The Big Picture

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The Buddha tells about how there was a time when a vision of the world was like a stream drying up. And in the stream there were fish fighting one another over what little water was left. Because no matter who won the battles, they were all going to die as the water dried up. And everywhere he looked, everything was already laid claim to. If he was going to find happiness in the world, he was going to have to fight people off. This gave rise to a strong sense of what’s called sanghvega. It can be translated as terror and dismay. A strong sense that we’re trapped in a world where the only happiness that can be found in the world has to be fought for. There has to be conflict. But then he said he turned around and looked inside. He saw the real problem was not out there. It was in the heart. He said there was an arrow in his heart. If he could remove the arrow, then that would be the end of the problem. In other words, the reason he was looking for happiness outside was because of that pain in his heart. But if he could remove the pain, then there would be no need to fight. He had to look outside. So he looked inside. And on the night of his awakening, he had some more visions. The first set of visions was of his many previous lifetimes. After he had gotten his mind into concentration, he posed the question in his mind, “Was I born before this?” He saw that he could remember back many, many aeons. He saw that his lives didn’t make any steady progression. They’d go up and they’d go down and then up and down. He said it was like a stick being thrown up in the air. Sometimes it would land on this end, sometimes it would land on that end, sometimes splat in the middle. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason. Then he had a second vision of the night in which he posed the question, “What is it that determines these ups and downs?” He had a vision of all the beings in the universe dying and being reborn in line with their karma. He saw that it was very complex. It’s not the case that you do one bad thing in this lifetime and you go to a bad place, or one good thing and you go to a good place. He saw you can do all kinds of different things, but the important thing was if you did something wrong, and you saw that it was wrong, and you made up your mind to change, and you developed the right view, and you carried that right view all the way through death, then you’d go to a good place. Vice versa. You did good things and then you finally decided there was nothing really good about doing good. You didn’t see any immediate results. You developed wrong view and carried wrong view all the way through death, then you’d go down. But it’s because he looked at the larger picture that he could see the pattern. When he looked only at his own lives, there was no clear pattern at all. So it’s important, as he sought to take that larger view, to look at the big picture. But the big picture taught him, if you want to get out, you have to focus on what you’re doing right now. Because the power of the mind in the present moment that can counteract the results of previous actions is quite strong. The question was, could he use that power to get out? And he found that he could. So think about that as you sit down to meditate. Often we come to the meditation with the narrative of the day. And then we jump right into the present moment. And what we see in the present moment is very much colored by that narrative. What was good about the day, what was not good about the day. What you did well, what you did that was not so good. And if the meditation doesn’t go well, that becomes part of the narrative. The Buddha got around that by taking a step back, taking in the big picture. So he gained a sense of the importance of actions. But he also began to see it in more impersonal terms. But the big picture did give him a continued strong sense of some way that you’ve got to get out. So it’s good every time you sit down to meditate to have a sense of the larger picture. This is one of the reasons why we think about goodwill for all. At the very least, it helps us just get out of our narratives. You start with, “May I be happy?” And then you think, “Well, may all beings be happy.” That expands your mind, expands your vision. And you realize that even though you’re going to be focusing on the present moment, it’s not just for the sake of the present moment. It’s also for the sake of the future. We hear so much about the wisdom of being in the present. But the Buddha didn’t define wisdom or discernment that way. He said, “Wisdom or discernment starts with a question. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” The wisdom lies in taking the long view and realizing that it’s going to depend on your actions. And where do you work on your actions? You work on them right here. You can see this in the Buddhist definition of what he calls the three kinds of fabrication– bodily, verbal, mental. And right now, as you’re sitting here meditating, bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. Pay a lot of attention to that. Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself, what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. You choose a topic to think about, and then you make comments, ask questions. Pay attention to that, too. And there’s mental fabrication, perceptions, the labels you put on things. And then feelings, feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Pay careful attention to that. Because these are the things that you use to take the raw material provided by your past karma and turn it into your experience of the present moment. And it’s all right here. The breath is right here. Your inner conversation is right here. Perceptions and feelings are right here. But the Buddha also talked about these three kinds of fabrication over the long term. In which case, bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication simply are the karma that leads to results later on in this life and on in our future lives. Some people say that the two types of fabrication are not connected. But how can that be so? The way you breathe is what allows you to move your body, to do anything at all with the body. When you’re going to speak out loud, you first have to speak inside. And when you think about things, you have to have perceptions, you have to have feelings. So you’re dealing with the immediate raw material of those actions that are going to have long consequences. We’re here for the present moment, and we’re here for the future. It’s always important to keep that in mind. We can’t just stay totally in the present moment. Because if you can’t remember the lessons you’ve learned from the past, what are you going to do? And if you don’t prepare for the future, you’re leaving yourself unguarded. But we can learn from the past. That’s what mindfulness is for. Mindfulness is not being aware of the present moment. Mindfulness means the faculty of your memory. When you call things to mind, keep them in mind. And particularly when you call to mind, keep in mind what lessons you’ve learned about how to get the mind to settle down. Once it’s settled down, what should you do with it? Focus on the present to develop the skills you’re going to need to deal with the big issues that are sure to come later on in life. Think about the Buddha and his initial impulse to go out into the forest. He was reflected on aging, illness, death. He realized that his whole life had been spent in looking for happiness, in things that would age, grow ill, and die. The question is, well, where does that lead? It leads nowhere. When you’re in the midst of these things, they seem to offer pleasure. But if you take the big picture, you begin to realize, well, where are the pleasures that you had last week? The sensual pleasures? They’re gone. What’s left is the karma, the things you did in order to get them. And if you did unskillful things to get them, it’s a loss. This is why the Buddha says, you want to think about the long term. This is where the wisdom comes in. Think about the long term. And then do what you can to look for happiness that really lasts. Because the Buddha was not a killjoy. As he said, if you’re looking for happiness in this lifetime, you should have initiative. In other words, you don’t just sit around and say that you’re letting go, letting go. There’s work to be done. And when you gain results from that work, you look after it, you take care of it, you don’t squander it. And then you live your life in line with your income. He says, don’t be too frugal. Don’t be miserly. Of course, you don’t want to be a spendthrift, but don’t be miserly. That’s interesting. He says, get some pleasure out of your wealth. Get some pleasure out of your talents. Because if you can’t get pleasure out of them, you become a shriveled up person, and you resent everybody else’s happiness. The question is, what kind of pleasures are harmless and which ones are not? This is where you have to look at yourself honestly. When you indulge in certain pleasures, what happens to your mind state? And what are you doing to other people? You want to be responsible in your search for happiness. Same with humor. We don’t think of the Buddha as a humorous person. But there are a lot of instances in the Canon where it shows that he had a wry sense of humor. There’s the case of the monk who had psychic powers. In fact, a lot of the instances of humor in the Canon have to do with psychic powers. Accepting that they’re real, but also accepting that they’re not what we’re here for. They’re like games. In this case, this monk had stayed in a shrine devoted to a Naga, a fire-breathing Naga. And he was able to tame the fire-breathing serpent. Word of this got out. The lay people said, “Boy, we want to make merit with this guy.” So they went to ask the monks, “What is it, something the monks usually don’t get in their alms round?” Well, they asked the wrong monks. A group called the Group of Six. And the Group of Six said, “We don’t get hard liquor often.” So the next day, all the people in the city prepared a little bit of hard liquor for Saketa, the monk with psychic powers. And so he takes a drink here, a drink there, a drink here, a drink there, and then he passes out at the city gate. The Buddha comes along with some other monks. They see Saketa, so they take him back to the monastery. They lay him down on the ground. He’s lying there with his head toward the Buddha. Well, he doesn’t know where he is. So he tosses and turns, tosses and turns. He’s got his feet pointed at the Buddha, which you don’t do in India. And the Buddha asked the monks, “Didn’t he used to show respect to us before?” “Yes.” “Is he showing respect now?” “No.” “And didn’t he do battle with the fire-breathing serpent?” “Yes.” “Can he do battle with a salamander now?” “Well, no.” There are lots of stories like that in the Canon. So the Buddha was not a killjoy. It’s just that he said, “If you really sincerely want to be happy, you’ve got to think about the long term.” That’s where the wisdom lies. And also think about what your actions have to do with the long term. Realizing that long term happiness is better than short term. And it’s going to depend on your actions. So as you meditate, it’s not just a matter of being in the present moment. We’re in the present moment to just develop some skills that we’re going to need to deal with the big problems in life. When aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, you’ve got to be able to keep your mind focused. Get some control over your thoughts so they don’t run wild. And use the power of the mind to help. Sometimes the power of the mind can actually help cure an illness. And even if it doesn’t cure the illness, you can be ill but not suffer. You can grow old and not suffer. You can die and not suffer. Because you’ve trained the mind. Is this something we can get in our educational system? No. They have other designs on us. But for the sake of your own true happiness, this is what you’ve got to think about. You’ve got to take on the training yourself. Nobody’s going to impose it on you. But the facts of aging, illness and death, they push you. So you’ve got to be wise to prepare.

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