

From Anxiety to Confidence

October 12, 2020

As the Buddha once said, there are four types of individuals to be found in the world: those born into darkness and going into darkness; those born into light but going into darkness; those born into darkness, going into light; and those born into light, going into light. As we practice, we try to be the type of people who are going into the light.

In other words, we practice the five precepts. We practice the Dhamma. That leads to a bright future. But we have to live in a world where there are people who are determined to go into darkness. Even if you point out the light to them, they don't want it. And they can be very destructive. As we read about their activities, it's very easy to get anxious. At what point will their darkness come in and cut off our pursuit of the light?

But you have to remember that this has always been the way of the world. Human nature has always been like this. We live in a mixed world. As the Buddha also said, we need mixed karma in order to become humans. If you want to find a place where people have nothing but good karma, you have to go way up into the higher heavens. So we're living in a mixed bag, but we try to develop our perfections in an imperfect world.

We can't let other people's darkness dissuade us from sticking with the path to the light. So we have to figure out a way not to get discouraged—not to get anxious in a way that eats away at our energy as we practice.

One of the first steps is to convert your anxiety into *samvega*, realizing that this is nothing new. This is the way the universe has always been. You look at the time of the Buddha, an enlightened age, yet still the kings were going into battle over stupid things. From that time on up, you read about people born into good conditions and they destroy them. It's happened again and again and again. But in the midst of that, people have been practicing the Dhamma and benefitting from their practice.

So when you've thought about the universality of the destructive nature of human beings and have developed a good sense of *samvega*, remember that the cure for *samvega* is *pasada*—confidence that the goodness you do is not lost. The opportunities to do good may get cut short, but you have to determine you're going to keep on—to continue to pursue the perfections, to continue to pursue your noble treasures. Those are your valuables. Those are the things you should hold on to.

The reason we're afraid of other people and what they might do, or what might happen in society, is because we're looking for our treasures in things that can be affected by other people's actions. But if we build treasures into the mind, nobody else can take them away. We're the only ones who can destroy them. And we have no good reason to do that. We may get discouraged that we don't have as much time to do this as we'd like, but remember that the Buddha said one day practicing the Dhamma is worth more than a hundred years lived without practicing the Dhamma.

So you've got today. Make it an auspicious day, which is not a matter of the stars or of any preordained fate. What makes the day auspicious is that you do your duty, as the Buddha said. Of course, that refers to the duties of the four noble truths. Those are things you can do every day, which means you can do them today. Some people say, "Well, I can do them any day," and then they put it off to a later day. That's not the proper attitude. The proper attitude is that today is the day because who knows about tomorrow? So you can make each day auspicious.

You work on developing the noble treasures—firstly, conviction in the Buddha's awakening. What he discovered about human action does give us hope that it is possible through what you do and say and think, if you do it with knowledge, to put an end to suffering. And the path to the end of suffering is a good path. It's a path that leads to light.

Based on that conviction, you have a sense of shame—a healthy sense of shame, which is the opposite of shamelessness. You think about all the noble ones who've gone before us. They worked hard not only to practice the Dhamma but also to set a good example. So if you fritter away your time, think of it as something you'd be embarrassed about. Remember that question the Buddha has you ask: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" Well, suppose he showed up in front of you and asked you, "Today is flying past. What are you doing right now?" You'd want to give him an answer that you're not ashamed to give. That kind of shame is a healthy sense of shame because reminds you that you have a higher potential, and it gets you to do what's right. It gets you to do what's skillful.

You read those stories about people meditating, getting discouraged, thinking they're going to give up, and the Buddha appears right in front of them. On the one hand, they probably felt very embarrassed. But on the other hand, they thought about how kindly his action was. He went to all that trouble to search them out. So when you think about shame as being the desire to look good in the

eyes of those you respect, remember that their standards are set out of compassion for you.

This is shame in a healthy relationship; it's paired with compunction. Once you know that certain actions are going to lead to trouble down the line, you don't tell yourself, "Well, this little case won't matter. It's just once." Once turns into twice, and then into three times. Then it stops adding and starts multiplying.

So each time you feel tempted to do something you know is going to lead to bad consequences, you've *got* to fight it. You can't be apathetic, because again, who knows how many more days you have to practice the Dhamma? You do have today, so make it an exemplary day.

Based on shame and compunction, you practice virtue. You develop the virtue of the mind. In other words, you have principles in how you're going to behave—how you're going to find your happiness. You're going to find it in a way that doesn't create harm for others.

This is probably one of the most dismaying things about the human world. So many people are very callous about the effect of their search for happiness on other people. They write other people off: They don't matter. But you take it as a point of honor that that's not how you're going to behave. You're going to be responsible in your search for happiness.

Those four qualities of conviction, shame, compunction, and virtue form a set.

Next in the list of treasures is learning—in other words, having a fund of knowledge about the Dhamma. In the old days, they would memorize it. You probably notice as you go through the day, sometimes bits and snatches of the chants go through your head. It's good to have those things floating around inside your mind because you never know. They might come in just when you need them.

That's one of the reasons why we have the chants not only in Pali but also in English. But if you know the Pali, it's good to have that, too, because it acts as a little reminder that this is what the Dhamma would say. It's good to have those things in your mind, especially as you get sick and your physical strength begins to wane. This fund of knowledge, this fund of Dhamma that you have, will be something you can rely on to give you the right perspective.

Another treasure is generosity, the ability to give up things you know are going to get in the way of a higher happiness—the ability to trade up, realizing that to gain something of great value, there are a lot of things of lesser value you're going to have to relinquish. So rather than try to gather everything that you like together, you have to realize, as Ajaan Lee said, it's like being told you're going to be forced to move to another country. You can't take everything with you, so you

take the things that are really necessary. You focus on those. One of the things that's necessary is this attitude of generosity. It translates not only into a willingness to give up things but also a willingness to give up unskillful mind states. You don't want anything that's going to weigh you down.

Then finally, there's discernment. Of all the treasures, this is the most valuable. This is what teaches you how to use the other ones. The Buddha's discernment is strategic. It's based on finding long-term happiness. Remember, it begins with the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" with the realization there is such a thing as long-term happiness, and it's better than short term. And it's going to depend on your actions.

That's the principle that underlies everything else in the practice because that's what you hold on to. This is why we develop good qualities in the mind—because they lead to long-term happiness. This is why we're willing to give up things that would get in the way of developing good qualities. Otherwise, you're cutting short your possibility, your potential for long-term happiness.

So with the conviction that there is such a thing and the discernment on how to bring it about, these are the things that should give you a sense of confidence. And even though the world looks pretty desperate, pretty dark, still this has been the recurring theme of the human realm: people headed for darkness. It's nothing new that the Dhamma hasn't encountered before.

I don't know how many people say, "Well, now that we have this crisis and that crisis, we have to forget the traditional practice of the Dhamma and do something new instead." But we've had crises all along. Those four mountains have been moving in again and again and again. And the basic principle is always the same. What are you going to do? You want to do right conduct, Dhamma conduct, meritorious actions, skillful actions, developing the good qualities of the mind because when the mountains crush everything else you might have, they can't crush these things. These things are still intact.

So invest your time, invest your sense of what's important, in things that'll remain intact even as the mountains come moving in. In that way, you can face the inevitable without anxiety. You can face it with confidence because whatever time you have, you've used it well. And you're ready to continue using your time well whatever the situation around you.