

Making a Fresh Start in Life

By Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi

(A talk given at the Chinese New Year assembly at Bodhi Monastery, February 9th, 2008)

For Buddhists, the new year should not be an occasion merely to celebrate and enjoy good food and the company of friends. It is an opportunity to take a new birth and start a new life, a time to renew our commitment to the Buddhist path. In following the Dhamma, it is always best for us to consider ourselves beginners. We should not think that because we may have been practicing Buddhism for ten, twenty, or thirty years, we are experts in the Dhamma. No matter how long we might have been studying and practicing the Dhamma, we should always consider ourselves to be on Square One, taking our first steps on this vast and deep path to enlightenment.

When we renew our commitment to the Dhamma, at the outset we should review our basic purpose in following the Buddha's teaching. Generally, people are initially attracted to Buddhism for reasons that have little to do with the essential purpose of the Dhamma. You may have been born in a Buddhist family and thus have a deeply rooted sense of being a Buddhist. But the Dhamma is not something that one inherits as a birthright. Birth in a Buddhist family can even be an obstacle if it serves primarily as the basis for a sense of pride. One identifies oneself as a Buddhist and then feels one must prove to others the greatness of Buddhism by arguing with those who follow other religions and paths of life.

Others may be attracted to Buddhism because they are drawn to the exotic trappings of an Oriental religion. We become disillusioned with Christianity or Judaism and are attracted to Buddhism because it appears intriguing, esoteric, or exotic: burning incense, chanting in strange languages, participating in strange rites. Many come to the Dhamma because they want to learn meditation as a way to overcome worry and restlessness, or to find some discipline in their lives. We might be attracted to the Dhamma because we are fascinated, or puzzled, by the strange concepts of Buddhist philosophy. Some might be attracted by the peaceful figure of the Buddha, or by a charismatic Buddhist teacher.

These are some initial reasons that people develop an interest in Buddhism, but over time, once we become better versed in the Dhamma, our understanding of our purpose in following the Buddha should mature, become deeper and broader, grow into closer alignment with the teaching itself. Ultimately, our own purpose in following the Dhamma should coincide with the Buddha's purpose in teaching the Dhamma to the world.

A key step in maturing one's motivation lies in strengthening and balancing deep faith and right view. Deep faith and right view have to be cultivated in conjunction, balanced in such a way that faith and understanding support and strengthen one another. Faith contributes the emotional component of the Buddhist spiritual life. Through faith, we place trust in the Buddha as a fully enlightened teacher and in his teaching as the way to

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enlightenment and liberation from suffering. Faith brings joy and tranquility. But if one has only faith without clear understanding, one's progress will be retarded. Thus faith should be complemented by lucid understanding. Through right view we deepen our wisdom. Faith anchors us in the Dhamma, even when the teachings challenge our own biases and preconceptions. Right view enables our understanding of the Dhamma

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to become sharper, deeper, clearer, and more precise. As our faith and understanding deepen, our motivation in following the Dhamma also deepens and becomes more compelling. We then follow the Dhamma because we accept it as the indispensable means to depart from suffering and find true happiness, a happiness that does not depend on external conditions.

Our motivation for following the Dhamma also matures when we develop a broad and inclusive mind. With the broad mind, our purpose expands beyond our narrow self-interest and we come to include others within the scope of our motivation. We then come to see the Dhamma not only as a way to our own emancipation from suffering, but also as a source of well-being and benefit for others. We learn what we can do to truly help others find happiness, peace, and security in their lives.

Generally, when we first come to the Dhamma, we begin with a concern for our own well-being and happiness. This is a narrow focus, but such a focus is often necessary. By sharpening our inner focus, we come to understand ourselves better, to see our own deeply ingrained weaknesses and frailties. We also discover our potential strengths; we learn how to tap into those wholesome qualities lying dormant in our minds that can be unfolded, developed, and expanded until they become dominant powers of our being. As we experience the benefits of Dhamma practice for ourselves, we can then open our minds more widely to consider others. We then realize that other people are not essentially different from ourselves. We understand that everyone wants to be free from suffering, to find invincible happiness and peace.

Most of the problems we face in our lives arise because we seek happiness in the wrong way, using the wrong means. We habitually assume that the way to happiness lies in the fulfillment of our desires. This is the great hoax that our minds play on us. The hoax is so cogent that it deceives almost everybody in the world. It takes a Buddha to awaken from it and call its bluff. The Buddha pinpointed self-centered desire as the root cause of suffering. He taught that desire is inherently insatiable and that the more we blindly pursue the objects of desire, the more suffering we potentially create for ourselves and others. Sadly, most people are not even dedicated to their "enlightened self-interest." Delusion is so strong and thick that we are inclined to pursue our selfish desires even when these destroy the very conditions that make our well-being possible, even the conditions that make life on earth possible.

When we evaluate our motivations in following the Buddha's teaching, it is almost inevitable that we become aware of our faults and shortcomings. Sometimes this experience can be quite painful, but our purpose in examining our faults is not to burden ourselves with a sense of guilt and unworthiness. It is, rather, to acquire realistic self-knowledge in the hope of changing ourselves. When we become aware of our faults, we see what lurks within ourselves that we have to change; we see what is necessary to bring our hearts into harmony with the Dhamma. Useful guides for self-examination are the Sallekha Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya sutta no. 8), which lists some forty-four faults, and the Simile of the Cloth (Majjhima Nikaya no. 7), which lists sixteen "minor defilements" that can be used as a guide for self-appraisal.

Discernment of our shortcoming gives rise to a profound feeling of remorse and repentance. In Chinese this is called *chàn huī*. In the traditional Chinese rite of repentance, one repents each fault from three angles: (1) for committing that fault oneself; (2) for instructing others to commit it; and (3) for rejoicing when one has witnessed others commit that fault. This widens our recognition of the range of our own responsibility.

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It compels us to see that we are responsible, not only for our own private actions, but also for the impact of our behavior on others and for our responses to the misbehavior of others.

In the practice of repentance, one also experiences remorse for the roots of the unwholesome actions that lie within oneself, that is, for one's greed, hatred, and delusion, along with other defilements. One reflects: "Whatever unwholesome actions I have performed in the past, on account of beginningless greed, hatred, and ignorance, arisen by way of body, speech, and mind, I repent them; I also repent all my karmic obstructions and the roots of the unwholesome actions."

Having generated a strong feeling of remorse and repentance, one then makes a renewed determination to correct oneself and to cultivate wholesome qualities. This calls attention to the importance of the will as the agent of self-transformation. In ordinary life, our mind is like a rudderless ship, buffeted by impulsive desires. Thoughts and impulses arise from the matrix of the mind, clamor for our attention, and we then compulsively follow them, especially when the fulfillment of these impulses is accompanied by pleasure. Superficially, this may seem harmless, and we may even think we are thereby demonstrating the virtue of "spontaneity" or developing a distinctive personality. If, however, we look at the matter more soberly, we can see that to let ourselves be driven around by our impulsive desires can be risky, even perilous. All the dangerous criminals in the world have become such because they allowed themselves to be driven by their unreflective minds. In the practice of Dhamma, our aim is to be the master of our own minds, not the servant of our desires.

One major factor in achieving this is the power of intention. Early Buddhism assigns a major role to right intention, the second factor in the Noble Eightfold Path. Thus the Buddha says that the thoughts we often entertain become the direction of the mind (MN no. 19). If we often ponder unwholesome thoughts, our mind will flow in an unwholesome direction, towards bondage and suffering. If we entertain wholesome thoughts, these thoughts will give positive shape to the mind.

In Mahayana Buddhism, right intention evolves into resolution, expressed by the word *pranidhi* or *pranidhāna* (Ch: *shì yuàn*). Sometimes this word is translated as "vow." To make a vow or resolution is to give a particular direction to our mind. Thus the vows we make, our resolutions, our consciously formulated intentions, play a major role in our spiritual development. We might even call them the main agents of self-transformation. Through our vows we resolve to eliminate unwholesome tendencies that are already present and to awaken and develop wholesome potentials that have not yet been fully actualized. The energy that we apply to fulfilling these resolutions then becomes our "right effort."

Resolutions should not be made only once at the beginning of the year. Ideally, the same determinations or resolutions should be made every day. The vows should be realistic, not so grand and lofty that we cannot act upon them. The most lofty vows we read about are those of Samantabhadra, Guanyin, and Kshitigarbha. These, however, are great bodhisattvas who have been cultivating the path for eons and thus are able to act upon their vows. We have to start in a realistic way with small steps, with acts within our scope; we need to adopt measures that can help us curb our faults and develop worthy virtues. For example, one can vow to be patient under difficult circumstances, without giving way to anger and dejection. One can vow to regularly practice generosity, helping to uplift the lives of the poor and disadvantaged. One can vow to practice meditation for a fixed time every day, without making excuses for skipping one's sittings.

If you fail to live up to your resolutions, you should not write yourself off as a failure. Instead, you should admit to yourself your human weakness and then renew your vows, making a fresh determination to fulfill them. We should always remember that progress in Buddhism is gradual: a matter of step by step practice, gradual progress, and gradual achievement. This is like the growth of an oak tree, not the blooming of a flower.

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A flower blossoms overnight, lasts for a few days, and then it withers and dies. An oak tree grows slowly and gradually, so slowly that day after day you don't see it growing at all. But after several years, the oak tree has become tall and majestic, rooted immovably in the ground, able to endure for centuries. This is the kind of spiritual development we should aim at in our practice of Buddhism.

At the beginning of a new year, it is also important to reflect upon your impact on the wider world. We are all part of a global community which is an integrated whole; we are like waves on an ocean. Although we might think that our lives are separate, that we are privately enclosed upon ourselves, in reality we are connected with all other life-forms, just as each wave on the ocean is, at some level, connected with all the other waves. Thus, the way we order our own lives has an impact on the whole. For this reason we have to live with a clear awareness of the social, communal, and even planetary ramifications of our actions. On this basis, we should then make an earnest effort to live in a way that will bring the greatest benefit to the whole. In Buddhism it is customary to speak about "all sentient beings," but too often this becomes a cop out from dealing with the beings who are most like ourselves, namely, other human beings. In our effort to benefit all sentient beings, our first task should be to relate to other people in a way that is wholesome, harmonious, and helpful. A useful guide for doing so is the "six principles of harmony and respect" that the Buddha taught to the Sangha (see MN 48, MN 104): (1) When acting, act with loving-kindness. (2) When speaking to others, speak with loving-kindness; even if one has to rebuke others, do so with the intention to uplift them and establish them in wholesome ways. (3) Think of others with loving-kindness, sincerely wishing for their welfare and happiness. (4) Share one's wealth and possessions with others through the practice of generosity; use part of one's income to support the Dhamma and to aid those less fortunate than oneself. (5) Observe wholesome precepts, especially the Five Precepts. And (6) hold right view, especially the view of the Four Noble Truths and the view that our volitional actions eventually produce their due results. If you take these six principles as guidelines for relating to others, you will act and live in a way that will promote the good and happiness of your family, your community, and the world. At the same time you will be sowing the seeds for your own well-being and happiness in this life and in lives to come. ☸

SPRING 2008 NEWS BRIEFS:

- **2008 Summer Dharma Retreat sponsored by the Yin-Shun Foundation:**
4-Day English Program: Fri.-Mon., July 4th - 7th • 7-Day Chinese Program: Fri.-Thurs., July 4th - 10th
More information will be published in the near future.
- **Spring Session of Majjhima Nikaya Study with Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi:**
Selected Tuesdays from 7:00 to 8:15 p.m.; See Announcements on the website for further details.
- **Saturday Morning Dhammapada Study with Ven. Bill:**
Saturdays from 9:50 to 10:40 a.m.; Lecture is given in both English and Chinese.

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