A Good Path to Be On

January 14, 2025

There’s a reflection that we chant often on how we’re subject to aging, illness, and death. We’re going to be separated from all that we love. And if the reflection stopped there, it would be very depressing. It gives rise to a strong sense of sungwaega, a word that means dismay. Even terror. You could think about all the places you could be reborn, no matter where you go. They’re all subject to aging, illness, and death. But as I said, the reflection doesn’t stop there. The fifth one, we have our actions. We have our actions as our arbitrator. That’s the hopeful side. So many people view the teaching on karma as punishment. You’ve done something bad, and it’s going to be punishment coming down the line. But when the Buddha discussed karma, he talked about two things. They’re actually much more positive. One is generosity. When you give something, it really is meaningful. Because karma is what? It’s your intention. And your intentions have power. Think about that. You’re not just a victim of forces beyond your control. You have a very important element of control in your life. The intentions that you act on. So the fact that you give something to someone else means that it wasn’t forced on you. It’s not because of the stars, or the laws of physics. You overcame your own greed, your own stinginess, your own narrow-mindedness. You gave a gift. It’s refreshing. It opens up the mind. It’s like opening windows in a narrow, stagnant house. Let some fresh air in. So the way the Buddha taught karma, that we have choices in the present moment. There are influences coming in from our past actions, but that’s not all. There are also our present intentions. In fact, without our present intentions, we wouldn’t even be aware of things coming in from the past. And it’s our present intentions that can shape them for good or for evil. And it is possible for us to learn how to do it well. The other thing the Buddha likes to talk about in connection with karma is gratitude. Again, when someone has helped you, it’s not because of the stars. It’s not because of the laws of physics. It’s because they saw that you were worth helping, and they went out of their way. You can start with your parents, your teachers, anyone who’s shown a special kindness to you. And it’s meaningful because of that. The power of karma, the power of your intentions, gives meaning to acts of generosity, gives meaning to feelings of gratitude. These are things that make the human realm livable. And the way the Buddha explored teaching on karma goes beyond that. He says you can develop the skills–virtue, concentration, discernment–that can lead to total freedom. So think about that. Whenever you’re getting discouraged, remind yourself that there is this opening. There’s a possibility for you to become more and more skillful. And it doesn’t have to depend on anybody else. You don’t have to go around pleasing other people. You can be nice to them. You can be kind to them. But you don’t have to please them in the sense of doing what they want you to do. There are people who say that when you say something that people don’t like, you’re harming them. The Buddha was not one of those people, though. One time he was asked if he would say anything displeasing to other people. It was supposed to be a trick question. If he said yes, he would say displeasing. And they’d say, “Well, what’s the difference between you and ordinary people down in the market?” If he said no, well, he was on record for saying that Devadatta was going to go to hell, which was certainly displeasing to Devadatta. But the Buddha pointed out there’s no categorical answer to that question. There’s an analytical answer, which is that if something was true, he would say it. If it was not true, he would not say it. But even if it was true, it also had to be beneficial. And even if it was true and beneficial, you had to know the right time and right place to say things that are pleasing and say things that are displeasing. The analogy he gave was a small child getting a sharp object in its mouth. You do what you can to get the object out of his mouth. Before he swallows it, even if it means drawing blood, because if he swallows it, it’s going to be a lot worse. So in the same way, there are times you have to say displeasing things. You don’t say harmful things, but you can try to go around pleasing people all the time. This path is not one of trying to please either people or some higher power. It’s a path where it’s basically between you and you. What do you want out of life? All the different desires you might have. You ask which ones are in line with the path of total freedom and which ones are not in line. You’ve got to sort through those. But it’s something you can do. We heard about the Buddha and sometimes it seems like his efforts on the path, or at least refining the path, were superhuman. But at the very least, we can take comfort in the fact that he did find the path. We don’t have to find it for ourselves. He sketches out the outline and we fill in the details. I mentioned this morning the element of creativity in the path. You learn to be creative in how you observe the precepts. In other words, coming up with good reasons to keep with them. Because sometimes the reasons you give yesterday for holding the precepts may not be that persuasive to the mind today. You have to keep thinking of fresh reasons for sticking with the precepts. Working with concentration, there’s a lot of room to play. One of the strangest developments in the tradition of Buddhist meditation was the idea that when you had to focus on your nose, you couldn’t focus anywhere else. I’ve been read a piece by one time by a monk who was saying that if you try to meditate anywhere else, tell people that they can meditate in any place else besides the tip of the nose, you’re going to destroy the religion. There’s no place where the Buddha said you meditate on the tip of your nose. You bring mindfulness to the fore, he says. Which doesn’t mean any particular part of the body. He says you make mindfulness strong. Put it in charge. The other strange thing is the idea that you can’t control the breath. You can’t play with the breath. You just have to breathe whatever way the body is going to breathe. The body doesn’t breathe on its own. The in and out breath is what’s called bodily fabrication. Fabrication contains an element of intention. So the way you breathe already has a subconscious element of intention. The best way to realize that is to try to breathe in different ways. Consciously change the way you breathe. See what way of breathing is comfortable, interesting, soothing when you need to be soothed, energizing when you need to be energized. This involves thinking about how you conceive the breath. Which images do you hold in mind about how the breath works? How does it flow into the body? What is the breath? The breath, the in and out breath, is not classified as part of the tactile sensation in the Buddhist teachings. It’s classified as part of the wind element in the body. It’s something that’s in the body already. It’s energy. And energy can be anywhere in the body. It can flow anywhere in the body. So take advantage of that fact. Be creative in your concentration. Be creative in your discernment. You don’t have to ask questions of the mind about why it’s attached to this. When there’s pain, physical pain, is there some way you can be with the pain and not suffer from it? When there’s a pleasure of the concentration, how can you learn to be with it and not get overwhelmed by it? In other words, you don’t just wallow. You try to be alert and mindful. So you can watch the mind. See how the mind moves around. See how it clings to things and ask it why. What’s the allure? And to get to the allure, you have to ask some pretty strange questions because the reasons we go for certain things are not always above board. They’re always in motives. And they’re not going to come out until you ask strange questions. So you have to be ingenious. The way you observe the precepts, the way you practice concentration, the way you engage in discernment, which means that we’re not being put into a straitjacket. We’re not just being told, “Well, just obey.” And there’ll be a reward down the line. We get to engage with all of our mind and all of our heart in terms of generosity and gratitude, virtue, concentration, discernment. All this comes out of the motivation that we want to find happiness in a way that’s harmless, so that our attitude of goodwill for ourselves can be universalized, can spread to all beings. May all beings try to find happiness in a harmless way. And the Buddha shows that it’s possible. There are a lot of things in the path to give you encouragement. Realize that since you’re on a good path, it may not go as quickly as you’d like, but hey, how long have you been mucking around in samsara? And nobody asks, “How many more lifetimes am I going to keep on doing this?” It’s funny when they talk about how the path may take a couple lifetimes. You say, “Oh, that’s awfully long.” But then you think about how many lifetimes you’ve been wandering around lost. It’s much, much, much longer. So you’re on a good path. And it has an end. Samsara doesn’t have any end point aside from nibbana. If you don’t go to nibbana, then you keep wandering around, bumbling around. So when you’re on the path, you develop a skill that engages all of your heart and all of your mind. So each step on the path is a skill. It’s a good step to take. It’s a good path to be on.

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