

Taking Stock of Our Lives

December 28, 2016

Close your eyes and watch your breath, each breath as it passes by. You want to make good use of it, because once it's gone, it doesn't come back.

This is that time of year—the end of the year, the beginning of the new year—when it's good to look back on the past twelve months to see what lessons you've learned, what things you did well that you're proud of that you want to continue into the new year, and also things you're not so happy about.

As for anyone who's wronged you in the past year, you want to give them forgiveness. You don't want any grudge to carry over into the new year.

So take stock of time, because time keeps slipping past, slipping past. It's like a faucet that's been left on and there's no way to turn it off. The water just keeps coming out, coming out. So the question is, what's the best use to make of the water? Because it's there, it's free, but it's running away if you don't use it.

We talk about the new year, but we look at ourselves and we're getting old. On birthdays, we're actually celebrating aging: one more year, one more year, as if we've gained something. Well, let's hope we've gained something in terms of knowledge, in terms of wisdom, in terms of the good qualities of the mind. The new year is a convention, but it's a convention that we can use well, to take stock of our lives.

This was one of the first teachings the Buddha gave to his son, which is that before you do something, think about the results you're expecting—why you're doing it. Look at the results you're actually getting, and if they're not good – in other words, if you're harming yourself or you're harming other people – stop. And then after the action is done, look at the long-term consequences and then learn from them.

This is a process that actually we should be doing all the time. But in case we've slipped on some things, now's a good time to cast your mind back over the year. Think about what you did that was unskillful, or you thought might have been skillful when you did it but it turned out that it wasn't. Or think about the times when you just had mindless lapses. Then make up your mind that you're not going to repeat those mistakes.

At the same time, look at the good things you did, the good things you've accomplished. That's what we actually gain as we go through life. If we gain just years, it's pretty empty. But if you gain wisdom, compassion, gain in all the good qualities of the mind, all the perfections of the mind, that's a real gain.

So even though when we meditate we're focusing primarily on the present, once the mind has settled down in the present sometimes it's good to call up things from the past: to contemplate them, reflect on them, and learn what lessons you can, so that the new year will be a good year.

That's how you make it an auspicious year, by figuring out what you should do and going ahead and doing it. It doesn't depend on the stars, it doesn't depend on people outside, it depends on your own actions. So try to make your actions as good as you can.

Because that's what you can take with you when time goes: the goodness that you've been able to accumulate over all that time.