

Sending Happiness

December 31, 2021

Tonight's New Year's Eve. There's one way in which that's totally natural and another way it's totally conventional. The natural part, of course, is that the Earth marks this amount of time, 365 plus a fraction of days as it goes around the Sun. If we lived on Mars, the years would be longer; on Venus, they'd be shorter. The conventional part, of course: Is where does the year begin in this ellipse of the Earth's path around the Sun? It's totally arbitrary that this is the Western New Year. In Thailand they have four. They've adopted not only their original Thai New Year, which most Thai's have forgotten, but also the Western New Year, along with Songkran, which comes from India, and Troot Jiin, which comes from China.

You can take advantage of the convention by using it to reflect on the past year, to see what was good, not only in terms of things that made you happy, but also the good things you did. Then think about what was *not* so good, primarily in terms of the mistakes you made. Then, as the Buddha said, when you think about the unskillful things you've done in the past, there are two appropriate reactions: One is to recognize the mistake as a mistake and resolve not to repeat it again. The second is to develop the brahmaviharas.

So this is a good night for that kind of reflection. What kinds of mistakes would you like not to make again? And then as motivation to stick with that determination, develop goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, with the emphasis on the goodwill: wishing happiness for others, the people you've wronged, to remind yourself that you don't want to wrong them again. Then wish happiness for all beings, because you don't want to act unskillfully with anybody. And have goodwill for yourself, so that you don't beat yourself over past mistakes, so that you can have an upbeat attitude toward the fact that you're on the path, you're engaged in the practice that's leading to true happiness. Which is why you also want to think about the good things you did in the past, to remind yourself that you *are* making progress and this is a good path to be on.

When you think about spreading thoughts of goodwill to everybody, you want to make sure it's not just thoughts, but that it's expressed also in your words and your actions. In Thailand, in adopting the Western New Year for January 1st, the Western tradition they've adopted is sending a New Year's card. They call it *saw khaw saw*, which is an abbreviation for *song khwaam suk*, which literally means to send happiness.

There are two ways in which you send happiness: One is through your thoughts, and the other is by setting an example. When people go about looking for how to find happiness in the world, they look around: How do other people look for happiness? Who seems to be doing a good job? And one way of backing up your thoughts is to set a good example.

The Buddha talks about four activities or four qualities that lead to happiness in this life. As it turns out, they also slough over into the qualities for finding happiness in the next life. So if you want to set a good example, you might want to think about these qualities.

The first is having initiative. In the texts they talk about having initiative in the way you make your living, particularly in that you're clever and untiring in making your living in a righteous way. You make your living in a fair way, but at the same time you're clever. You try to figure out new ways of advancing that skill, whatever the skill is on which you base your livelihood. And you try to be untiring and energetic in what you do.

You can also interpret this in terms of your meditation practice. Show initiative in your meditation by being clever and untiring. You sit down, and things are not working out well: What could you do to make them work out better? Think about the different kinds of fabrication that go into meditation: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself in directed thought and evaluation, the feelings you focus on, the perceptions you focus on. What needs to be changed? You can change the way you breathe. How do you direct your thoughts to the breath? How do you evaluate the breath? Or if you find that the mind isn't willing to settle down with the breath, what other things could you be thinking about right now that would be in line with the Dhamma?

One of the monks who stayed with Ajaan Lee toward the end of his life noted that even though Ajaan Lee would focus a lot of attention on the breath, it wasn't the only meditation method he taught. He would teach recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, the unattractiveness of the body, mindfulness of death—all kinds of topics that were related to the Dhamma, with the realization that not everyone's ready to settle down in the beginning with the breath. And even those who are usually able to settle down with the breath will sometimes find that they need to switch over to some other topic, either because an issue has come up in the mind that needs an alternative treatment, or because there's something not right with the breath itself.

When lust comes up, you need more than just knowing your breath, although being able to relax the breath energy in the body is one helpful step. You also have to think about: What is it that you're lustful about? And exactly where is the

craving focused? You can start by taking apart the image of the body in your mind into its pieces, thinking about the pieces being laid out on the floor, and asking yourself, “Okay, which organ of the body are you lusting for?” When they’re taken apart like that, there’s really no reason to feel lust. So why is it when they’re put back together again there seems to be a reason? In that case, you have to start looking back at your perceptions. What is it in the mind that *wants* to lust, that wants to perceive things as worthy of lust? Sometimes the idea of lust itself is where your craving is focused, not so much on the object or on the fantasies you have around lust. So try to track things down inside. Use some ingenuity until you figure this out.

There are other times when you feel lazy about practicing. That’s when the Buddha has you engage in mindfulness of death to remind yourself that death could come at any time. Think about the Buddha’s analysis of what happens when you die, based on the analogy of a flame being blown from one house to the next, latching on to the wind as it goes. In the same way, he says, we latch on to craving at the moment of death and we just go. You know how blind craving can be, and at the moment of death, you can imagine how desperate it could be. Is your mind ready and prepared so that it can hold things under control? That much of a thought should be in the background—because when you engage in mindfulness of death, it’s not as if you’re thinking about death, death, death, death, death, all the time. You remind yourself, “What do I need to develop in order to prepare?” Then you focus on preparing that.

It’s like walking along a tightrope. You focus on the tightrope, and if your mind wanders from the tightrope, you have to remind yourself, “No! You can’t go anywhere else!” because if you do, you’re going to fall. Staying focused on the tightrope is like staying focused, say, on the breath or whatever meditation is necessary right now. The thought that you could fall is there only when you start wandering away. In other words, that’s when you remind yourself, “Death could come at any time. Why are you wandering away?” That gets you back to work.

So try to be clever and ingenious in your meditation. And be untiring. Find ways of keeping at it, keeping at it. There always is a source of energy someplace inside where you can keep on doing this, except when you sleep. This is one of the reasons why we have long sits like this every now and then, to remind ourselves that we *do* have these resources that we haven’t tapped into that we *can* tap into when we need to. That’s how you can become untiring, and this is how you show initiative in your practice.

The next quality the Buddha recommends after initiative is that you’re consummate in vigilance, learning how to maintain the gains you’ve made. Now

again, in the texts he's talking about the wealth you've gained from your livelihood, but you can also be vigilant about not throwing away your meditation when you get up and leave. For a lot of us, it's like an object on our lap. As long as we're sitting here, it's safely on our lap, but as we get up it just falls off onto the ground. You have to remind yourself: The breath is still here, the possibility of the mind to wander away is also still here. Why do you let it wander away when you've got something good?

Whatever good you've gotten out of the meditation, try to maintain it as you go through the day. And notice what it is that pulls you off—whether it's an urge that comes from within or something strong that comes through your senses from outside—and think about how you can withstand that.

Ajaan Lee's image is of having some good food in a bowl with a cover over the bowl. You don't want the flies to get in, either the flies of outside distractions or the flies of your own defilements. So once you've got something good in your meditation, maintain it. And here again, you want to show initiative in ways to maintain it, thinking about it and realizing its value. If you just do the meditation and throw it away, then do it again and throw it away again, it doesn't develop momentum. But if you value it, protect it, then it can build up over time.

The third quality is having admirable friends. You look around you to see: Who are the people who have admirable qualities in terms of their conviction, their virtue, their generosity, their discernment? Conviction, here, means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, which translates into conviction in the principle of how important your actions are. Everything the Buddha awakened to comes down to the importance of your actions and what a big difference your actions can make. It's good to be convinced of that, because otherwise people get careless with their actions. Even though our actions are our main treasure, our main source of wealth, if you throw that wealth away, what have you got? Nothing really, just memories about how *this* was fun and *that* was fun. But those memories can't sustain you. They pull you back. Yet if you take care of your actions and then reflect back on those actions, the times when you did something good: That gives you energy. Each time you think about it, it gives you energy. That's why it's wealth.

The second quality of an admirable friend, virtue: You want to look for someone who sticks by the precepts, is principled in his or her actions, so that you can emulate that quality in yourself.

The same with generosity: If you hang around generous people, you're going to be the beneficiaries of their generosity, but not just that. The proper attitude is seeing how they're made happy by being generous with their time, and with their

energy, not just with the material goods. If you have a sense that you'd be ashamed not to be generous with your time and your energy, then you've got the right attitude. Admirable friendship carries with it a healthy sense of shame. When you're around good people, you'd be ashamed not to emulate their qualities. That's the kind of healthy shame that the Buddha recommends.

And then discernment: This is defined as penetrative discernment of arising and passing away. Now, "penetrative" discernment doesn't mean simply watching things come and go. To be penetrative means noticing that when some things come, they're really good; other things come and they're not. And when they come, *why* do they come? So you penetrate into their causes and then you penetrate into which things are skillful and should be encouraged, and which ones are not skillful and should be discouraged. That's a quality that you want to emulate as well. When you emulate it, then you can set a good example for others, too.

And then finally, the last quality for happiness in the present life is maintaining your livelihood in tune. Here again, the Buddha focuses primarily on your wealth outside, that with the wealth you've gained you're not a spendthrift but also you're not a penny-pincher. You spend your wealth in a way that's appropriate to your income in terms of meeting with your own needs, being generous with others, saving up for the future. And here again, there's an analogy inside: As you think about the amount of time you spend in helping others, if you help other people to the extent where your meditation begins to get harmed, then you're a spendthrift. If you don't help other people at all, you're a penny-pincher. And you're lacking those good qualities that the Buddha said come when you look out after others.

We know the analogy of the acrobat: You have to look after your sense of balance, the other acrobat has to look after his sense of balance, and in that way you protect each other. But there's the other way that that principle goes, which is that by looking after the others you look after yourself. In other words, in thinking about others, learning how to make their life easier, make the burden of their work lighter, you're developing goodwill, you're developing compassion; putting up with their difficult times, you're developing patience and equanimity—all of which are good qualities to have in yourself.

So as you develop these qualities inside by being helpful outside, this also is a way of sending happiness, by giving a good example to the world.

The world is full of all sorts of bad examples right now. But that doesn't mean that the good example you set is not going to have some impact someplace. By being a good person, you're making yourself a gift to the world, bringing happiness

to the world, both in doing things that make other people happy and in showing other people that this is how harmless and lasting happiness is found. This is a good example.

So as the new year begins, think about sending some happiness out, not just on the day of the new year or the first part of the new year. Send happiness all year round—thoughts of goodwill on a daily basis, developing these four qualities: initiative, vigilance, admirable friendship, and maintaining your livelihood in tune. See if you can make this practice last throughout the year and through the succeeding years. Remember, you *can* generate happiness inside, and you can send it out. If you're constantly thinking about how you're going to get happiness from other people, you're a drain on the world. But if you can generate happiness and send it out, then every time you breathe in and breathe out, it's going to be a gift.