

Dignity in the Face of Hardship

January 12, 2021

Someone once asked the Buddha, “How does a being go from this lifetime to the next?” And the Buddha gave the analogy of a fire going from one house to another. The houses may not touch, but the wind can blow the fire from one house to the next. That provides the sustenance for the fire. In the same way, craving is the sustenance that supports a being going from one body to the next. That’s what we cling to. And as we know, the nature of craving and clinging is that they tend to be pretty blind. Especially when you can no longer stay in a body, you go for whatever presents itself as an opportunity.

In fact, this is how we live our lives, not only at death. As the Buddha said, all phenomena are rooted in desire. All beings are sustained by food, maintained by fabrication, through our intentions. When we find ourselves in difficult situations, it’s not that we were simply minding our own business and something came along and hit us. We were out looking for it.

We have to keep that in mind at all times. The question is, what are we looking for now? As things fall apart, where is your craving going to go? Is it going to try to latch on to what’s falling apart, or are you going to train it to think in terms of cause and effect?

Because the causes for good things in life—and that includes both good material things and opportunities to practice—depend on the right kind of actions: generosity, virtue, meditation. You’ve got to train your desires to think in terms of cause and effect, and focus on the causes. As the effects seem to be falling apart, resist the temptation to clutch to them because they can pull you down. This may not be easy, but then remember the distinction that Schiller made between dignity and grace. Grace is when you know the right thing to do and it comes easily, so you do it. Dignity is when you know the right thing, and it’s hard to do, but you do it anyhow.

The path of practice is always one either of dignity or grace. Sometimes when it’s done with dignity that means a lot more, both to you and to the people around you: to you in the sense that you realize that you’ve risen above the things that you’d be ashamed to do in the presence of someone like the Buddha, or Ajaan Mun or Ajaan Lee. That sense of dignity can be sustenance. You know it’ll give good results down the line. But you also develop a sense of self-worth: that regardless of whatever other people are doing, you’re not going to stoop to

anything low. You also think about the power that you have, in the sense that you do fabricate your experience. Now, it's not the case that you have an infinite set of choices—the raw material available to you at any one time is based on your past choices, and sometimes is quite limited—but you *can* choose to do the skillful thing.

Keep the Buddha's graduated discourse in mind. The good things in life do come from virtue; they do come from generosity. They are good, but they have their dangers. This is why we look beyond just the good things in life to the path, where we look to release. It may not be the case that you gain release in this lifetime, but you want to put yourself in a position that when the time does come to go, the opportunities will be there. And what you do now will determine what kind of opportunities you'll face then.

Ideally, you want bad opportunities to be closed off to you, while good ones are open. Well, you do that through the practice. You do that through following the path, and you keep your desires trained. Focus on the causes. Don't let yourself get distracted, because the actions of other people around you can be very distracting, and you don't want to be pulled down to their level. This may sound like pride, but it's a healthy kind of pride, a healthy sense of honor. This is where dignity shows its value.

I think I've told you about the time I gave a Dhamma talk and I happened to mention the word *dignity* in the talk. Afterwards, a Russian woman came up. She'd been living in the States for ten years. She told me she learned the word "dignity" in her English class in Russia, but this was the first time she'd heard it since coming to America.

That's a sobering thought. In a society where the emphasis is placed so much on material things, dignity gets swallowed up and disappears. But we can create a space for it by the way we act, by the choices we make. And the good causes—the causes that lead to good things—are things that we all have within our power to do. With the pandemic and with civil unrest, it's as if we've had our noses rubbed in the fact that there's so much that we can't control in this world. And that sense of powerlessness can be really dispiriting.

Which is why we have to keep remembering that the choice to be generous is something that we always have within our power. Even when we're poor, we can be generous with our time, generous with our forgiveness. The choice to be virtuous, to abstain from doing anything harmful, is also within our power. The choice to train the mind so that it keeps its processes of fabrication headed in the right direction is something that we can always do. We can always fabricate a comfortable breath. We can fabricate our inner conversation around the breath.

We can fabricate the perceptions that we bring to the meditation.

When we learn these skills in the meditation, we can apply them to everything else. Whatever happens in life, we can see: How are we breathing? How are we talking to ourselves about this? What perceptions, what feelings are we focusing on? It's through those fabrications that we maintain ourselves both in dignity now and in well-being on into the future.

So focus your energy, focus your attention on the areas where you do have power, where you do have control both in your relationships with other people—where you treat them with generosity and virtue—and in your relationship to your own mind. Remember that a sense of dignity will sustain you. You may not be able to eat it, it may not be able to protect you from the cold, but it does protect the mind's own self-esteem. And no amount of food or clothing or shelter can protect a mind that has lost its dignity.

So remember where your most important possessions are and protect those. And it is within your power to protect them. You'll come out fine, and you'll be setting a good example for the rest of the world.