

## *Great Expectations*

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One of the amazing things about the Buddha was his sense of what a human being was capable of. He looked at the pleasures he had and he realized they were all subject to aging, illness, and death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. If he were to look for his happiness, his fulfillment in things that are subject to aging, illness, and death, would be it worth it?

As he saw, everything that he might try to lay claim to had already been laid claim to by somebody else, which meant that he'd have to fight people off. He wondered if there was something that was better than that—a dimension not subject to aging, illness, or death, something that you didn't have to fight people to gain. And he found that there was.

And he realized he wasn't the only person who could do that. Other people could find that same dimension, too. So imagine him looking at you and having high expectations for you, much higher than our society has. We tend to think that people are their feelings. And the nature of feelings is you want to express them. Another nature of feelings is that your feelings may come into conflict with those of other people, so you try to manage things in such a way that you can express your feelings without at the same time harming other people or hurting their feelings.

For a lot of modern psychology, that's the best that can be expected: Get in touch with your feelings. Don't deny what they are. If you really feel lust, admit to yourself that you feel lust, because that's you. If you feel anger, don't deny your anger, because that's you. Just learn how to express these things in harmless ways, or relatively harmless ways. And then you die. That's it.

Whereas the Buddha said you're not your feelings. "Feelings" here, in terms of emotions, come under *sankharas*, fabrications, in the five aggregates. He very clearly saw that there's a greater happiness to be found by letting go of these fabrications. It's possible to get beyond your feelings.

So when he says to kill your anger, he's not telling you to repress it. When he

tells you to overcome lust, he's not telling you to go into severe repression, because after all those things are not you or yours. They may be yours for the time being because you're laying claim to them, but do you really have to?

He saw that there was a happiness that comes by letting go of these things. You're better off letting go.

So he had a much larger view, a much larger sense of what human beings are capable of, and it's up to us to ask ourselves which view we prefer. Which provides more opportunities for a genuine happiness? Obviously, the Buddha's.

When greed, aversion, and delusion arise, the Buddha would call them defilements. Modern psychology calls them us. There's a big break right there.

When greed comes up, when lust comes up, it's not necessarily something we have to identify with. When anger comes up, we don't have to identify with it. And in not expressing it, in learning restraint around these things, we're not denying ourselves. We're redefining ourselves. We don't pretend that they're not there. If you pretend that they're not there, then it gets unhealthy. You have to look them straight in the eye. The best way to do that is to get the mind really quiet, with a pleasure that's not involved with sensuality.

As the Buddha once said, if you don't have this higher level of pleasure—the pleasure that comes from concentration, getting the mind secluded from sensuality and unskillful thoughts—then no matter how much you may know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you're going to go back to it.

That's precisely the problem of modern psychology: They don't know this higher pleasure. So they think that there's no way of getting out of your lust and your anger, so you might as well learn how to live with them.

But the Buddha's teaching that you can learn to live without them. There are better things you can do with your mind—first in the concentration, then with the insight that allows you to let go: being very frank with yourself about how these things arise, what causes them to arise, and how they pass away. They're not there all the time.

Remember that image the Buddha gave of the mind being like the sun, and then the clouds come and obscure it. The clouds are not the sun. Now, the sun, here, does not represent purity. It simply represents the fact that the mind can be

aware. It doesn't have to be enslaved by its defilements, doesn't have to be obscured by its defilements. It can use its awareness to reflect on them. This is how we find the Dhamma, as the Buddha said: through commitment and then reflection.

We commit to seeing how greed, aversion, and delusion come and how they go, why they come, why they go, and then we look for their allure. Why is it that when they go, we go back and dig them up again? What is it that we like about them?

In some cases, we like the objects, say the object of lust, so the Buddha has us contemplate it: "Is it really worth it? Are you deceiving yourself when you find this attractive?" After all, all you have to do is to take off a tiny little layer of skin, and you can't look at it at all. If you took all the internal organs out and put them on the floor, we'd all run away. So obviously there's some lying going on when lust arises.

Then you turn around and look at the lust itself, because that's where the real attraction lies.

Often, as Ajaan Lee noted, the mind is sitting around when there's nothing to provoke it, and it gets a desire to lust for something, gets a desire to be angry about something, and then goes out and looks for an object, any object that it can take as an excuse. What is it that we find attractive about the lust? There's our identity around it—which is a huge issue now. People identify as this, identify as that. As the Buddha pointed out, there's just a lot of suffering there in clinging to an identity.

Even if you cling to a fluid identity, the fluidity becomes the object that you cling to. So you have to learn how to see all that narratives and any other embroidery that you place on your lust as a form of suffering.

The same goes with anger. We may not like the object—the person who's gotten us angry—but we certainly like our anger. People get very defensive when they're told, as the Buddha said, to kill their anger. They say, "Isn't there righteous anger?" Actually, righteous anger is probably one of the worst kinds because there's a lot of attachment there. Actually, it's perfectly possible to live in the world, see what's wrong with what's going on, and not be angry about it. In fact, the more matter-of-fact you are about what's wrong, then the more clearly you can

see what can be done to correct whatever is wrong.

But there's a certain fire to anger. There's a sense of release when your shame and compunction get pushed aside and feel free to say anything that comes to your mind. The things that you wouldn't ordinarily want to say, you can tell yourself, "Okay, now I have the right to say it."

Where does that right come from? In the logic of anger, it comes from the fact that somebody else has done something outrageous, so you have the right to respond in an outrageous way. But the Buddha has you reflect often on the nature of human speech. There's true speech and untrue speech, there's well-meaning speech and ill meaning speech, there's helpful speech and unhelpful speech. This is just the nature of human speech. So there's nothing extraordinarily out of line when people say words that are untrue and hurtful and unhelpful. And because they're not extraordinary, you don't get any extraordinary rights to say, do, or think what you want. Of course, the problem is that when you put aside your shame and compunction, then when they come back, you look at what you've done and said, and you feel a lot of regret.

So you have to look at the allure of the anger and the lust, and you have to look at the drawbacks of these things, remembering what the Buddha said about where true happiness lies. You have to be willing to develop a sense of dispassion toward the things that you were ordinarily passionate about because you see that the passion and the things you do under its influence are simply not worth it. There's a better happiness that can be found.

If you didn't think there was that good alternative, you wouldn't let go. This is why when the Buddha announced the four noble truths—that it is possible to put an end to suffering by putting an end to the cause, which is craving, and that there's a true happiness that comes about as a result—the texts tell us that there was an earthquake. That possibility shakes everything up.

This possibility is the reason why the Buddha has high expectations for human beings. We can do this. It is possible to find a dimension inside where there is no greed, aversion, or delusion; where there's nothing but happiness, a well-being that cannot be touched by space or time. You've got that capability.

So don't let the culture around you persuade you to turn your back on it. Try to

look at all your actions in the light of that possibility, because it does leave open the possibility of genuine freedom—something that modern culture can't provide, but the Buddha's culture can.