

Everybody Suffers

March 27, 2005

One of my English teachers in high school once said that a sign of a great mind, a great person, is the ability to look past the particulars of your own experience, and see the general principles that apply to everybody. Say you're disappointed in love: You see it in general terms. You're not the only person to whom it has happened. And what makes us human, in the larger sense, is our ability to see past the particulars to detect the universal drives underneath them.

But what does that mean, the fact that there is this drive to want to be connected with someone else, yet constantly frustrated by impermanence? What's to be done about this? You can think about it in your own particular terms. You might say, well, just find somebody else. Or you can start thinking about the larger patterns of human life. The same applies to any kind of separation, any kind of loss.

This is one of the things that made the Buddha great. Instead of dealing in large abstractions, he looked at the particulars of his life, and was able to see through them to the general principle that is common to all experience: Where's there's birth there is aging, illness, death, and separation. These things all go together, and there's no way around it if you keep on living an ordinary life. He questioned: What can be done about this? He saw that the seeds of the problem didn't lie outside, they lay inside.

If the nature of reality is one way, but what you want out of it is something else entirely, maybe you've got to reassess your wants. What can you do about them? Some people say: "Well, the choice is simply between following your desires, or totally denying your desires for true happiness." But the Buddha was able to find a third way out, which was, on the one hand, looking at the nature of reality, the fact that it's governed by cause and effect, and, on the other hand, asking how far can you push those laws of cause and effect? Can you work with them in such a way that they open up to a true happiness? That was the happiness he pursued, and that's how he pursued it. That's how he came up with the answers that he found for the larger issues, seeing his life in the perspective of those larger issues and then finding a realistic solution.

What's interesting about his life story is that he didn't look solely at his own problems in life, he looked at life in general. Looking at aging people, ill people, dead people, he realized that he himself was subject to the same fate. He was going to get old, he was going to grow ill, and he was going to die. If he had disdain for

people like that, it wasn't appropriate. And if he was pursuing a happiness that was headed in the direction of what would age, grow ill, and die, that, too, wasn't appropriate.

The feeling that overcomes you when you think about these things is samvega. It's different from grief. Grief is personal. Samvega is impersonal, it's universal. And it's interesting in his later teachings, when the Buddha talks about overcoming grief, the way out of grief is through samvega. You look at the happiness that you gain out of the objects of the senses—and that includes people and relationships—and you see the grief that comes when the happiness you had from these things changes. So instead of trying to turn from that grief by looking for pleasure in the senses, which is what most people do—they think that's the only alternative—you let yourself think about the universality of all this. That's what allows you to turn yourself, turn your thoughts, in another direction: What is it in the mind that keeps giving rise to this spark that desires birth? The Buddha said that that's the cause of suffering: this drive for becoming.

I was talking this evening to someone about the Buddha's take on happiness: Normal happiness is based on feeding. And this person was saying that the solution would be to have lots of different food sources, so that if one food source is denied, you have lots of others to fall back on. But that's really blind. There comes a point where all of those other food sources run out. What do you do then?

This is why the Buddha's solution is to look for happiness that doesn't depend on food sources. Of course, by "food" we're talking about more than just physical food. We're also talking about emotional food, the food of sensory contact, the food of our thoughts, the food of consciousness. All these things can dry up, they can all be threatened. So you have to look for a happiness that lies outside of their range. And it was the Buddha's discovery that there is such a happiness, and it can be attained through human effort.

That's what takes you beyond samvega, and on to a quality called pasada, which means confidence, a sense of inspiration in the path. And this traversal from individual grief, through samvega, to confidence, is a necessary part of the path as well. It's the emotional side of the path. It's what gives impetus to the practice. Without it, the practice simply becomes a means of stress control, stress management, stress reduction. You dabble in it enough to calm yourself down and relax a little bit, and then go back to your old ways. Which is not a solution. It's just a Band-Aid. Many times the Theravada path sounds very intellectual. But there is this emotional component as well. When you face disappointment, when you face separation, when you face grief, this is the way out: learning how to

reflect on the general principles, the universality of grief, of separation. That's what gives you the impetus to pursue the path with the ardency it requires.