

What Made the Buddha Exclaim

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I've been working on a translation of the *Udana*: a series of short pieces where the Buddha witnesses or participates in an event, and it calls forth something spontaneous from him. He exclaims—usually a poem or sometimes a poetic piece of prose. And it's interesting to notice what kind of thing would make an awakened one exclaim spontaneously.

The inspirations for a Buddha's exclamation come down to two kinds of things: One, is a sense of awe at the Dhamma, how amazingly good the Dhamma is, and how when people are trained in the Dhamma how amazing they become as well. This gives rise to a sense of confidence that this really is a good path with a really good goal.

The other thing that makes him exclaim is a sense of *samvega*. He sees people behaving in ways that are really harmful for themselves and for the people around them—and they're so ignorant and so blind and so attached to what they're doing.

You have to remember his perspective. He's coming from the night of his awakening, when he not only attained nibban but also saw how karma works in the world.

You probably know the image of the ocean: that the tears that you've shed going on through this long, long, long time of wandering on are more than the water in the ocean. You can imagine what it would be like for someone who'd actually *seen* that and then turns around and looks at people doing their best to create more tears. It gives rise to a sense of strong *samvega*. That's what the world looks like to someone who's awakened.

Even though we're not awakened yet, or haven't achieved full awakening yet, it's good to keep in mind what the perspective of an awakened person is, so that we can have the right perspective on our own choices in life.

One of the reasons we're here meditating is a combination of *samvega* and *pasada*: on the one hand, seeing how meaningless life can be and how if we're not careful we can create a lot of suffering for ourselves; and then, on the other hand, realizing that through the practice of the Dhamma something really amazing can be attained: a state of mind where the happiness is totally unshakable.

There's a whole series of verses where the Buddha talks about how the mind of an awakened one doesn't quiver at all in response to either pleasure or pain. Totally solid, a happiness that can't be touched by anything else: That's what we're practicing for.

In the case of the Buddha, the attainment that he achieved never lost its capacity to amaze.

So try to keep both of these attitudes in mind. On the one hand, the *samvega*: looking at the world around us, looking at the way we've been living our lives. In some cases the *samvega* the Buddha expressed had to do with laypeople, sometimes with people from other sects arguing over totally useless matters.

This is where the image of the blind men and the elephant comes in. It's not just that the blind people get a partial view of the elephant—they fight over it as well.

There's a weird humor to that passage because the king has arranged this. He's told his men to gather up all the people blind from birth in the capital city and has them, as he says, "Show the blind people an elephant." The king's people show one part of the elephant to some of the blind people and another part of the elephant to others. And then the king asks the blind people, "Have you seen the elephant?" And the blind people say, "Yes. We've seen the elephant." "What's it like?" And so they talk about the different parts they saw: The blind person shown the ear says that the elephant is like a winnowing basket. The blind person shown the tail says that the elephant is like a broom, and so forth.

And then they start fighting. The fact that they're fighting over it gives the king a lot of pleasure—which is kind of a sick pleasure, but that's the way people are. We fight over so many trivial things and useless things simply because we don't see the whole picture. That's one thing that sparks a sense of *samvega* in the Buddha.

The other is the way that people want to do things that just keep causing more and more suffering for themselves, such as the women in the *Udana* who want to have children and grandchildren. One woman wants to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in the city of *Savatthi*. And the Buddha asks her, "Would you ever be free from funerals? Children and grandchildren are dying all the time." So she decides that maybe it's not so good.

There was also a woman who'd had a seven-year pregnancy. After she gave birth to the child, the child was able to speak to *Sariputta*. She was so proud of the child that she was rapturous. The Buddha noticed that she was filled with rapture so he asked her, "Would you like more children like that? Another pregnancy like that?" and she said, "Yes, I'd like seven more!" And so the Buddha exclaims a verse on heedlessness.

There are also cases of boys and teenagers: the little boys tormenting animals, the teenagers getting into big fights. This calls forth an exclamation from the Buddha. In some cases he actually speaks to the boys and says, "Look, if you're afraid of pain why are you causing pain to others?"

In a nice ironic twist, the Buddha also teaches the same message to a king. There's the story of Queen *Mallika* and King *Pasenadi* in the palace. The two of them are alone in their bedroom, and he turns to her in a tender moment and asks if there's anyone she loves more than herself. And here he is, a king: You'd think that he'd be able to get somebody like his queen to say, "Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself." But *Mallika* can't say that. She says, "No. I don't love anybody more than myself. How about you?" Of course the king has to admit that he doesn't love anybody more than himself. That's the end of that scene.

So the king goes down to see the Buddha, and the Buddha comments that what the queen said was right. You search in all directions you never find anybody you love more than yourself.

In the same way, other people are fiercely in love with themselves. But then the exclamation that he gives is, “So as you keep this in mind, you should never harm anyone else.” A good lesson for a king.

Sometimes the Buddha’s *samvega* comes from seeing his own monks misbehaving. Here they have the chance to practice and what do they do? They spend their time talking about which king is the better king, the more powerful king; which craft is the best craft. Or just chattering away with no purpose at all. This causes the Buddha to exclaim as well.

So you look around you and you see there are lots of things that would cause an awakened one to have a strong sense of *samvega*.

But there are also cases where he’s inspired. In fact, the largest class of verses has to do with him seeing his own disciples practicing well and gaining results. That gives him a sense of inspiration.

One story in particular: A group of monks come to visit the monastery where he’s staying. As they’re putting their things away, they’re chatting up with their friends whom they haven’t seen for a long time.

So the Buddha says to Ananda, “Who are those monks over there chattering like fishermen with a catch of fish?” He calls them into his presence and then sends them away from the monastery, saying, “I don’t want monks like you around here.”

The leader of the monks takes them off to a quiet place and says, “Look. The fact that the Buddha chased us away was for our own good. He wanted to chastise us so that we’d gain a sense of *samvega*.” So they practice hard. And during that rains retreat they all become arahants.

Then they come back to the Buddha. And this time the Buddha’s exclamation has to do with the brightness of their attainment.

So the purpose of all these stories is to give you a sense of heedfulness: that if we’re not careful about how we look for happiness, if we’re not careful about our behavior, we just go around and around and around without stop, suffering without stop.

The Dhamma is available, and yet there are so many people out there who want to change the Dhamma or erase the Dhamma. And it’s rare that you can stop that. The Buddha didn’t go out and stop those sectarians. But he did say that you can practice. You can make sure that your practice, at least, is a light to others.

So it’s good to keep the perspective of an awakened one in mind—because it gives us the sense of the dangers that come when we don’t practice and of the wonders that can happen when we do.

The *Udana* also contains all those exclamations about the nature of *nibbana* being unmade, unbecome, totally free from suffering, a totally different dimension: the kind of thing that would make even a Buddha exclaim. The attainment is that good.

So whatever effort’s needed in the practice, however much we have to sit through pain and

deal with distractions and all the other hard parts of the practice, remember: It's always more than worth it.

Let that thought give you energy.