make sure that you have a sense that that's your general goal. And it's good to keep reminding yourself.

Of course, when the time comes, when you can't stay in this body any longer and the mind is tempted to grasp at anything, you want to be careful you don't just grasp at anything. This is where the principle of determination comes in. This is where Buddhism overlaps with a Western tradition here for the beginning of the new year, which is to make resolution.

Buddhism calls it determination, but you're basically resolving that you want to do something worthwhile. So think about it: Where would you like to go? Then act in that direction so that when the time comes to go, those opportunities will open up for you.

Ajaan Fuang told me one time that he had been reading a book about King Asoka and he came across a determination that King Asoka made: that whatever lifetime he was reborn in, he wanted to have a capability in and of himself: in other words, to be self-reliant and have the ability to look after himself. Ajaan Fuang really liked that determination.

In other words, wherever you go, you want to make sure that you find the Dhamma, find the path, and that you also have the capability within and of yourself to practice it.

You look at the ajaans: They were born into some pretty meager surroundings in Northeastern Thailand. And back in those days, if you were born in Northeastern Thailand, there wasn't much hope for you. But look at what they were able to accomplish: They found the true Dhamma, they practiced, and they were able to benefit greatly.

In one of Ajaan Lee's passages he says, "No matter where you're born, if you have discernment, if you have a capability within yourself, then all you need is a machete and you can set yourself up in life." In other words, you don't need a lot of talent, you don't need a lot of wealth. What you need is the discernment to figure out how to make the best of your surroundings.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate, so that we have the mindfulness and the alertness and the ardency that all go together to create discernment. Mindfulness: keeping in mind, what you've learned from the past, either from other people or from your own actions. Alertness: watching what you're actually doing. And then ardency: the desire to do it well.

When Ajaan Lee talks about mindfulness practice, that's where he focuses the quality of discernment: in your ardency. You realize that if there's going to be happiness, it has to come from your actions. And you can't wait around. Whatever you can do now, you do now.

We focus on the present moment not simply to hang out here, but because there are duties to perform here. We want to understand or comprehend what it is to suffer, so that we can identify the cause. When we see the cause, that's what we let go. We do this by developing the path, and eventually get to the point where we can realize the cessation of suffering.

Those are the duties the Buddha sets out. And notice they're duties in line with your deepest aspirations. You want to put an end to suffering. You want to find a happiness that's

reliable. If that's the case, these are the duties you can willingly take on.

No one's imposing them on you. But as the Buddha points out, it's good to know that this is the way things work, because otherwise, you're at sea, with no guidance at all.

But here it is: We're born into this human world without a handbook, and the Buddha's providing us with a handbook: These are the duties, this is how you do them to find something of real solid worth.

So as you're sitting here meditating, you're performing at least some of these duties: developing concentration, getting some sense of where the suffering is inside and what you're doing to cause it, and then learning how to let go of the cause. This is a good place to take a stance, to develop the qualities you need— and to set your sights in the right direction.