

Samvega

January 21, 2022

There's a series of suttas in the Canon where monks are out in the forest meditating but letting their minds wander in different places, doing things they shouldn't be doing, thinking about things they shouldn't be thinking about. Devas come and call them on it. Probably the most famous one is the one of the monk who's going bathing, and there's a lotus in the lake of water where he's going to go bathe. He bends over and sniffs the lotus. A deva appears suddenly and says, "You just stole the scent of that lotus." The monk basically says, "Oh, come on! That's not theft." She says, "Look, anyone who's really serious has to see even the slightest fault as big as a cloud." Back in those days, clouds were the biggest things you could imagine. The sky is big, but clouds can cover the whole sky, and more. They're bigger than the sky. So the monk comes to his senses, thanks her for warning him, and then says, "From now on, if you see me doing anything like that, can you warn me again?" And she says, "No, I'm not your servant. You can look after yourself." She leaves. And as the sutta says, the monk was struck with *samvega*.

This happens in every case. The monk is struck with *samvega*, and that's when his practice gets serious. The word is a hard one to translate. Sometimes it's translated as urgency. The urgency, though, is a result of *samvega*. The word itself is related to a word for terror or dismay. It's what the animals of the forest feel when the lion comes out and roars his roar and they realize they're in danger. The arising of *samvega* is the point of the practice when you start taking things seriously: when you see that you're in danger. You can't just coast along. You're not here simply to accept what's going on and be okay with it, thinking that that's going to be enough. You have to see that there's a big problem. We're going after things that are subject to aging, illness, and death. And as long as we do, as long as we have a thirst for them, we're going to keep suffering aging, illness, and death and the suffering that goes along with them.

When we begin to realize that we're the ones causing the trouble and if we don't put our act together, nobody else is going to do it for us: That's when we get serious. Otherwise, this huge expanse of suffering lies before us. The Buddha talks about how he developed a sense of *samvega* before he ordained. He saw the world as being like a river drying up, and fish in the river were flopping over one another, trying to beat one another out to get that last little bit of water. And, of course, no

matter who wins, they're all going to die. He looked around and saw that everywhere where he might want to look for happiness had already been laid claim to. If he was going to find happiness in this world, he was going to have to fight other people off. And then like the fish, everyone was going to die. That, he said, was his feeling of *samvega*.

But then he realized that the problem lay in the heart. There's an arrow in the heart, he said. If you can remove the arrow, you'd be free.

So this is what we're doing as we practice. We're trying to remove the arrow in our heart. As the Buddha said, you think about death as much as you can to remind yourself that this is serious business. And if the work isn't being done now, *when* is it going to get done?

There's one sutta where he says, every time the sun sets, you should remind yourself, "You could die tonight." Death is easy. It can happen so easily. A little bit of hardened blood starts wandering around in your blood system, gets lodged in your heart, gets lodged in your brain, and you're out. You could trip and fall, hit your head at the wrong way. I mean, it's so easy. Are you ready to go? You have to look at your mind. What in there would create trouble for you if you had to go right now? What would you be holding on to?

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha is so strongly against the principle of clinging. All the things we cling to as being right, being ours, whatever: Those are the things that will pull us down if we suddenly have to go. So what sort of things are you holding on to that you shouldn't be holding on to? Let go of them right now.

The same when the sun rises: You can remind yourself that it may be a pretty sunrise, but you could go today. Are you ready to go? What's in the mind that's not ready to go? You've got to deal with that. Then, as the Buddha says, when you find anything unskillful in the mind, you have to treat it the same way that a person whose head is on fire would try to put out the fire. You're not just aware of the flames and accepting the flames. He says you have to be mindful, relentless, and ardent in putting out those flames. The mindfulness here means that you keep your mind focused on what's really important right now, which is basically letting go of unskillful qualities. The acceptance here would be accepting that they're there, but you don't let them stay there.

The Buddha gives different techniques for getting rid of unskillful qualities. The first is that if you know that your mind has wandered off into something unskillful, you just replace it with something more skillful—as when you're focused on the breath and you suddenly find yourself thinking about memories of the past, problems in the monastery, problems in the world outside. Those aren't

the issue right now. The issue right now is what's going on in your mind. So you come back to the breath. Then you work with the breath in a way that makes it more interesting so that it's not so easy to slip off.

But if you find yourself slipping back again and again, then you really have to think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. Where is it going to take you? If you thought about that kind of thing for 24 hours, what would it induce you to do? Usually, a lot of unskillful things. Is it worth it?

If there are thoughts of sensuality, remind yourself of the different analogies the Buddha gives for sensuality. There's no nourishment there, but a lot of danger. If thinking of the drawbacks isn't enough, then the Buddha says to ignore the thought. In other words, it can be in one part of the mind, but you stay focused on the breath. In cases like that, simply the fact that you pay attention to it is feeding it. So, starve it of attention. Like a dog that keeps coming around to your house, hoping for some food from you: You know that if you give it food, it's going to hang around, and you don't want the dog hanging around. So you just don't feed it. Eventually it'll go away.

If that doesn't work, then the Buddha says to relax around the thought. This step is useful when you have some sense of the breath energy in the body. You begin to notice that when a particular thought comes up, there'll be a catch in the energy someplace. It might be in the arm, might be in the hands, in the head, it can be anywhere in the body. If the thought is related to a particular tightness or tension in some part of the body, relax that tension.

If none of these techniques work, then he says to press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and just tell yourself, "I'm not going to think that thought." Beat your mind down, he says, with your mind. This is where a meditation word is really useful—one like *buddho*. Do it really rapid-fire.

So you're not here just to accept the presence of your unskillful thoughts. You also have to accept that you've got to do something about them. They could really get in the way if you go. As the Buddha saw on the night of his awakening, the kind of karma that determines your next lifetime is a combination of things you've done in this lifetime or in previous lifetimes, plus your state of mind and especially your views at death. You want to make sure that nothing else comes in to get in the way of right view at that point, so you really need to have some good control over your mind. And if you can't control it now while you're healthy, how can you control it when the body's really weak, has a lot of pain, and you realize you've got to leave?

So there's work to be done. *Samvega* is there to remind you that it's urgent. You can't be complacent. So there in the back of the mind is the fact that you

could die at any time. It's not the main focus, though. When the Buddha describes mindfulness of death, the thought of death is always in the background. The foreground focus is on what needs to be done right now. If you're doing something unskillful, how can you change what you're doing? How can you have a change of heart to make yourself realize it's important not to let yourself indulge in thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of anger, thoughts of ill will?

So if you can stir up that sense of *samvega*, it can really have an impact. It can bring about a change of heart, which is what's needed.

We all know the Buddha's teachings on karma. I've been repeating them many, many times. You've heard them many times. There has to come a point, though, where it begins to hit home. The Buddha's really serious. This is not a picnic. When the body dies, it plays hardball. You need to have your skills ready so that you're not taken in by pain, you're not taken in by any of the aggregates. When you have that sense of urgency, that's when your practice really takes off.