

Compassion for People on Fire

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There was a time right after his awakening that the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha. And what did the world look like from that perspective? He saw that beings were on fire: on fire with the fires of passion, aversion, delusion, running around setting fire to everything they touched.

He felt compassion and goodwill, based on *saṃvega*, seeing that beings were already suffering from birth, aging, illness and death, and if that weren't enough, all the added sufferings that come from greed, aversion and delusion.

So when we think about the Buddha's goodwill for the world, his compassion for the world, we have to remember that it's tinged with *saṃvega*.

After all, even the Buddha could teach only those who were willing to be taught. We have that phrase in the praise of the Buddha, "Unexcelled teacher for those fit to teach." It's qualified. Not everybody is going to listen to the Buddha. Not everybody, even if they listened to the Buddha, would be able to practice. And not everybody who practiced would go all the way in this lifetime.

To make sure that that our goodwill and compassion don't degenerate into sadness, we also have to practice equanimity: realizing that beings live in line with their karma. There are some beings we can help and a lot we can't.

So we focus on what we *can* do. Of course, the primary being we have to worry about is ourselves. We're not at the point where the Buddha was. He was safe. He was fireproof at that point. We're still flammable. When we look at other people on fire with greed, aversion, and delusion, we have to ask ourselves: Are we beyond that yet? What are we still attached to? Wherever we're attached, we're flammable. Think of the way people thought of fire back in those days: Fire held on, it clung. Wherever there's clinging, there's going to be heat, there are going to be flames. So look at where you're clinging. Try to get some perspective on your clings.

Think about the case of King Koravya. In the Pali Canon, they often highlight the drawbacks of lay life by focusing on the people who have possibly the best position, the kings. Yet even they suffer. In the case of King Koravya, he was suffering from things that were inconstant, stressful, not-self. Inconstancy relates to aging. Stress, of course, relates to illness. Death relates to not-self, whatever you have now you're going to have to let go.

So here the king was suffering from these things. There was no one who could take his pain and share it out, so that he could feel less pain. And yet in the last reflection, when he was asked, "If you were offered the chance of conquering another kingdom, would you take it?" He said, "Yes, of course," even one on the other side of the ocean. Here he was, eighty years old, already

suffering, already ready to die, and yet his thirst for power, his thirst for wealth was unquenchable.

And here we are, beings on fire with this unquenched thirst, unquenchable thirst. Even if it rained gold coins, the Buddha said, we wouldn't have enough for our sensual desires. So we've got to develop a sense of *samvega* toward our desires, and focus our desires in a different direction.

In the beginning, that's why we focus on concentration. Instead of focusing on desires for sensuality, we focus on desires related to form, inhabiting the form of the body. It lifts the mind. You're looking for a happiness in a place where you don't have to fight anybody else off. No one's going to come in and try to push you out of the way to watch your breath. It's yours. And it does have a great potential. As the Buddha said, we have the potential for pleasure in the body, we have the potential for rapture, if you pay appropriate attention to what's going on. Looking for those potentials, making the most of them, you find that you can provide yourself with a sense of intense well-being right here.

In the beginning of the meditation, that's the duty of directed thought and evaluation. Ajaan Lee talks about how directed thought and evaluation, particularly the evaluation, have to do with looking at the way you're breathing, adjusting it so that it's just right for the mind, just right for the body.

When you get a sense of well-being, you work it through the body. Some people have asked, where did he get that idea? It doesn't sound like anything there in the Canon. But it *is* in the Canon, in the image of the bathman or the bathman's apprentice, working the moisture through that ball of bath-powder to make a bath dough. Of the various images or similes for *jhana*, that's the only one that has a conscious agent doing something, and that's what evaluation does. Once you've given rise to a sense of well-being, you've got to work it through the body if you want it to suffuse and pervade the body. At first, you're going to find a lot of resistances: tight places, tense places, places where the breath energy doesn't flow easily. You have to figure out how to relax them, how to work through them, how to work around them if necessary.

It may sound like a lot of thinking, and it is, but it's thinking engaged in preparing your place to settle down. It's like moving into a house that's been neglected for a long time. You find a corner where you can straighten things out, smooth things out, make a comfortable bed for yourself. If you don't do that, there's no way you're going to find any comfort in that house. Then, from there, you expand the area that's livable, until eventually the whole house is a pleasant place to live.

So here it is, the house of your body: Learn how to work through the energies, and you get a good place to settle down.

Once you've settled down, then the image for the next stage of concentration is of a spring at the base of a lake, spreading its cool water throughout the lake. The spring doesn't have to

think about where the water's going to go, it just keeps producing cool water, and the water circulates, permeates the lake. That's because you've already opened all the energy channels, everything is connected, so the sense of rapture, the sense of pleasure can spread around on their own.

As the Buddha said, it's only when you can provide yourself with a sense of well-being like this, inside, that you can begin to trust yourself more around sensual pleasures, sensual temptations. If you *don't* have this pleasure inside, you're going to go back to the old sensual objects that you wanted before, or worse. But with this, you have an alternative. You have something better to feed on, something better to hold on to. You can begin to trust yourself more.

So work at this, however much work it requires to be able to settle down and to stay settled down. It's all to the good. We've turned the flame down. We now have a steady flame, a flame we can read by, a flame that illuminates rather than simply giving off heat, like those fires the Buddha saw. If we don't have this place to settle down, we're running around those fires in our heads as well. And we can see all around us what happens when people let themselves get their fires stoked.

We have to have a lot of compassion for them, and a lot of *samvega* that gives rise to goodwill. But we also have to have goodwill for ourselves. That means realizing that we need to get our act in order, so at the very least we're not running around with our heads on fire like other people. It's only when you can put the fires out—or at least adjust them so they become steady, cool flames inside—that you can be a good example to others. And it's only through being a good example that you can make lasting change. At the very least, try to make a lasting change inside, and perhaps some of it will spread around as well.