

An End to the Stories

July 30, 2017

We start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill to clean out our minds from all the stories of the day: “This person did that, that person did this.” Or the stories of the year or the stories of your lifetime. Think about that statement at the end of the chant just now: “Those who are capable of making an end.” That’s what we’re trying to do: Put an end to suffering. It means putting an end to a lot of stories we keep dragging out. After all, those stories are what keep us going, especially if they involve some wrong that we want to right. That would mean we’d have to come back. And, of course, what usually happens when a wrong gets righted is that some more wrong gets done. Then the other side decides that *they’ve* been unfairly treated, and it goes back and forth like this.

There are many stories in the commentaries about issues going back and forth to the point where you lose track of who started it. So it’s best to think in ways that can put an end. One of the best ends is when you decide you’re going to step out of the back and forth, to pull yourself out of the feeding chain. That’s what you’re doing right now. So, to whatever extent you need to do a little extra adjustment to the narrative—especially, in cases where you were the wronged party last time around—tell yourself that you’ve decided to forgive the other side, so as to find the way out.

So much life in samsara is just a big fight. The Buddha’s image is of fish in a stream that’s drying up. They’re struggling with one another for that last gulp of water and then they’re all going to die regardless. So you ask yourself, “Does it really matter who gets that last gulp of water, who gets the final victory over somebody else? How about getting victory over yourself?” The Buddha said that kind of victory, victory over yourself, is really worthwhile. That’s what the path is all about: the “unexcelled victory” through the noble eightfold path. That’s a battle where you’re not fighting with anybody outside at all. You’re fighting with your own greed, aversion, and delusion—and all your attachments.

The hardest attachments to let go of, they say, is the sense of having been wronged. There’s usually a desire to want to get back or, at the very least, to have the other side acknowledge that they did wrong. But remember, we’re living in a world where people have the right to withhold kindness. They have the right to withhold any goodness if they want to. And the more you try to force things on other people, then you become the bad party, pushing your way on others.

One of the hardest things we find living in this world where we have freedom of choice is that other people have freedom of choice, too. That’s hard to accept sometimes. We want things to be a certain way outside. But people have every right to think whatever they want, to say whatever they want, to do whatever they want. When you realize that, you have to develop equanimity so that you can focus on what the real issues are: the ways in which you keep on

churning up more issues inside. As the Buddha said, the craving that makes for becoming is a big issue. You make something from that becoming and then you become a being with needs to feed. You live in a world where other beings are trying to feed as well. There's going to be conflict. So you have to remember that the becomings in your mind are not just idle pastimes. They can have a big impact on what's going to happen now and on into the future.

There's a novel written by a friend of mine, *Bronze Mirror*, which is about a storytelling contest between two groups of Taoist gods and goddesses. Part of the novel is the story that they're composing in alternative chapters. And the part of the story is, of course, the backstory behind the story, the machinations and the politics between the different groups of gods and goddesses as they compose chapter after chapter. They manage to give the heroine of the story a really rough life. People are getting killed off all over the place. Miseries of all sorts are being parceled out to all the various characters. Then at the very end of the novel, Quan Yin appears and she says, "Okay, now you all are going to have to *live* the story you've created." The final scene of the novel is of all the gods and goddesses falling out of heaven, coming down to be reborn on earth.

That's a good symbol for what the Buddha teaches us: The fantasies we have and the mental worlds we create are going to create actualities, but they're going to have consequences that we may not have expected. So you have to be very, very careful about the "becomings" you create. Some of the ones that you want the most will be the ones that will cause the most trouble. So you have to look especially into that sense that you were treated unjustly. Our ideas of justice can cause a lot of havoc. Again, they're based on stories. Now, every story has a particular beginning, and you can identify who is the guilty party and then what the resolution might be based on that idea. But in the Buddhist view of things, there's no beginning to these stories. They go way, way back.

I remember when I first met Ajaan Fuang, one of the few times he ever talked about the idea of past lives—this was right after my mother had died—he said, "You know, you were a soldier in a previous lifetime. You killed a lot of people, orphaned a lot of kids." That was all he said, but it put a whole new perspective on things, how what we think is the beginning of the story is not the beginning at all. There's a backstory, and then there's a backstory to the backstory. The prequel has a prequel has a prequel. You don't know how far back you can trace it. When you allow yourself to think in those large spans of time, it makes it a lot easier to let go of the story. You think about the Buddha's knowledges on the night of his awakening. He started with his own personal stories and went way, way back. But then what allowed him to drop the stories was to think about the larger picture. He realized that his story was just one little thread in a very complex fabric. The best thing to do was the noble thing to do—to get out of the fabric entirely.

So if you've been the recipient of some unfair treatment, just let it stop there. Tell yourself: The fact that you have ears to hear things and have a body that can be hit puts you in an unsafe

position. They're open to attack at any time. Can you find a happiness that doesn't depend on those things? And where are you going to find that? You find it inside, right here in the present moment where you're near the breath. When it's going to open up, that's where it's going to open up.

So try to stay as close to this spot as possible—the spot where there are no stories. After all, the story of your breath meditation is what? You breathed in and then you breathed out. And then you breathed in and then you breathed out again. Not much of a plot. That's why it's a good thread to follow. This narrative is calming. This narrative is something that helps you get centered. It helps you put an end to things, all the other stories that could otherwise just go on and on and on without end.

You've got to leave the ends dangling. We always hope for closure, but samsara offers no closure at all. The only closure is the closure that comes inside when you find the Deathless, and that doesn't have any stories at all.

So you're right here with the breath in the present moment. This is a good place to be. This is the place where things can come to an end if you choose to have them come to an end. It's up to you—and you're making that choice every time there's a temptation to go wandering off away from the breath. Do you really want to put an end to those things or do you want to go back and have another couple of rounds? The choice is yours.