

The World Is Aflame

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The eye is burning; the ear, the nose, tongue, body, the mind is burning. All six senses, the Buddha said, are burning with aging, illness, and death; passion, aversion, delusion. And those six senses are both his definition of the world and his definition of old kamma. It's not a very life-affirming or world-affirming view, but it does affirm something else: that if you're going to look for happiness here, you're looking in the wrong place. But that doesn't mean that happiness can't be found, it's simply that you have to look elsewhere.

So that accusation that the Buddha's teachings are not life-affirming or world-affirming is true, but from his point of view it's just common sense. Think about your old kamma as burning. It's from our old kamma that we derive the raw materials to try to find happiness, but if it was unskillful kamma then the raw materials are painful. If it was skillful, they're pleasant, but around the pleasantness there congregate all kinds of trouble. You know that blessing we have, "May you be beautiful, strong, wealthy." It's a blessing, but think about it: beauty has its drawbacks. Wealth has its drawbacks. And if you get attached to the good things you've created, they burn you, too.

It's as if it were a dirty trick. We work hard to be skillful and then the rewards, when they come, are rewards we can't really hold on to. If we hold on to them, we suffer. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to be skillful, because the another way of dealing with those positive things is to use them as tools. We have the opportunity now to practice: That's the result of good past kamma. Well, take it as an opportunity to practice. Don't throw it away, don't waste your time, don't get stuck on the pleasures of living in a relatively comfortable monastery surrounded by other people who are practicing. You can't just stay there with the pleasures of harmony and seclusion. You've got to use them.

So even though these things are burning, it's as if the practice gives us the kinds of gloves with which we can handle burning materials and not get burned. We're doing this because, as the Buddha said, there is a true happiness that can be found outside of the six senses, but we use the material within the six senses to get there.

I was teaching up in Canada recently, and I happened to mention that the Buddha never said there was anything wrong with looking for happiness. Now, there are some versions of Buddhism that say you shouldn't look for your own happiness, that you should think about the well-being of others and put your well-being off to the side. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He said that if you want to really help other people, first you've got to learn how to find happiness within. Because then when you know how to do it, you can give them good advice. You can be a good example. And the happiness you find within cannot be found by being selfish. You have to be generous, you have to be virtuous, you have to train the mind. But the

practice is basically a search for your own happiness, simply that if you do it with heedfulness, you find that you have to develop wisdom, compassion, and purity as you go along.

A person in the audience who said she'd been meditating for thirty-some years, listening to Dhamma talks for thirty-some years, commented that she had never heard the idea in those talks that the search for happiness was okay. Yet, when you think about it, that's what the Buddha's teachings are all about. He's not affirming the world out there but he is affirming the heart's desire for true happiness. It is possible. And it's a good thing to look for that kind of happiness. Just learn how to do it heedfully.

So the practice we're doing is not to keep us living in the world in a comfortable way. If we don't make it all the way to awakening this time, we'll come back and the good kamma of the practice will make things comfortable – but again, you can't just wallow in the comfort or grab on to the comfort, because it'll burn you. But if you learn how to use it, it can help you along your way. That's where the difference lies: using the results of your good kamma as tools.

This is the way in which the middle path is a middle path between indulgence in sensuality and self-torture: It doesn't pursue either sensual pleasure or pain. It uses them both. You use the pain to gain an understanding. You use, not sensual pleasure, but the pleasure of a mind that's concentrated. And so it's not a middle path of a middling sort of pleasure, or a middling sort of pain. Actually, the pleasure that comes from concentration can be very intense.

But even this is a burning pleasure. After all, the verb for doing jhana, *jhayati*, also means burning. But it means burning with a steady flame. It's not the same as the flickering flames of passion, aversion, and delusion that can get you all deluded about what's going on out there. When you look at things by the light of a flickering flame it's hard to figure out exactly what's happening, what's actually there. The shadows move erratically and things come in and out of the darkness. But when the flame is steady, then you can even read small print. It's still a flame, it's still burning, but it's been adjusted.

You adjust the mind into concentration so that you can read it—and read by it. And then, ultimately, you can get to the point where, as the Buddha said, the fire goes out. Now the image there reflects the belief in the Buddha's time, that fire when it was burning was clinging and agitated and trapped in its fuel. But when it let go, then it was freed. It was no longer agitated. It was calm. When it's burning, it's trapped in its fuel because it's holding on to it's fuel. When it lets go, it's freed. And that's the message here. The six senses don't hold on to us. We hold on to them. And because we hold on to them, we're trapped. But when we let go, we're free.

So it's up to us to realize that no matter how good things can get in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas, they can still burn you. But if you learn how to use them, you can find a way to use these things to get you past the burning and into freedom. Because that's what the image of the fire that's gone out conveys: freedom. Release. So even

though the teachings are not world-affirming or life-affirming, they are freedom-affirming, happiness-affirming, and that's what counts.

We're not here to save the world. Sometimes you hear people saying that the Buddha wanted us to get rid of all kinds of suffering, wherever the suffering is found, and they use that as an excuse for not meditating and getting involved in all kinds of social programs instead, saying that their programs are Buddhist. But the Buddha was very particular. He focused on the suffering that comes from the mind's own actions, because that's where suffering is caused. He's not here to save the world. He's here to go beyond it, and that's where our practice should be aimed.