The Best of a Bad Situation

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There’s a story in the canon of a monk named Buddha who’s going to go to a wild part of India. So he goes to pay his respects to the Buddha, take his leave. And the Buddha asks him, “The people there are pretty rough. What are you going to do if they curse you?” And Buddha says, “I’ll tell myself these are very good people, very civilized, and they’re not hitting me.” “What if they hit you?” “I’ll tell myself that they’re very civilized and they’re not stoning me.” “What if they stone you?” “I’ll tell myself they’re very good people and they’re not stabbing me.” “What if they stab you?” “I’ll tell myself they’re very good people, they’re not killing me.” “What if they kill you?” “I’ll tell myself at least my death wasn’t a suicide.” So Buddha leaves after the Buddha says, “Okay, you’ve got the right attitude.” Buddha leaves and goes there and he ends up converting a lot of people to Buddhism. It’s because he didn’t let the difficulties of the place get him down. There are many, many stories in the Buddhist tradition and other stories around the world of people who found themselves in really bad situations. But didn’t just resent the bad situation, they figured out there must be something good here. They made the best of a bad situation and benefited from it. You might say that samsara is a bad situation. You do good, you get rewarded with pleasures, but then the pleasures eat away at your character. You get lazy, you get complacent, and you fall. And then you have to scramble to come back up again. Again and again. In this particular case, the best thing to do with this situation is to get out. That’s what the path is for. The Buddha found himself in a bad situation. From the outside it may not look all that bad. He was a son of a wealthy oligarch. Not oligarch, excuse me. I don’t know exactly what his father’s position was. He was kind of a king. But the king of a republic. He had three palaces, one for each season. All the pleasures you could imagine back in those days. But he realized it was a bad situation. He was going to get complacent, he was going to get carried away with his power. If he didn’t watch out. So he had to get out. In that case, it was recognizing a bad situation. Years back, when I was in Thailand, they had reconstructed an old palace, the one that Rama V lived in. One of the largest teak buildings in the world. It had a long section for all of his wives. And those wives had children with him, had the children there as well. I remember walking through that section of the palace and feeling really oppressed. I had to get out. Just because the situation is comfortable, material-wise, you have to recognize that it’s a bad situation. And do your best. If you can’t get out, then you do your best within that situation. There was the monk who was out in a wilderness area. And he fell sick. What was he going to do? He said, “Here’s an opportunity to test the Buddhist teachings.” “Developing the five strengths, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening.” The Buddha said, “The Dhamma is medicine.” “Well, here’s a chance to test it.” I remember the story of a John Lee, walking into the forest for three days. He was going to spend the rains retreat at this one spot, very isolated. He arrives there and within a few days he has a heart attack. No access to doctors. The diet was precisely the diet you would not want if you had a heart condition. A lot of bamboo shoots. So what did he have to fall back on? Well, he had the Dhamma. He had his practice. He ended up not only surviving, but discovering new ways of focusing on the breath. Using the breath. Connecting to the breath energies throughout the body. And he arrived at a way of teaching breath meditation that he used for the rest of his life. So the Dhamma is here to offer you something with which you can make the best of a bad situation. Even if they throw you in prison, those concentration camps they’re building right now, they say they’re just for immigrants. Well, after they run out of immigrants to put in there, they’ll probably find other people. They have to be prepared. But at the very least you have your breath. You can work with the breath energy inside the body. Nobody else has to know. But even when situations don’t get that dire, you have to realize that you’re so much addicted to your clingings. And your clingings are making you suffer. And as with any addiction, a lot of the problem is a lack of imagination. You can’t imagine relating to your thoughts, your feelings, your perceptions, even your acts of consciousness in any other way aside from clinging to them. But the Buddha is saying there are other ways to expand your imagination. One way of expanding your imagination is just to start with something really simple. Generosity. I used to like to read stories of explorers going to the Arctic and the Antarctic. Because you learn a lot about people when they’re in extreme situations like that. There was a case where a French expedition went down and they ended up having to winter over in Antarctica. There were a lot of explorers who had never learned how to read. And so the captain in charge of the expedition spent the winter teaching them how to read, giving them basically an education. He shared his knowledge. There’s another case of a British ship that was caught up in the ice north of Alaska. That was back in the days when billiards was an upper class sport. They played for billiards. And so they made a billiard table out of ice. And then he taught all the sailors on the ship how to play. So they had billiard contests all through the winter. That’s how he kept spirits up. This is one very basic way of making a bad situation good, is to be generous. The important thing is you don’t simply resent the bad situation and spend your time moping. There’s a passage in Slaughterhouse-Five where the main characters, Americans, have been put in a prison camp in Dresden. And they all withdraw into their own shells and they’re miserable. They hate each other. In fact, one of them develops a grudge against the main character in the book and he ends up, later on in the book, trying to kill him. But this then gets contrasted with the British in their prison camp. They’re putting on plays. They’re thinking of activities for themselves, to keep themselves occupied and entertained. And their spirits are much better. So they go out of their way to help one another. And in helping one another, their spirits rise. So when you find yourself in a bad situation, think about what you can do to make something good out of it. Starting with generosity and going into your meditation. Meditation that’s nurtured by generosity. It’s much better than meditation that’s just “my selfish thing that I’m going to do.” Because the “my selfish thing” attitude is basically “what can I get out of this?” Whereas the generous attitude is “what can I give?” And the meditation is going to go well only when you give. Give of your time, give of your energy, give of your imagination. Because you have to remember the meditation isn’t going to get you out of some sorrow unless you give up a lot. And giving up doesn’t necessarily mean going without. A lot of times it means being generous, sharing. So think about that.

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