

Defiant Like the Buddha

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With most unskillful mind states, the Buddha doesn't have you sit and stew in them. He says you should try to get rid of them as quickly as you can, in the same way that a person who discovers that his head is on fire would immediately try to put the fire out. Greed, aversion, delusion: With these kinds of things, the Buddha said, "Put them out." But there's one negative mind state where he says, "Allow yourself to express it as long as you feel that something is accomplished"—and that's grief. That one, he says, actually can be converted into something skillful. As he says at one point, it's because of our suffering that we gain conviction that there's got to be a way out. So, what are the steps leading from the suffering of grief to a conviction that there's a way out? They start by going through compassion.

There's the case when King Pasenedi came to visit the Buddha. As he was talking to the Buddha, one of his courtiers came up and whispered in his ear that Mallika, his favourite queen, had passed away. Pasenedi immediately broke down and cried. The Buddha's first comment was, "Since when has there ever been a person who's born who hasn't died?"—the point being that this is not the universe dumping on Pasenedi. This is something that happens to everybody. As you sit with your grief for a while, you realize that other people have felt this grief, too. And that thought can actually open your heart.

The problem with grief is the sense that "It's happening to *me*. Why is the universe dumping on *me*?" Try to get the "me" out of there. It does tell you that a lot that grieving for somebody else often has to do more with your sense of what you're lacking rather than grieving for what's happened to the other person. But if you can put the sense of "me" out of the grief, you realize that, "Okay, everybody has experienced this." That opens your mind to a wider perspective and gives rise to a sense of compassion—and that's a healthy mind state. If you go through life not sensing much in terms of suffering, you look at other people and you don't think they're suffering much, either. Or if you see them suffering, you have no idea what it's all about. But if you appreciate your own sense of grief, your own sense of loss, and the suffering that goes with that, it makes you more sensitive to the sufferings of others.

This is how compassion gets nourished.

But then from compassion the contemplation goes further. You start thinking about how this is going to happen again and again and again if we don't put a stop to the causes. And that sense of how overwhelming it is that there is so much suffering in the world, so much death, so much aging and illness, and all the attendant suffering that goes with that: That gives rise to

samvega, a word that can be translated as dismay or terror: the realization that this is a really scary situation. You get reborn again and again and it's more of the same stuff again and again. Can't there be a way out?

From *samvega*, you go to *pasada*, confidence, and that leads straight to conviction that this is the way out.

So, that's one case you can take a negative mind state and you can convert it into something positive with that sense that "I'm not just going to allow this to go on. I'm not going to allow myself to continue suffering like this. There's got to be some way out of this."

We hear so much about acceptance, acceptance, acceptance in the Buddha's teachings, although I really don't know what the word for acceptance is in Pali. The principle seems to be that we should accept the fact that we grow old, we get ill, we die, and that there's wisdom in accepting that. Now, of course, denying the fact that these things happen is really dumb. But simply accepting the fact that these things happen was not what the Buddha was all about. After all, he didn't teach just the first noble truth that there's going to be suffering. There's a second noble truth: There's a reason why there is suffering. And that reason is something that can be abandoned: That's the third noble truth. And there's a way to do that: That's the fourth noble truth.

So, look at everything from the perspective of all four noble truths. There is suffering, but there's a way out. As you think about this, you realize how defiant the Buddha actually was. He didn't just accept aging, illness, and death. His immediate thought was, "There's got to be a way out of this. If there's anything noble in life, it's the search for what doesn't age, what doesn't grow ill, what doesn't die."

That's why he left home—to find that. And that's making a huge demand. In other words, any suffering that would weigh on the heart was something he wouldn't want to have to experience ever again. He wanted a happiness that was totally free of aging, illness, and death. And you look around: Where are you going to find that? As he said, he looked at the world and had a sense of dismay, a sense of *samvega*, seeing everybody laying claim to things, fighting one another, and dying like fish in a puddle that's drying up. No matter where he looked, everything had already been laid claim to. If he was going to find his happiness in things outside, he was going to fight people for it.

Then he looked inside, and he realized that the problem was there in the negative mind states that he was allowing himself to feed on: the big ones, of course, being craving and clinging. Was there some way to get past them? He realized he had to comprehend the clinging. Why is it that we hold on to things? Why is it that we feed off of things? Because of our thirst. Why is there that thirst? Because of our ignorance.

Now, if there were no alternative, if there were not the deathless dimension, you'd say, "Well, what else can we do? Since there is some pleasure to be found in following your cravings, why not go for that?" After all, for most people, the idea of there being no craving at all is like death, annihilation. But the Buddha discovered that that was not the case. You follow the path to put an end to craving, and you actually find the ultimate happiness.

So we're fortunate. It's as if the Buddha had already scouted the territory for us.

I was reading recently about the scouts who were sent out to find a passage over the Rocky Mountains. They almost died because they didn't really know where they were going. It's the same with the Buddha. He almost died in his search for the deathless. But he actually found the way to the deathless. He pretty much mapped out the territory for us. It's up to us then simply to follow the path. It's been laid out, and it's a safe path. We don't have to subject ourselves to the dangers he subjected himself to. It's a path of virtue, a path of concentration, a path of discernment. These are all safe qualities.

There's not only safety in these qualities, but there's also victory: the defiant attitude that the young prince had when he was thinking that there's got to be a way out of here. He was actually able to carry it through. When you look into your own heart, there must be something in there that says, "I'd like a happiness that just doesn't die." The world tries to dump on that aspiration, saying, "It's impossible. Just learn how to accept things as they are. Find what pleasure you can in things that change." But the Buddha's saying, "No, don't satisfy yourself with that. There's got to be something better. There *is* something better." Always keep that in mind.

As we get older, there is that tendency just to let things slide. Simply having a body gets more and more difficult. The brain is not working as it used to, and it's so easy just to give up and let things take their course. But this is precisely the time when you can't let that happen, because as the Buddha noted, your mind state as you die is going to be very important in determining where you're going to go. Even if you've lived a good life, if something happens then, if you decide to change your views about goodness, it could get in the way of those good actions giving fruit.

So, you've got to be on top of things. You've got to have that attitude that regardless of what the mind is doing, you're not going to give in to its unskillful moods. If something comes up—regret over the past, anger over the past, any of these things—you keep reminding yourself, "You don't have to go there." It's as if the mind opens doors to various directions. If you look through a door and realize, "This isn't going anywhere good," you don't have to go there. Just stay with your awareness in the present moment. Use the breath as your anchor to stay here and make it as comfortable as you can, a more and more a

pleasant place to stay. But there will come times when the breath gets very labored, and you can't do much about it. That's when you go straight for the awareness, and that will save you a lot of grief. Just maintain that sense of knowing, knowing, knowing. It's not the ultimate solution, but it helps. You remind yourself, "Okay, you don't have to give in to things."

Even when you're dying, you don't have to give in to where the mind might seem to want to slip. Try to keep your awareness, your alertness, your mindfulness, your ardency, working even at that time—*especially* at that time. This is why we work on these three qualities. Mindfulness: keeping what you know is good in mind, what you know is useful in mind. Alertness: watching what's going on. And ardency: trying to do it as well as you can. That's the defiant part. Remember the Buddha's message: Even though he had to undergo the aging, illness, and death of his body, his mind didn't have to suffer from them anymore. It's possible to experience these things but not suffer from them. And it's possible to find a dimension where aging, illness, and death don't occur. That's the essence of the skill that he taught.

So, for unskillful mind states that you can convert into something skillful, go ahead, convert them. The ones that you can't convert, just let them go. Even if they keep coming back, coming back, you have to remind yourself that you don't have to go. No matter how insistent they are, you can be even more stubborn than they are. Think of the young prince's determination and try to have some of that determination play a role in your mind, too. Some people say "Well, that was the Buddha." But the whole point of the Buddha's teachings is that these are things that human beings can do.

He said that there were three qualities that he kept applying: ardency, heedfulness, and resolution. Heedfulness is reminding yourself that what you do is going to be important, so be very careful about what you do. Ardency is the desire, "I want to do this well." And resolution is sticking with it. These are qualities we all have in some areas of our lives. The trick is how to apply them to the problems of aging, illness, and death so that they can see us through. That's what the practice is all about. That's what the skills of meditation are all about.

You look at the range of people the Buddha taught—a wide variety of people from all different walks of life: young, old; men, women; some with a lot of education and others with not much education at all. But what was common in all the cases was that they took seriously the desire for true happiness. And when they saw the Buddha offered them this opportunity, they went for it.

Well, the opportunity is still there. So no matter where you are, no matter what's happening, you can go for it, too.