

## *Go in Brightness*

*July 28, 2020*

When we're born into this world, we come crashing in without any guarantees that it's going to be a safe place to land. We're fortunate if we get good parents to look after us, a good birth—in other words, what the Buddha calls “coming in brightness.” That's not always the case, but how we come is not the issue.

As he said, there are four kinds of people in the world: those who come in brightness and go in brightness, those who come in brightness and go in darkness, those who come in darkness and go in brightness, and those who come in darkness and go in darkness.

Coming in brightness means you're born into good conditions. You have an opportunity for education. You have an opportunity to set yourself up in life without too many difficulties. Coming in darkness means you don't have those opportunities. Going in brightness means you follow the precepts, you practice the Dhamma—you're headed in a good direction. Going in darkness means you don't follow the precepts, you don't practice the Dhamma—you're headed down.

So regardless of how we come, we have to focus on where we're going. All too many people in the world come into the world and, even though they come in brightness, they run into suffering, and all they can think about is how to get away. So they go running in whatever direction seems to get away from the suffering. For the most part, they go running toward sensual pleasures. But then the sensual pleasures don't last. Often they turn into suffering, so you have to run away again.

Ajaan Chah gives the analogy of a snake: One end of the snake has teeth; the other end of the snake doesn't have teeth. We look at the end that has teeth and we say, “No, I don't want to touch that, it's obviously dangerous.” We don't see any teeth on the other end, though, so we think it's safe to touch. Of course, the other end is connected to the end that has teeth. The end with teeth is pain; the end without teeth is pleasure. We try to grab on to pleasure, and pain bites us anyhow.

We keep running back into suffering, and then we try to run away and find more sensual pleasures, which turn into pain. The Buddha offers an alternative—what he calls his middle way. We chanted about it just now. The middle way is not middling. In other words, you're not going to be trying to catch the snake right in the middle. You're going to stay away from the snake. You're looking for something better, a way out.

The heart of the way out is right concentration, because it offers a pleasure that's not sensual: the pleasure of form. So you aim here. This is one of the meanings of what the Buddha calls having yourself well aimed, having yourself well directed. You aim at a pleasure that's

harmless and blameless: harmless in that it doesn't intoxicate the mind, blameless in that you don't create any bad kamma. Nobody gets harmed by your pursuit of pleasure inside.

So you put aside thoughts of sensuality and focus simply on the sensation of the body as you feel it from within right now. Notice how the breath feels as it comes in and goes out. Notice what kind of breathing feels good. This is called using directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath, then you evaluate the breath. Is it a good breath to settle down with? Experiment for a bit to see what varieties of breathing there are, and how the different ones feel in the body right now. Choose one that seems to feel best, and as long as it feels good, stick with it.

And as they say, no animals are being harmed as you do this. No beings are being harmed at all, and yet you find you can feed off of this pleasure. It gives you sustenance. It's not the whole path, but it's what the Buddha calls the *heart* of the path. The other factors of the path are its requisites, its supports. But work on this, because this takes you out of that back-and-forth between pain and sensual pleasure. It gives you real direction.

Otherwise, as we run into suffering in life, we fall into what the Buddha says are the two reactions to suffering. One is bewilderment: Where does this come from? Why is this happening? Why is this happening to me? And then a search: Is there somebody out there who knows a way to put an end to this suffering? There are a lot of people out there who would give you advice, not very good advice. We're fortunate that we've found the Buddha's teachings. We've found a person of integrity, one who knows the way out. And it's a harmless way, and it's an effective way.

This is the beginning of getting a good direction: finding somebody who knows the right direction. Then you listen to their Dhamma, and you know that it's the true Dhamma because when you try to put it into practice, you get results. You put it into practice first by applying appropriate attention, asking, "How does this teaching apply to my problem of suffering right now? How do I identify where my suffering is, what I'm doing to cause it, and how does this teaching give me some insights into how I can develop a path that brings that suffering to an end by bringing the cause to an end?" You listen and you see how it applies.

Then you practice the Dhamma in accord with the Dhamma. You do this not by inventing Dhamma that you would like it to be, and not by making things up. We see all too much of that all around us. And of course when you don't follow the Dhamma as it is—in other words, when you try to adjust the Dhamma to suit your defilements—it just takes you back to where you were before. It doesn't lead you out. To be led out of where you are, you have to be willing to put aside a lot of your preconceived notions, a lot of your firmly held beliefs, the beliefs that have gotten you into trouble so far. Give the Dhamma a real try.

That's when your life takes a genuine direction, in other words, it takes the direction *out*. You're not living just for the sake of the body; you're not living just for the sake of sensual

pleasures. There's something better. But we don't get to that something better unless we're willing to make sacrifices, all the way to the end.

I think I've told you that story of the woman who transcribed a lot of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks. A friend of hers was dying of cancer and wanted to go stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa for a while and practice the Dhamma so that she could get herself ready for her death, and could deal with the pain of the disease leading up to the death. He told her, "Well I can take care of your mind, but I can't take care of your body. You've got to find a doctor to come along with you." So this woman, who was a retired doctor in her eighties, went along.

Ajaan Maha Boowa gave almost ninety dharma talks in the course of the three months they were there. Several months after they returned to Bangkok, the woman with cancer died. The woman in her eighties decided—they had all these tapes of the Dhamma talks he'd given to them—that it'd be good to transcribe the tapes. But she felt daunted by the challenge: Here she was 80+, her eyesight was not all that good, she wasn't as strong as she used to be. But Ajaan Maha Boowa said to her, "See how much goodness you can still squeeze out of your body. You're going to have to throw it away at some point anyhow, so squeeze as much goodness as you can while you've got the opportunity."

Now, you can do that when you've got a firm sense of direction. All too many people live life without any sense of direction. They just want to run away from suffering without any clear idea of where they're running to. One of the standard phrases in the Canon describing the mind state of someone who's upset by events, who's been knocked for a loop by events, is that the directions are all dark. In other words, it's hard to see what's north, what's south, what's east, what's west—and that's the confusion most people live in.

But if we take the Dhamma as our guide, we have a very clear sense of direction. Just make sure that you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and it will take you to a good place—so that regardless of how you came into the world, you leave the world in brightness.