

The Samsaric Mud Fight

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The question came up yesterday about the difference between Mahayana and Theravada. And one of the important differences is how they view samsara. For the Mahayana, samsara is a place. And because it's a place, if someone does a lot of good, develops a lot of good qualities, and then leaves that place, they're leaving everybody else in a lurch—which is why they say that the truly generous and compassionate person wants to hang around, doesn't want to leave samsara. In fact, they define samsara as being identical with nirvana if, they say, you look at it the right way. That way the bodhisattva gets to be in samsara and nirvana at the same time.

But the early teachings don't treat samsara as a place. They treat it as a process. Samsara literally means "the wandering on." It's an activity. A process. And you don't just wander. You create the worlds in which you're going to wander into. They involve feeding, and that's addictive.

So samsara is basically a bad habit, where you have an idea: You'd like to have this kind of pleasure, but it's going to cost a certain amount of suffering both for yourself and for other people. This is why stopping the process, stopping the addictive habit, is actually good for yourself and for the others. And this is why samsara and nirvana can't be the same thing, because you can't stop the addiction—that's nirvana—while still indulging in it.

Stopping your own addiction is good for others for two reasons. On the one hand, you're giving a good example. On the other hand, you're taking one more person out of this addictive process, one more person out of the feeding chain. So the idea that you would want to wait until everybody else got over the addiction before you're willing to give up your addiction doesn't make any sense.

We could look at samsara like a big mud fight. I splash mud on you. You splash mud on me. And then I splash mud on you back because you splashed mud on me. It goes back and forth like this and it never ends. So the idea of trying to straighten everybody out—or trying to settle the score—again makes no sense.

There's that famous story of Somdet Toh. A junior monk came to see him once, complaining that another monk had hit him over the head for no reason at all. He hadn't done anything at all to the other monk. The other monk was just a really bad guy who came up and hit him. And Somdet Toh said, "Well, you hit him first." The junior monk replied, "No, no, he came up and hit me first. I didn't do anything to him at all." Somdet Toh kept insisting, "No, you hit him first." And so the young monk went to complain to Somdet Toh's superior, who must've been the supreme patriarch. He went to Somdet Toh to question him about this: "Why did you keep insisting that the other, this monk, the innocent monk, had hit the other

monk first?” And Somdet Toh said “Well, it’s karma. If this monk had never hit that other monk, he wouldn’t have been hit back.”

The idea of settling scores makes sense if you have a clear beginning point and a clear endpoint. But when the beginning point, as the Buddha said, cannot be found, how are you going to figure out what the score is? Where would you begin the tally?

This is a useful point to think about when things come up in your meditation. You start thinking about events in your past: people who abused you, people who did horrible things to you, or people who are still doing horrible things to you. You have to ask yourself, “Well maybe I’ve done something to that person.” That doesn’t exonerate the other person. It simply means that the two of you have been entangled in this mud fight, back and forth, and you don’t know when it began. So the best thing is to say, “Okay, I’m just going to not continue the back and forth.” Wish the other person well. If reconciliation is possible, try for reconciliation. If it’s not, you go for forgiveness, because you realize that not every score is going to get settled. And again, in a mud fight, the question of who splashed more mud on the other person after a while becomes really irrelevant. It’s not the kind of score you want to keep, a score you want to settle. It’s a fight you want to get out of.

There’s that passage we talked about today where the head of the Asuras had said, “If other people see you being restrained while they abuse you, they’ll think you’re weak, and that might make them abuse you even more.” And Sakka says, “No. You can’t look after the other person’s behavior. You have to look after your own.” If you stop, that’s the only way this back and forth is going to stop. See that their words and actions don’t really touch you—at least they don’t touch your goodness. Then it’s as if somebody throws something at you and it falls at your feet. Well, just leave it there. Don’t pick it up and throw it back.

One of the ways we meditate is to learn how see these things as not hitting us. They just go right past, right past. The words go past. Even if the other person hits your body, the body’s not you. That’s one of the uses of the not-self strategy. It’s just a body. You have an awareness that’s separate from that, that’s not besmirched by that. The only thing that can besmirch your awareness is what you do.

So when things like this come up in your meditation, you realize, “Okay, this has been a back-and-forth that it’s best to get out of.” It’s a process. Remember, we’re not here in a place where we’re trying to establish a just or paradisiacal society, or even a fair society. We’re entangled in a bad process, and the wisest, most compassionate thing is to get out and to show other people that they can get out, too. You have to realize you’re not the only person who’s been involved in this kind of behavior. Everybody has been involved in a back and forth to some extent—if not precisely the way you’ve been involved, they’ve got their own involvements.

It’s up to you to decide. You have the freedom to decide. If you want to fight for other people to help get them out of this kind of situation, make that your gift to humanity - that’s

your choice. It can be a form of generosity. But you have to realize that people have their choices, too. And they can choose to follow along with your idea of what's good or they can choose not to.

The Buddha never said that we're here to clean up the mud fight. We're here to get out of the mud fight. And your idea of how things should be: That's what a lot of the mud fights are all about—how to redress old wrongs. When you've had enough of the mud, there comes a point when you have to realize that the Buddha was right. The best course of action is to get out—for the two reasons I mentioned. One is that you're no longer oppressing the other person, so you're no longer creating bad karma for yourself. And two, you can set a good example for other people.

Now, they have the right to choose to be inspired by your example or not. You can't control that. But what you *can* control is the kind of example you set. So you have the choice. Are you going to be the sort of person whose life is totally ruined by something that someone else did, or is continuing to do? Or are you going to learn how to step outside, step to the side, and say, "Okay, those things happened. Who knows when it started, but I don't have to be directly involved anymore. I don't have to keep identifying with the fight, identifying with my role in the fight, identifying with my avatar that I've designed here." And then you drop the whole thing.

Now some mud may continue to come back at you for a while, sloshing around from your old karma, but there comes a point where it ends. In the mean time, you've created one more stellar example. It's like black holes, which are surrounded by dazzling light. In creating a good example, you create a lot of light for the world. And that's actually a gift: Getting out of the process is a gift. We're involved in this addictive process. And the best way you can put an end to it is to end your addiction. Then, if you have the time and the energy and the talent, you help give information to other people on how they can do the same. That's how compassion really works, both for yourself and for the world around you.