A Sense of Duty

July 12, 2025

The Buddhist view of the world can be pretty bleak. There’s a forecast in the Pali Canon that the quality of human life is going to deteriorate over time. People’s lifetimes will get shorter. People treat one another with more violence. It’ll get so bad that it gets to a point where they call it the “sword interval,” where people hunt one another down like game. But then things will turn around. People will realize that they have to learn how to live by more humane values, and the world will begin to develop again, until the time of the next Buddha. But in the meantime, as I said, it’s pretty bleak. On top of that, you’d have the different forester chants making forecasts about the world. And some of them are pretty bleak as well. So what do you do in a bleak world? Most of us swing back and forth between hope and despair. And the Buddha says there is hope, but it’s in our actions. The extent to which our actions can change the world is going to depend on a lot of things that are beyond our control. The real hope is the salinity that we can build inside, qualities we can build in the mind. And some of those qualities are dependent on just how we relate to ourselves, and others are dependent on how we relate to others. The path is where the Buddha said, “If you look out after others, you’re looking out after yourself.” In other words, to look out after other people requires equanimity, it requires kindness, it requires goodwill, and a lot of endurance and patience. Because people are difficult. And each of us is a karma producer, free to make whatever choices we make. You can’t force choices on other people. Even the Buddha realized that he couldn’t force the path on everybody. There’s that passage where a Brahmin comes to see him, and asks him, “Is the whole world going to go to awakening, or a half, or a third?” The Buddha doesn’t answer. Venerable Nanda is upset. He thinks the Brahmin is going to be upset. So he pulls the Brahmin aside and says, “The Buddha is like an expert gatekeeper to a fortress.” He goes around the fortress. He sees that aside from the gate, there’s no place that anyone could come into the fortress’s not even big enough for a cat to slip through. So what does he know? He doesn’t know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress. But he does know that all those who will go in and out of the fortress have to go by the gate. In the same way, the Buddha doesn’t know how many people are going to gain awakening, because each person has the choice to practice or not to practice. But he does know that if they follow the path, as he expressed it, the path of skillful action, thoughts, words and deeds, the four foundations or establishings of mindfulness, and the seven factors for awakening, you follow this path and you get to awakening. So it’s up to us to make the choice. Ask ourselves, “Where are we going to place our hopes?” What we have within our power is our choices. So place your major hopes there. But again, it’s not just empty hopes. You have to do it right. And you have to have the right attitude. Because some of the goodness we develop, as I said, depends on how we interact with others. And if our interaction swings back and forth in line with our hopes and our despair, it’s not going to be dependable. What the Buddha recommends is an attitude that you know you have some duties, and you follow those duties. That’s what he taught from the very beginning. As he said, his duty as a teacher was to give you a clear sense of what should and should not be done. In terms of skillful actions, skillful actions should be developed, unskillful actions should be abandoned. In terms of the Four Noble Truths, suffering should be comprehended. In other words, you should see that suffering is in the clinging to the aggregates. That takes a lot of effort to comprehend that, because we tend to see suffering in other places. But this, the Buddha said, is where the real suffering is. So you want to comprehend that. How do you cling? Why do you cling? The Four Noble Truths, which is the origination of suffering. Where in the mind does this come from? It comes from craving. Three types in particular. Craving for sensuality, for becoming, non-becoming. Sensuality is our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning sensual pleasures. Becoming is when you have a desire for something, and you get a sense of what world that desired object exists in. And how you can enter into that world and take on a role, take on an identity in that world. We do this in our thoughts very often. You think of something you want. Where is it? What would you do in order to get it? That’s becoming. And the Buddha says even though we enjoy that, and most of our thinking is in those terms, it’s making us suffer. Craving for non-becoming. You’ve got a world. You realize it’s not working out. It’s not what you wanted. You feel more and more confined by it. You want to get out. You want to destroy it. You prefer oblivion. That too is suffering. That craving. Because it leads to more becoming, ironically. You take on an identity as the person who wants the non-becoming. That becomes your new becoming. So when you see these things happening in the mind, you should abandon them. The duty with regard to the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is to realize it. That is realizing that when the craving stops, when you abandon all passion for your craving, then the suffering stops. And you realize that by developing the path, the fourth noble truth, which boils down to virtue, concentration, discernment. These are your duties. Now, no one’s imposing them on you, aside from the fact that suffering imposes them. If you really want to get away from the suffering, you want to get beyond it, these are the things you have to do. And it’s important that you have a strong sense that if something is a duty, you do it. And it will see you through. No matter how bleak things are outside, no matter how hopeful things are outside, you stick by your duties and you’re going to be safe. And the happiness you get is going to be reliable. Because you have become a reliable person. There’s that story they tell, the true story, of Shakylin going down to Antarctica on the Endeavor. He had a crew. They had pulled together. Their plan was to land their ship on one side of Antarctica, go across the continent, walk all the way to the South Pole, then over to the other side. And someone else was going to come pick them up. They couldn’t even get to the coast. Their ship was locked in the ice. And they had to abandon it. And things looked pretty bleak. Who was going to help them? There was no help anywhere for thousands of miles away. But their attitude was, things may look bleak, but if we’re going to survive, it’s going to depend on our doing our duties. Whatever is required, they’re going to do it. And it turned out that they didn’t survive, at least it wouldn’t be because they had shirked their duties. And so they stuck by their duties, even when things were looking really, really bleak. But they managed to get out. All of them survived. Now, they didn’t accomplish their original aim. But they did survive. Because they had a strong sense of duty. As we practice the Dhamma, our strong sense of duty will see us through. Now, in terms of the goodness we want to leave behind in the world, we do our best. That’s part of our generosity. It’s part of developing our perfections. But what people will do with the goodness that we’ve left behind, that’s totally beyond our control. The Buddha, toward the end of his life, one of the last things he said to the monks was, if the monks decide that any of the minor rules in the Vinaya should be rescinded, they can go ahead and do that. Now, you hear the Buddha had been spending 45 years setting up the Vinaya. He’d put a lot of thought, put a lot of care into the Vinaya rules. And he said again and again that the long life of the religion would depend on the monks not adding new rules and not taking away any of the rules. That he had established. But he showed at the end of his life that he was not possessive of the Vinaya. That was one of the things he had to leave behind. He had to let go. So he said, okay, if you want to change any of the minor rules, go ahead. Now, in some ways that was a challenge to them. It offered them the opportunity to show that even though they were allowed to change the rules, they were going to be loyal to the Buddha’s vision, to his compassion in setting out the rules. And they decided not to change any of the rules. That became a principle that’s been held to ever since. Now, every now and then you get some monks who say, well, we should change the rules. After all, the Buddha himself changed the rules. Which shows that there is that tendency for things to get worn down. You leave good things behind in the world, and there will be people who want to change and destroy them. You have to accept that fact. But you can’t let it make you despondent, because you focus more on what good qualities you’ve developed. Like the people in the expedition. Their main aim was to do something no one had ever done before, which was to walk across the continent of Antarctica. That didn’t happen. What did happen was that they cared for one another, saw one another through. And everybody on the expedition survived. So we live in this world which can be very bleak. But you want your goodness to survive and to thrive. You can’t make your goodness depend on your hopes for how good the world is going to be. You place your hopes in trying to be as skillful as you can in your actions. If you do something, you think it’s going to be harmless, but it causes harm. You don’t do that anymore. You learn to train yourself. There’s where hope lies. Your ability to observe your own actions, your ability to learn to become more and more truthful and honest with yourself as to what your real intentions are when you act, what you’re actually doing when you act, and what the results are. And your duty is to try to learn from that. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. So you want to learn how to be as skillful as possible in committing and in reflecting. So at the very least, your goodness survives and it becomes solid. Because it’s based on something solid, your strong sense of duty. This is what has to be done. If we feel that our emotions are needed, we know how reliable your emotions are. They come and go. Hope comes and then despair, and then despair and then hope. We’re talking today about how some people are fully awakened. They don’t need a lot of emotion to be compassionate. They don’t need a lot of emotion or a lot of anger to get stirred up to do something to help people who are being mistreated. They just see this is what needs to be done. Again, strong sense of duty. That’s a lot more reliable than your emotions. So do your best to develop that sense. Your own goodness becomes more reliable for you and for the people around you.

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