

Living Honorably

April 24, 2015

As someone once said, one of the most amazing things about human beings is that they know they're going to die and yet they live as if they don't know. In fact, they try to push that awareness out of their minds—because for most people, it's too depressing thought. They don't know how to handle it, so they push it away. One of the marks of wisdom is that you don't push it away. You try to figure out how to live in the presence of the possibility of death.

The Canon has two very striking images in this regard. One is the image that came to the Buddha when he was still a young prince. He saw life as a dwindling stream. The water's running out and the fish are just flopping around, struggling with one another, pushing one another out of the way to get to that last little bit of water. And, of course, they're all going to die. The water's going to run out.

It's like that time I saw spawning salmon in that little stream up in British Columbia a couple of years ago. The water was only a inch or two deep, and the salmon were struggling up, up, up the stream—fighting one another for the water, first trying to get past the seagulls at the beach who were waiting to poke their eyes out, then making it into the woods where they had to flip themselves over dead salmon to get to that last little bit of water. In the meantime, there were bears in the woods just waiting to scoop them up.

It's not a very inspiring sight. In fact that was the image that gave the Buddha a sense of *samvega*—it could be translated as terror, dismay at being trapped in all this suffering and wanting to see a way out.

That's one image.

The other image is the one that comes from story with King Pasenadi. King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks him, "Where are you coming from in the middle of the day?" And the king, in a remarkable display of frankness, says, "Oh, I've been with my ministers engaging in the sorts of things that people who are obsessed with power, drunk with their power, do from day to day." And the Buddha asks him, "Suppose someone reliable were to come to you from the east, saying that there was an enormous mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. Another reliable person comes from the south and reports that there's a mountain moving in from the south. Another person comes from the west: There's a mountain moving in from the west, crushing all living beings; and another mountain coming from the north—altogether four mountains moving in." He then says, "Considering that human life is so precious and hard to obtain, what would you do?"

The king replies, "What else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?" And then the Buddha says, "Okay, I announce to you that aging, illness, death, and separation

are moving in. What are you going to do?" The king says, "What else? Calm my mind and practice the Dhamma."

The second image is by far the more honorable one. The fact of death is still there, either way, but in the first one, everybody is still struggling for that last little bit that's not going to do them any good. And in the second, people are doing good things that they can take with them after they die—qualities of mind—behaving honorably in the face of death.

That's what we want to do as we practice. There's a lot of talk nowadays. You look in the newspapers and seems like everything in the world is falling apart. And it is. So, what is there to accomplish? We train our minds. We're good to one another, because that goodness isn't erased by death. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is when you find someone who's knowledgeable and ask that person, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question.

That question is, in the Buddha's terms, an expression of appropriate attention. He has an interesting analysis of attention. He's not talking about bare attention—just sitting there, watching things arise and pass away, as if you're in a drugged state. To pay attention to life means to ask questions. Appropriate attention is when you start asking the right questions. And this is a good one to begin with: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" "Long-term" here is important. That's part of the wisdom. The other part of the wisdom is that happiness depends on your actions. You want long-term rather than short-term happiness; and you know it's going to depend on what you do, what you say, what you think. From that principle, you can derive a lot of the Buddha's teachings.

He talks about three perceptions, or what are often called the three characteristics. Yet the Buddha teaches them as perceptions for testing things to decide if something you're focusing on is really worth taking as a goal or not. The first test is that if it's not constant, it's not going to be trustworthy. It's not going to be long term.

Is it stressful? If it's stressful, it's not going to be happiness.

And if it's stressful and not happiness, why would you want to claim it as "mine"? That's *anatta*, not-self.

But you also could also apply the Buddha's underlying question to other parts of the teachings, such as the four noble truths. Stress and suffering are the problem, and you've got to do something to find a long-term solution. The Buddha's first recommendation is that you have to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause. So how are you going to figure out a way to sit with the suffering long enough to comprehend it and detect the cause? The cause for the suffering that's weighing your mind down is coming from within. That's the really important point. We tend to blame people outside our suffering. And while it is true that they can provide the material with which we can make ourselves suffer, the actual putting together of the suffering and causing it: that comes from something inside the mind itself. To see that—to comprehend that suffering and to abandon the cause—you've got to develop strength.

This is why we're meditating, to gain the strength of the mind that comes from mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the things that give you the strength to deal with these problems. As long as the mindfulness and concentration are not yet strong, you need other forms of strength, such as conviction and persistence. You're convinced that this has got to be the way out and this has got to be the way to behave. And this is the noble way to look for happiness. You have to ask yourself: Are you going to go like the king or are you going to go like the fish? If you look inside, you're not fighting with others over the water. You're looking inside for the cause of the problem—and you find that you've got the means for the solution inside as well, so that you don't have to keep on coming back again and again and again to worlds where the water is running out and mountains are moving in.

This path does offer a way out. In the meantime, you're not harming anybody and you're providing yourself with definite wealth, definite strength, definite treasures—as we often say in Thailand—that last beyond death. In other words, you treat the world around you in full knowledge that it's going to die, but you treat the quality of your mind as something that doesn't die. That's what gives honor to what we're doing. It's what makes this a noble path.

So pay attention. Ask the right questions of yourself. Where is the cause of the suffering here? Look for it inside. This is not meant to blame you for the suffering. I mean, everybody's doing it. And it's not to say that there aren't other people out there who are not misbehaving. They really are, sometimes in horrible ways. But the question is, do you have to make yourself suffer over that? You look for the cause inside. You develop the strengths inside. The potential is there within all of us. We can develop these strengths.

When the Buddha talked about the qualities that led to his awakening, one was resolution. He made up his mind that this was something he really wanted to do. Another was ardency. Another was heedfulness. He didn't have a monopoly on those qualities. When he started out, he was pretty much like us, with strengths and weaknesses. He took his human qualities, though, and he strengthened them. He found strength by being with good people; getting good advice. But then he realized that he had to do the work himself. This is true for all of us. We want to be able to depend on the people around us, yet we find we can only depend on them up to a certain extent. Beyond that, it's our work.

But it's good work to do. This is one of those paths that is noble not only in the end. It's noble all the way through. All the qualities the Buddha has you develop are good qualities. There's nothing sneaky about the path; nothing cut-rate. It's a solid, dependable path. It's a safe path, even though ultimate safety doesn't come until the end. Still, the fact that we're doing things that are not harming ourselves and not harming other people: There's a safety in that.

So remember, we have the choice as to how we're going to face the fact of death. Are we going to go out like fish? Or are we going to go out like kings? Or are we going to go out like the Buddha? The Buddha shows you how to go out like a Buddha—maybe not a full Buddha, but at least someone who has the purity of mind that the Buddha developed, along with the

wisdom and the compassion. The choice is just laid there before us. So take advantage of your freedom to choose.