

Birth Is Suffering

June 2, 2020

Jātipi dukkhā. Birth is suffering. I heard someone recently explaining the Buddha's list of the different forms of suffering. He came to this one and said, "Well, that's behind us now." The problem is that it's not behind us. We have it behind us, but we also have it ahead of us if we're not careful. Each time it happens, it's like a throw of the dice.

As they say, the opportunities that are open to you are based on your past karma. But look at your karma—you don't even have to look at past lifetimes, look at your karma in this lifetime—and you realize you've got a mixed bag. You've done skillful things and unskillful things. And only a very well-trained mind can be sure to focus on the skillful things at the moment of death and rebirth. Because it's what you focus on: That's what creates the state of becoming.

There will be a desire of one form or another. Around the focal point of that desire, it will form either a world—the world in which that object exists—or an identity. Sometimes your desire's not so much about what you want to get out of the world. It's more about what you would like to be. This is when becoming begins. Then you go in for it: That's birth.

You can notice when you fall asleep how random the process is. We talk about our dreams sometimes with a sense of disbelief. How could *that* have happened? How could that dream have occurred to you? Well, the same thing happens with rebirth. Sometimes it's very unlikely, and yet it happens. So we have to train our minds so that we'll have some control over where they go.

The Buddha talks about having a self rightly directed. You're fortunate in this lifetime, you've got some past merit you can depend on, but that's not going to be enough. You have to make sure you focus yourself in the right direction. And basically the right direction is out. As the Buddha said, the people who hang around and try to develop the world are not following his teachings. The ones following his teachings are those who want to get out, realizing that this is the best course for everybody because even if you're here to be a good person, you're a burden on so many other beings.

This is one of the reasons why we have that reflection on the requisites every day. The simple fact that you've got a body means that you're going to need food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. There are a lot of supply lines involved in all of those things, and a lot of pain and suffering for the people in those lines. You come into the world with lots of needs. You're going to have to lay claim to

things. The problem is that other people will be laying a claim as well, and then we get into battles over our claims.

We do a lot of unskillful things in those battles. That's something we have to watch out for: seeing that somebody else really misbehaved, behaved in a cruel or unfair fashion, and then getting fixated on that. That becomes the focal point for another becoming. It goes on and on and on.

So you've got to learn how to think in ways that get you out. For instance, the Buddha says that when someone misbehaves, our ordinary reaction is anger. But he says the proper reaction is compassion. You should want for that person or that being to have some happiness, and yet look at what they're doing. They're doing all kinds of unskillful things that are going to lead them down. When you can pull out enough to have compassion, that's when you're on the right track.

The Buddha's teachings are all about pulling out of conflicts. Back in those days, in addition to the wars they had—I mean actual wars—there were huge debates. India at the time was a hotbed of all kinds of opinions, and people would debate and debate and debate their opinions. It became such a central part of the society that kings and queens would set up assembly halls for debates as part of their entertainment. But there was a very strong sense of identity that was built around those debates.

Again and again, the Buddha talked about the different positions people would take on whether there was post-mortem survival—whether the self survived or didn't survive after death—or whether the world was eternal or the world was not eternal, finite or infinite: a long list of different opposing views. But the Buddha would often focus not so much on the content of the views. He'd say, "Well, look at this. You're fabricating this view, and then you're clinging to it. And you're suffering as a result."

In other words, he stepped back and looked at the process of suffering involved in taking sides, then seeing all the unskillful things people do, based on that—for what? You get something that falls apart, and then you're left with the karma. So he looked at views as processes. And the question was: Is this a process that leads away, or does it just lead to more suffering? That was the nature of his insight.

So look at the conflicts that you get involved in and ask yourself, "To what extent is something actually being accomplished? And to what extent is it just creating more and more things to tie you down?" Look at the process by which you created the opinions that led to the conflict. And the fact that your opinions may be right: Those are the most seductive and the hardest ones to pull yourself away from. Yet you've got to pull yourself away. As long as there's an opinion that's going to tie you down, you've got to get out of it.

Now, there are some views that help you get out. Those are the areas where you take positions. The Buddha was critical of people who wouldn't take a position on anything at all, particularly on the issue of what was skillful and what was not skillful. That, he said, is an issue that you have to take a position on because people are constantly acting, and they're acting in ways that can either lead to suffering or lead away from suffering. But again, you make that distinction and you hold that view not for the purpose of arguing, but for the purpose of liberating yourself.

It's the same with the four noble truths, analyzing where there's suffering and what's causing it. This is the type of analysis that you apply to all your views. Where is the suffering in the clinging to the view? What's causing it? What craving lies behind the view? Can you learn to wean yourself off that craving? You do that by developing the path, and the path starts with right view. We don't often realize how radical right view is. It's a way of looking at the construction of views, the construction of positions, of identities, and the construction of worlds. It's getting a behind-the-scenes look at what's going on.

From there, you develop your attitudes. One of them is the resolve on renunciation, realizing that the desire for sensual pleasures is going to lead to more and more struggle. It'd be good to find a way to find a happiness that doesn't rely on sensuality.

There's also the resolve on non-ill will: in other words, resolve on goodwill or equanimity, as may be appropriate, and trying to have goodwill for all, even for people who are really difficult. The purpose of this is to pull you out of the different sides of conflicts in a way that's not escapist, in a way that actually is good for the people involved in the conflict. If you can help get them out, too, then you're happy to do it.

Then finally, resolve on harmlessness, which basically is equivalent to compassion. You see the suffering that people are creating for themselves and wonder not so much who did right and who did wrong. The question is, how we can stop the suffering? How can we get people to stop creating these things that they latch on to? They create more and more suffering and more and more unskillful behavior for themselves. But the first question, of course, is how are *we* going to learn how to stop? You have to look inside. It's only when you look inside and see these behind-the-scene processes in your own mind that you can understand how they operate in other people—and also how you can see the skillful way out.

This is why we meditate: to watch the processes in the mind and see how things form. We do that by trying to form a state of concentration. We get hands-on experience with bodily fabrication in the breath, verbal fabrication in the way

we talk to ourselves, and then mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions—seeing how we put these things together to create a state of concentration. Then, as the concentration deepens, some of these fabrications will peel off. That's how we see that they are distinct.

The first one that peels off is the directed thought and evaluation. The second one that peels off is going to be the in-and-out breath. You'll still have breath energy in the body, but the in-and-out breath will grow calm. Only at the very high levels of the formless jhanas can you see the mental fabrication peel away, too. So you're getting hands-on experience of seeing how we put states of mind together. Then you can turn around and look at how you do it in other issues around your life: how you put greed together, how you put anger together, how you put grief together. They're all the same fabrications.

So we're looking at the process of construction to learn how to pull ourselves out of our constructs. That's how we can pull ourselves out of this problem of birth. As the Buddha says, as you put these things together, you create a state of becoming. He lists all the steps. It sounds abstract when you see them all laid out, but it's a very detailed account of what's actually going on all the time in your mind as you formulate a desire. Then an identity builds around that in a world in which the object of the desire also appears. Then you go into it, and there's another birth.

We're taking birth all the time. It's simply that the birth that happens when you leave the body and go latch on to another one: That's a really major one. And as I said, for most people it's like throwing dice. The Buddha's image is of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end; sometimes it lands on that end; sometimes it lands splat in the middle. Given the mixed bag of most people's karma, with birth, all bets are off. After all, even though you may have created a lot of good karma in this lifetime, you don't know about your past lifetimes and what might come surging to the forefront at that moment.

But you do have choices. Even at the moment of death, there are choices. Some people think that when death happens, that's it. There's nothing you can do. But that's when you're actually going to be making your most important choices. You want to have your wits about you so that you can make your choices wisely. As long as there's going to be a birth, make sure that you suffer as little from it, and you go to a place where there's a minimum amount of suffering and a maximum opportunity to practice, so that ultimately you can find the escape.

In all your dealings with the world, you want to make sure that you work on resolve for renunciation—in other words, looking for happiness in the concentration so that you're less fixated on the happiness and the pleasures of the

world outside. Resolve on non-ill will, i.e., goodwill. Resolve on harmlessness, i.e., compassion. Those are the attitudes we should have toward the rest of the world.

So, when we find our minds going off in other directions, we have to stop and take stock. Are these other directions just going to entangle us even deeper and deeper into traps of the world? Or are we going to be able to free ourselves? We're the ones who trap ourselves: That's something we've got to keep in mind. Through our choices, we've trapped ourselves many times over—again and again and again. We're really good at that. We're really good at greed, aversion, and delusion.

What we've got to learn now is to get good at renunciation, goodwill, and compassion even when they're really difficult. And what's going to be more difficult than death? If you can't master these things in the relative difficulties of life, then when the difficulties of death come, it's going to be really hard.

So you've got your work cut out for you. We all have that work cut out for us. Still, we've got the opportunity to do this kind of work now, so make the most of it while you've got it.