

Make the Most of Right Now

January 2, 2021

Every year, at the beginning of the new year, we wish one another a happy new year, in huge denial of the facts: Time is passing, and what happens as time passes? People grow old, they grow ill, they die, they get reborn again, and it happens all over again—again and again.

There's a sutta where the Buddha goes for alms at the house of a brahman, and the next day he goes to the house again. The brahman puts food in his bowl, and the Buddha goes again the next day. And the brahman puts more food in his bowl. On the third day, the brahman complains, "What is it with this pesky contemplative? He comes every day, again and again, for food." And the Buddha replied, "And again and again, people take birth. Again and again, people grow ill. Again and again, they die; they get carried off to the charnel ground. And again and again, they take birth." The question is: When are you going to have enough? There's that temptation to say, "Well, next time around I want it to be better." You try to arrange for it to be better, but then it's going to fall apart again.

And all too often when things get better, people get complacent. Think of the devas: Anything they want appears. You can imagine how spoiled you could get if anything you wanted just appeared. After having been spoiled like that for a long while, they have to fall. Then it's that much harder to deal with the fact that their wishes don't come true anymore, or they come true only with a lot of effort.

So here we are, trying to develop some goodness, in hopes of the rewards of goodness, but then the rewards, if you hold on to them, turn on you. They bite you. That's why the question is: When will you have had enough? As the Buddha said to that brahman: Only when you've developed the discernment that can let go of these things will you not have to come back again and again to further becoming. It's all fueled by our craving.

There's the same sentiment that Ratthapala had when he first listened to the Dhamma. He realized, as he said, *The world is swept away; it has no shelter; you have nothing of your own*. In other words: inconstancy, stress, pain, not-self. But then, *it's a slave to craving*—it wants more of the same. When will you have had enough?

There's another place where the Buddha points out that if you take delight in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, then you're delighting in stress, you're delighting in pain. Now, some people might say, "Why are you badmouthing the good things of the world, the good things of life?" We're not really badmouthing these things. We're just pointing out the facts because there's something better. That's what you always have to hold in mind—there is something better.

Sometimes the Pali word for stress, *dukkha* is translated as *unsatisfactoriness*. There's a way in which that's right, but a huge way in which it's wrong. Dukkha means pain, stress,

suffering. It's unsatisfactory because there is something better, but taken on its own, when you say that something is unsatisfactory, it sounds as if you could simply change your standards and learn how to be satisfied with things, and then you'd be okay. And that's a lot of what modern Dhamma teaches: Accept the fact that things change. Don't want them to be any way different, and you'll be okay. Learn some equanimity.

That is *not* the escape from suffering. That's not the escape from unsatisfactoriness. The escape is realizing that you're implicit in making these things happen. When the Buddha says that the objects of the senses and the senses themselves are fabricated, it's not simply that they depend on conditions, but that you play a role in getting engaged with them, shaping them. And it's because you still find delight in these things that you keep coming back.

So, in the meantime, he says to delight in the path. Even though the path is made out of intentions, thoughts, words, deeds, still it's a set of intentions, a set of aggregates, that provides the way out.

You have to depend on this body, with all its illnesses and its aging, as a tool for practice. Either you take it as an object of contemplation, or you focus on the breath: contemplating the thirty-two parts of the body or focusing on the breath to develop a sense of relative well-being. You know that you're going to have to give it up anyway, but it's better to give it up understanding why you took it up to begin with, and how you can learn how not to pick it up again: That's what we're aiming at.

Because, again, there is something better. If there weren't something better than all this, the Buddha wouldn't have taught. As he said, if there weren't a true happiness to be found by developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones, he wouldn't have taught people to act in those ways. He taught because there is a benefit to these activities that goes beyond the ordinary coming back to better things.

So here's our opportunity: We don't know how much time we have, and as the Buddha says, "Days and nights fly past, fly past: What am I becoming right now?" Are you becoming a better person, someone who's less reliant on the pleasures of the senses, and more reliant on the pleasures of the path? Or is it the other way around? You're the one who has to judge.

As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is found through a combination of commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to the path. How well are you committed? That's what you have to reflect on. If you say, "Well, I'm doing enough so that I can come back fairly comfortably," Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice response. He says, "People who are planning their next lifetime don't really believe in rebirth." That's because they don't understand how risky it is: We have no idea what karma we have in the past that might suddenly might barge in at some point and take us off to some place where it's going to be hard to practice.

But we do have the opportunity to practice *now*. So make the most of it: Try to be uncomplacent, try to be heedful—because those are the qualities you have to depend on. If

you're missing those qualities, the practice begins to fall apart. You start thinking, "Well, I'll make a practice of relaxing my way to awakening, or taking the ease-full path."

I was listening to a Dhamma talk from another tradition last night in which the teacher was saying he didn't like the idea of translating *samādhi* as concentration because simply the idea of concentrating the mind makes you tense: There's something you have to do to get the mind focused, as opposed to simply allowing it to be peaceful and still. Well, peaceful and still but not focused means that you're just drifting around.

You can't clone awakening. You hear about awakened people being at ease, but you don't get there by taking your ease all the time. Ajaan Suwat gave the image of the difference between eating and being full: When you're eating, you have to find the food, you have to fix the food, you have to chew it, and you have to digest it. There's a lot of activity that goes in to it. The feeling of being full is something that's just *there*. They're two very different things. You can't make yourself full simply by telling yourself, "Okay, I'll act like I'm full." You've got to do what's required.

So realize: There's work involved. There are going to be frustrations and difficulties, but learn how to delight in taking the difficulties as challenges. Think of the difference between simply enjoying the pleasures of the senses and enjoying the mastery of a skill: Delight in the path is enjoying the mastery of a skill. You're working on a skill, something that you couldn't do before, but now you can. Problems that you faced before and they seemed insurmountable, now you can surmount them: That's the delight of the path.

Yet that's nothing compared to what lies at the end of the path. As the Buddha said, if they could make a deal with you that they would spear you with a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred at noon, a hundred in the evening, for a hundred years—three hundred spears a day for a hundred years—but with the guarantee that at the end of a hundred years you'd get full awakening, he said, "Take the deal." And when you arrived at awakening, you wouldn't think that it had been won by pain. The sense of relief that comes, the sense of being totally unburdened, totally unlimited that comes, would erase any regrets over how much pain was involved along the way.

So there is something special that lies at the end of the path. Have a very keen sense that it's worth it. At the same time, have a keen sense that you don't know how much time you have. Last night we lost a member of our original support community. She lived to be ninety years, but still, at the end of ninety years, all that time seems like nothing—it's all gone. Where are those ninety years right now? They're gone.

Once we're born, it's as if we've been sentenced to death, and we go around with this sentence hanging over us. We tend to forget that it's there. And we have no idea where we are in line, or of who's next in line. But the sentence will be carried out—you can be sure of that—so make sure that you've developed as much of the path as you can in the meantime. If you don't, there'll be a lot of regrets, and it's not a good thing to die with regret. When the time comes, die

with the sense, "Okay, I did what I could." Even if you haven't reached all the way, there'll be a sense of satisfaction there, and that'll carry you through.