

In Charge of Your World

October 19, 2008

There's a story in the Canon, where 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? The King says, "Oh, I've been meeting with my ministers and talking about the sorts of things that people obsessed with their power talk about:—which is a remarkably frank statement. You can imagine a press conference where a President is asked, "What have you been doing today?" and he says, "Talking about the things that people obsessed with power talk about."

The Buddha asks the King, "Suppose someone were to come from the East saying, 'This enormous mountain is moving in from the East crushing all living beings in its path.' Another person comes from the South saying, 'There's another mountain coming from the South crushing all living beings in its path.' Another person comes from the West, a person comes from the North. 'There is a mountain moving in from the West and another mountain moving down from the North,' all four mountains crushing all living beings in their path.

The Buddha then asks him, "Given this great destruction of human life, and remembering about how rare it is to gain a human birth, what would you do?" And the King says, "Well, what else could I do but practice the Dharma, train the mind, and do good?" And the Buddha says, "I announce to you, great king: Death is moving in, crushing all living beings in its path. So what are you going to do?" And the King says, "Well, what else can you do but practice the Dharma?"

We look at the situation in the world right now and there's a lot to be worried about. But we can be confident about one thing, that the best way to respond to whatever the situation is in the world is to practice the Dharma, to be generous, to be virtuous and to meditate to train the mind. Because whether the situation in the world is good or bad, there is always aging, illness and death. There is no point where the world is so totally free of insecurity that you can really trust that the situation is going to be good. Even if the economy is great and everybody agrees to lay down their arms, people are still going to get sick, still going to get old, and still going to die.

But the empowering thing in all this is that your actions do shape the world you experience: the world you've experienced, the world that you're experiencing now, and on into the future. So no matter what anybody else does, you always want to practice the Dharma—to hold by your ideals, to hold by your principles—because you create your world through your actions, and you want that world to be a principled one.

One of the misunderstandings we pick up from the media is that the important decisions in our world are made by other people over whom we have no control. But it's a fact that even though we're sitting here in the same room, each of us lives in a different world. And the world of our experience is created by our own actions. We're the ones who are creating it, and we continue to create it with our actions each moment.

So basically you're in charge of your world. You're not a monad totally independent from influences from outside, but the choices you make are the ones that shape your life. If you make wise choices, generous choices, you protect yourself and you protect other people. On the surface it may sound selfish. Here you are trying to make sure your little world is okay, but the only way you can make sure your little world is okay is to act in a way that you're not harming anybody else. And influences spread around. If you act in a noble way even in the midst of danger and destruction, that's a good example to other people. Other people want to join in.

Being a human being is not really worth much if it's all just scrambling after wealth, scrambling after things that other people have to be deprived of. The Buddha saw this prior to going out practicing. He said the world was like a puddle that was drying up, and there are all these fish in the puddle fighting for that little last bit of water. He found it really dismaying. That kind of life is not a human life, it's an animal life. Human life is one in which, regardless of what the situation is outside, you know you shape your world through your actions, and that the actions shaping a good world are ones that are honorable, compassionate, wise. And you can hold to that principle.

Some people were commenting this evening that the crowd here today was one of the gentlest crowds they had ever seen. That's because we came together to do good, to be generous, and to rejoice in one another's generosity. This is something that's been typical of the Buddhist tradition ever since the very beginning. Back in the 19th century when Westerners were beginning to read some of the Buddhist texts, and all saw was suffering, death, aging, illness, As a result, they wrote Buddhism off as a very pessimistic religion. But when they went to Asia, they saw that Buddhists in general were very happy people. The temple fairs, the various observances in the course of the year, were always very happy gatherings. And the Westerners came to the conclusion that Buddhists didn't understand their own religion. If they really understood what the Buddha taught, they would be morose and horribly depressed. But instead they were happy.

So Westerners came up with a theory of what they called the great tradition versus the little tradition, i.e. the great tradition being what was in the texts and the little tradition being Buddhism on the ground. But what they really missed was the central message in the texts, which is that your happiness is in your hands. And that true happiness comes from behaving in a way that's totally harmless. And not just harmless in the sense that you're not going to hurt other people, but also that you're going to positively do good by practicing generosity as an important part of the path. This is how the Buddha's message is empowering. You can create a happy life by acting in ways that are noble and good.

You see this in the Buddhist tradition all the way from the time of the Buddha's funeral. Even though the Buddha had just passed away, there was singing and dancing at his funeral in honor of him. On the one hand, people were sad that he had gone, but on the other, they were honoring the fact that they had been alive when there had been such a wonderful human being in the world. The same with the temple fairs in the very early centuries: They were very happy

occasions because everyone got together to do good. Social caste didn't mean anything. Everybody was working together, helping in line with their talents and abilities.

So it is possible to create a good society. Whenever one gathers around the principle that true happiness comes from being harmless, being helpful, training the mind—that's empowering. And you don't need to have political power in the world outside. You have the power to create your own world right here, right now through your actions.

One thing that would frequently strike me when I was in Thailand was that I'd be on my alms round, walking past a little tiny grass shack, just big enough for two people to sleep in. And sure enough there were two people in the grass shack, a newlywed couple, still very poor. One of them would run out of the house and want to put something in my bowl. When you're the beneficiary of the generosity of poor people, it really goes to the heart. I'd come back from my alms round and tell myself, "You can't be lazy today. A poor person has been generous with you."

The Buddha's teaching gives that opportunity to be generous, to be virtuous, to everybody, regardless of their position on the world. Regardless of how rich or poor you may be, no matter what society may think of you, you have the ability to train your mind. And you can shape your world through that power. The teachings talk about becoming: It's basically your sense of the world in which you live, and your identity within that world. That becoming is based on your actions. Your actions are the field in which a particular sense of the world can grow. You keep on doing things that you know are good, and that creates a good field. The possibilities in that field are always replenished. That's something totally within your power. The world at large may have political strife, economic collapse—all kinds of negative things may be happening but in your world—but you're creating a good world. And you're not the only one benefiting from that.

So this is why we train the mind. Regardless of the situation outside, it's through training the mind that we're shaping the world—the world in which we live and the world in which the people around us live as well. So even though the mountains of aging, illness, and death may be moving in, we can still train the mind. Because as the Buddha pointed out, death is not the end. It's one incident in a very long story. Poverty is not the end. Famine, the four horsemen, are not really the end. The four horsemen have been stampeding all over the world for who knows how long. But we can still do good.

And in doing good, we protect ourselves. As the Mangala Sutta points out, your protection lies in the good you do. There was another time when King Pasenadi went to see the Buddha. He had commented that the more he thought about it, the more he realized that people who act in harmful ways in what they do, in what they say, in what they think don't really protect themselves. They don't really love themselves. They leave themselves open to attack from all sides. The people who are well protected are the ones who behave well in thought and word and deed. With that kind of protection, you don't need an army. Or as the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*, if your hand doesn't have a wound, then you can pick up poison and not get harmed by it because you haven't done the sort of thing that would leave an opening for the poison to seep into.

In the same way, when you train your mind, you're giving protection to others and to yourself as well. This is how we can live together in peace and harmony. So on a day like this when people have come together to do good, it's something we should rejoice in. Because that rejoicing helps to remind us where true happiness lies.