The World Is Swept Away

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You could be out playing with fireworks tonight. You could be going out for a dinner, out for a party, but instead you’ve decided to come here. Practice meditation, get the mind centered in a sense of the body, just sitting here, breathing in, breathing out, breathing in a way that feels good. As you breathe in, notice, where do you feel the energy moving in the body? That’s the breath we’re talking about. And ask yourself if it feels good. If you’re not sure, you can experiment with different kinds of breathing. Longer, shorter, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. See what feels good for right now. Energizing if you’re feeling tired. Soothing if you’re feeling frazzled. Relaxing if you’re feeling tense. This is called focusing on the pleasure of form, the body, as you feel it from within. When we talk about meditation, we usually don’t refer to the fact that this is a kind of renunciation. People don’t like the word renunciation. It sounds like you’re being deprived of something. But actually you’re looking for your pleasure. Someplace outside of sensuality. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. You can think for hours about dinners you could make, or dinners that you have had. Any of the sensual pleasures. It’s basically a waste of time. If you’re looking for your pleasure there, it’s not a safe place to be looking. It’s better to look here, inside your body. This is a territory that’s yours. So try to make the most of it. Renunciation is one of the perfections. It’s a list of the qualities that the Buddha developed along the way to gaining awakening. It’s a good list to think about. Years back, I was visiting my father. By that time he had moved to Williamsburg in Virginia. And years earlier we had lived in Charlottesville, a couple hours up the road. And when we lived in Charlottesville, we’d actually built a house from the very beginning. Getting an architect, deciding on the plans. My father built a large part of the house himself. We painted it. So it wasn’t just telling someone else to build it, we actually participated. It had been many years since we’d seen the house. So Dad decided, “One day let’s go up and check it out.” So we did. When we got there, it turns out the people living in it now were not taking good care of it. It was looking pretty run down. On the way back, my dad started reflecting. He said, “You know, I have nothing to show for my life.” He went down the list of failures in his career. He had a fairly successful career as a government worker. But before that he’d been a farmer. And basically the bottom had fallen out of the potato market. The farm had gone bankrupt. He got a job, moved up the ladder, got onto the Water Resources Council where they were doing some work to think intelligently about how we’re going to use our water resources in the country. And the politicians came in and just threw it all away. All the work they had done. He was reflecting on this. It made me reflect on two things. One was, how could he say he hadn’t accomplished anything? I thought I was a pretty good son. And he had two other good sons. That was an accomplishment. But it also made me reflect, if you look for your success in life in things outside, you’re looking in the wrong place. Because it’s so easy for people to come along and just destroy things that you’ve done. I mean, it wouldn’t take too much to destroy this building we’re in right now. Or it would take what, a fire coming in? Or vandals coming and breaking into class? Earthquakes? And just the general fact that things run down. And you can think of all kinds of other things that you might accomplish in life where it’s really subject to outside forces. Which is why it’s good to think of what else can you do to look for a sense of accomplishment in life, a sense of purpose in life. This is where the list of the perfections come in. Qualities of the mind. The list is kind of random. But you can organize it under what the Buddha calls the four determinations. There’s the determination on discernment, which includes the perfection of discernment, and the perfection of goodwill. As the Buddha said, if you have ill will for anybody, that’s wrong view. If you think anything good would be accomplished by seeing somebody else suffer, you’ve got the wrong attitude. Then there’s the determination on truth, which includes the perfection of truth, the perfection of virtue, the perfection of persistence. There’s the determination on relinquishment, which includes renunciation and generosity. And there’s the determination on calm, which includes endurance and equanimity. You can look at these as qualities that you might want to develop in life. And when you develop them, they’re really yours. Once they become part of your mind, a part of your heart, then they go with you wherever you go. And no one can take them away from you. There’s an instance in the life of a Jon Mun. Someone came to see him one time. He said, “Can you separate a person’s virtue from the person’s heart and mind?” In other words, is it something external? And Jon Mun said, “No. If you could separate it, then people would probably steal your virtues. But they can’t be separated.” So working on developing the perfections gives you a purpose. Because these are qualities of the mind that lead to awakening. I remind you that if you’re looking for your happiness in the world, you’re looking in the wrong place. We use this world as our theater for developing the perfections. But the perfections are the real essence of what we’re doing, the real purpose of what we’re doing. Ironies of life is the good things you leave behind in the world go with you. It’s the things that you try to hold on to in terms of wealth, status, praise, sensual pleasures. The more you try to hold on to them, the more they get ripped from your grasp. But if you leave behind some generosity, it goes with you. And the generosity you’ve left behind helps other people. So as you pursue the perfections, you’re not the only person who benefits. But you know for sure that your benefits are yours. And they do lead to something that goes beyond the world. Because as we chanted just now, the world is swept away. It does not endure. It comes as part of a passage in the Canon. There was a young monk named Ratabala. Originally he wanted to ordain. His parents were opposed. He had to listen to a Dhamma talk by the Buddha. And these were the themes that he remembered from that Dhamma talk. The world is swept away. It does not endure. The world offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. And the world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. He wanted to ordain. And the Buddha asked him, “Do you have your parents’ permission?” “Well, no.” I remember the first time I heard this story, at Manasukhanam. The abbot was giving the sermon. And he was marveling at how different things were. In Thailand, parents plead with their children to ordain, at least for a little while. But here was a case where the parents were opposed. Something very hard to find in Thailand. But I sympathized. Not so much that my parents stood in the way, but they were not all that happy when they gave permission. So Ratabala goes home, wants to ordain. The parents say, “No. We’d rather see you die than ordain. It’s that bad.” So he says, “Okay, I’ll just lie down and die.” He went on a hunger strike. And finally his friends pleaded with his parents, “At least he’s going to be alive if he ordains. If you let him die like this, it’s nothing at all.” So the parents relented. And he got ordained and then left, went off to another province of India. A couple of years later, he came back. He comes to the house and his father doesn’t recognize him. He shouts some insults at him, “You stupid, shaven-headed people. You took my son.” And so he walks around to the back of the house. And a slave woman is about to pour out some old, spoiled porridge. And he says, “As long as you’re going to throw that away, why don’t you just throw it away in my bowl?” So she puts it in his bowl. And as he opens the bowl, she recognizes his hands. So he comes into the house and tells Vandabala’s mother, “Your son is here.” And the mother is so happy, “If it’s true, then you’re free.” So the father goes, tracks down where Vandabala’s gone, finds him eating by the side of the road, invites him back to the house, and the son says, “I came to the house already and all I got was insults.” So the father says, “Well, please, tomorrow come for the meal.” And they try to lure him back to the way life, to have his former wives dress up in the clothes that he liked to see them in. They have a pile of gold, a pile of silver. They reveal all of this to him. He’s not interested. He’s already fully awakened. And so he leaves the house, goes to the pleasure ground of a king. Back in those days they would have what we would call deer parks, where things were kept a little bit wild, so the king could have some pleasure out in the wild. Word gets to the king that Vandabala’s there, that he knew Vandabala when he was still a young man. So he goes to see him and asks him, “Why did you ordain?” As far as he could see, people would ordain because either they’d lost their relatives, lost their health, lost their wealth. None of this was true in Vandabala’s case. So Vandabala repeats those dharma summaries. He starts with, “The world is swept away.” The king says, “Well, what does that mean?” And Vandabala asks him, “When you were young, were you strong?” The king says, “Yes, I thought I had superhuman strength. I saw no one who was nearly as strong as I was.” “How about now? Now the king was 80 years old, and as you said, sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place and it goes someplace else.” Vandabala says, “That’s what it means. We live in a world where aging is everywhere.” One of the monks here at the monastery confessed one time that he’d like to go down to the airport to pick up people who were coming or going. And he found he had a tendency to look for all the beautiful people. And one day he decided, “Well, this is not right for a monk to be doing.” So he said, “Well, let’s look for the signs of aging.” All of a sudden he saw them everywhere. He hadn’t noticed them before, but they’re all there. So there’s aging, taking away our strength, taking away our powers. Then the next summary. There’s no one in charge. The king, of course, being king, said, “What do you mean by that?” Vandabala says, “Do you have a recurring illness?” “Well, yes, a recurring wind illness, which meant shooting pains through the body.” He says, “Sometimes I’m lying in bed in pain, and the courtiers are standing around thinking, ‘Maybe this time he’s going to go. Maybe this time he’s going to go.’” Think about that. People actually want you to go. Vandabala says, “Can you command them that they take out some of that pain and share it, so you don’t have to feel so much?” And the king says, “No. I have to experience it all on my own.” That, Vandabala said, is meant by there’s no one in charge. The fact of illness. Illness can strike anybody, not only those who are in their eighties. I was talking this evening with someone who’s got Alzheimer’s. Dan Parkinson’s, and he’s only in his fifties. And hearing how weak his voice was was kind of scary. But that’s the fact of life. We have aging, the principle of inconstancy. Illness, the principle of stress and pain. And finally, the last one, the third one. The world has nothing of its own. Here’s the king, very wealthy. He’s got stores of gold, stores of silver. “What do you mean?” he says. “The world has nothing of its own.” And Vandabala asks him, “Can you take that with you when you go?” “Well, no.” So it’s not really yours. So we’ve had aging, illness, and now death, which is not self writ large. Sometimes we think of death in the context of rebirth as being the ideal of trying to continue being you wherever you go. But when you die, you just have to leave so many things, so many parts of you behind. Unless you develop some good karma, in other words, develop good qualities in the mind. Then there was the last one. The world is insatiable, a slave to craving. Being a king, the king didn’t want to be told that he was a slave. So he asked, “What does that mean?” And Vandabala says, “You already rule over this large and prosperous country, right? You yourself are wealthy, right? If someone were to come from the East and say there’s a kingdom to the East with lots of wealth and a very weak army, you could defeat it. Would you take it?” The king says, “Of course.” “How about one from the South, the West, the North?” “Of course, of course, of course.” “What’s the other side of the ocean?” “Of course.” That, Vandabala said, is what’s meant by being a slave to craving. Here the king has been made to reflect on facts of aging, illness, and death, inconstancy, stress, not self. And he would still go for things like this. That’s the predicament we’re in. And Vandabala, reflecting on that, said, “I’ve got to get out.” And he realized that being a slave to craving was what kept him in. That’s why he ordained. And he ordained and he developed all the good qualities that are needed to gain awakening. So he had something solid inside. So he was looking for happiness in the right place, not out in the world, but in the qualities of the mind. So this is what the perfections are for. So there is a way to find happiness. It’s not just accepting the facts of aging, illness, and death. We’re not making peace with the fact that the world is swept away. We realize we are in serious trouble. We’ve got to find a way out. And the Buddha points to that way. That’s why people shave off their hair and their beards, put on the robes, and go forth. And those who can’t do that, this is why they develop good qualities in the mind, develop their perfections. To find something solid inside. You’re looking right now at the right place to look. The reason you don’t see it yet is because you have to develop your qualities of discernment, mindfulness, concentration. But these are things that can be developed. So that when the world gets swept away, you don’t get swept away with it. Or things of real value within you don’t get swept away. The body is going to be swept away. As long as the mind has these qualities inside, then it’s secure.

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