

The Human Condition

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Human life, when you think about it, can be pretty miserable. Think of how few people actually get what they want out of life, and yet how much they're driven by their desires. Sometimes their inability to get what they want can be blamed on laziness, but often it's because of factors totally beyond their control. A wave comes up out of the ocean, washing thousands of people away, and all their plans, their hopes, their desires get washed away as well. What we're left with is thousands of corpses, wrecked buildings—and that's just one day's events. The days add up to years, and the years to centuries: centuries of frustrated desires. So what we need is a way of dealing with frustrated desire, and that's one of the gifts the Buddha offers us.

He talks about the emotions that come from desire. There's grief, there's joy, and there's equanimity. He divides each of these into two types: householder grief and renunciate grief; householder joy and renunciate joy; householder equanimity and renunciate equanimity. He uses these different emotions as a way of mapping out the path.

Most of us live in householder grief, householder joy, and householder equanimity. Householder grief is the type that comes when you don't get the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations you want. You don't get the ideas you want. Householder joy is when you finally do get what you want in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. Householder equanimity is when you stay equanimous in the midst of these things, whether they're good or bad.

Most of us muck around in these three types of emotions. We suffer grief and so we look for joy in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. When we don't get what we want, that brings more grief, but we turn around to look for joy in the same places.

What the Buddha wants us to do is to turn our attention to what he calls renunciate grief, renunciate joy, renunciate equanimity. Renunciate grief is when you reflect on how you haven't attained what you want in terms of freeing the mind from suffering. You haven't reached the goal of the path. Renunciate joy is the joy that comes when you *have* reached the goal. And then renunciate equanimity is the peace and equanimity that come when you know the path is completed.

One of the Buddha's most interesting tactics is that when we suffer from householder grief, the way to get ourselves above and beyond that is to try to transform it, not into householder joy, but into renunciate grief. Householder grief and joy, he says, don't provide us with much hope, whereas renunciate grief at least gives us some hope. It points to the way out.

One way to foster renunciate grief is to reflect on the limitations of human life. That chant we had just now, "I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that I love," followed by the reflection on kamma: In the full text of the sutta, the Buddha doesn't stop there, with just the fact that *you* are subject to these things. He says to reflect on the fact that all people, all beings—man, woman, child, ordained or not, whatever level of being you're on—are subject to these things.

This is one of the ways the Buddha repeatedly has us approach all our grief and dissatisfaction. He says, "Open your eyes. Are you the only person suffering these things?" This is his solution for the question, "Why me?" The answer, of course, is that it's not just you. It happens to everybody with no exceptions. It's amazing what opening your eyes like this will do for you. And it's ironic, how realizing the huge amount of suffering in every life can make *your* suffering seem less. But it works. It changes your whole perspective. You start seeing the futility of looking for your happiness in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas.

In other words, the Buddha basically wants you to transform your grief into *samvega*, an overwhelming sense of dismay, not at your own personal problems, but at the nature of human existence as a whole. And the reason for this is that *samvega* motivates you to look for a way out. Of course, *samvega* on its own is not a very comfortable emotion to have. But it provides the impetus to *pasada*, the sense of confidence that there must be a way out.

The way to work with renunciate grief is not to go looking for sights, sounds, and so forth. You work with it by focusing your efforts on following the path. This is why this kind of grief is a useful grief. It keeps you on the path of practice. Often you hear people saying, "Don't try to push too hard in the practice; don't have any sense of goal, because you'll get frustrated over the fact that you haven't reached your goal." But that closes all the doors. What you want is the attitude that "I'm not where I want to be, but there is a way to get where I want to be." That gives you the right sense of direction. You're not going back to householder joy, with all its uncertainties. You're aiming at renunciate joy.

So whenever you find yourself asking, "Why me?" the answer is always, "Well, why not you? It happens to everybody." And what are you going to do about it? You can't just stew around in your own personal problems. You can deal with them, but the only way to do that is to open up to the larger

perspective that enables you to get something out of the grief, to get something out of the disappointment.

This is why Ajaan Lee focuses so much on what are called the eight worldly dhammas: gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain. He says all eight of them have their uses. We don't like the negative ones, but they have their uses for developing a sense of direction. When loss hits you, if you can realize, "Oh, this is what happens to human beings everywhere," then you can take it as a lesson so that you don't get carried away by gain when gain comes back. The same with loss of status: This is what happens to people when they lose status. After all, whose was it? Status is something the world gives you. You may feel that you've earned it, but if the world gives it, the world can take it away.

Instead of taking these things personally, you use the gains, you use the status, for whatever purposes you find skillful. When you lose these things, you can learn lessons. You can turn loss to a useful purpose as well. At the very least, you learn who your true friends are, both inside and out. If you got complacent when you were wealthy and powerful, you can now see if complacency is really your friend. This way you can reflect on the nature of the human condition and not get carried away by the good things when they come back again.

This is how the Buddha has you deal with disappointment. Don't try to assuage it by looking for more pleasure in worldly things, for that, he says, is why most people get entangled in sensuality. They don't see any other escape from pain, disappointment, and grief, aside from scrambling after sensual pleasures, worldly things. He tells you to set your sights in a different direction. Renunciate grief, even though it's still a kind of grief, is better than getting lost in householder grief and joy, because renunciate grief can lead to renunciate joy, the kind of joy that's not affected by any change at all.

That's why we're working on the sense of ease and wellbeing that comes from having the mind in concentration. That's part of the path toward renunciate joy. We don't have to wait until the very end of the path to gain some of this joy, you know. It comes with the sense of wellbeing you gain when you center the mind. That, in and of itself, reminds you that there are alternatives to running after sensual pleasures. There's the pleasure of a well-centered mind, a mind that's not affected by things, that has its own internal sense of wellbeing. It doesn't need to depend on anything else outside.

So when you find yourself wallowing in grief, remember the Buddha's instructions on where to take that grief, what to do with it, how to find a way out, so that you don't stay stuck in that vicious cycle of going from grief to joy, to grief, to joy, to grief, to grief, to grief based on the ups and downs of things you experience through the senses. Take that grief and point it in another direction.

My English teacher, during my senior year in high school, once made a remark that the sign of a great person is that he or she can reflect on his or her own personal problems but then, from that standpoint, can generalize, universalize them to the human condition as a whole. She was talking about great poets, but it's also the nature of any wise mind not to wallow in its own personal issues, but to generalize from them, to see how this is the way it is for human beings everywhere.

This was what the Buddha did on the night of his Awakening. He remembered his past lives over many eons—if you think you're carrying around a lot of narratives, imagine what he saw—but then he broadened his gaze to encompass the cosmos as a whole. He wasn't the only one suffering rebirth after rebirth. Everybody has been doing this. But only after seeing this as a universal story was he able to see the underlying pattern: People are reborn in line with the quality of their intentional actions based on right or wrong views. That universal insight was what enabled him to turn and look at the present moment, and to look at the right place in the present moment: his own views, his own intentions. Only after looking at the universal picture was he able to depersonalize the issue of suffering and its causes. When he had depersonalized it, he could look at it simply as a process. When he viewed it as a process, he was able to find the way out.

You're not the first person to suffer and you're not going to be the last. If you don't set your sights in the direction of renunciate grief and joy and equanimity, you'll never find a way out. But if you learn to broaden your gaze to encompass the whole human condition, that's the beginning of the road to freedom.

So broaden your gaze. Don't just look inside. Look around yourself as well, for there are lessons to be learned there, too.