

The Brightness of Life

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The story goes that when Anathapindika first met the Buddha, he asked the Buddha who he was. And the Buddha said, “An Awakened One,” which is what “Buddha” means.

And Anathapindika said, “Did you say, ‘An Awakened One?’” He was glad to hear that there was an Awakened One in the world. Who knows where he got the idea that this was something special. It may have been something buried from a previous lifetime. But for him it was very good news that there was a Buddha in the world. He gave brightness to life.

Because the Buddha does teach the way to put an end to suffering. He doesn’t spend a lot of time focusing on issues that are beside the point. His very first sermon went straight to the point: “This is going to all be about suffering and the end of suffering.” His first noble truth, which is often misrepresented as, “Life is suffering,” actually says simply, “There is suffering” and identifies what it is: the act of clinging. Wherever there’s clinging, there’s suffering. And what causes the clinging? Craving. Which is why we have a path to put an end to craving.

And the fact that we have these things, that we know these truths: That’s really good news. It’s what gives brightness to the world.

One of the major misunderstandings about the Buddha’s teachings is that they’re pessimistic, viewing the world in dark terms. Well, the Buddha has us focus on the suffering in the world because that *is* the big problem. He doesn’t deny that there’s pleasure to the aggregates, pleasure to the senses. But he points out that if you focus on the pleasures, you’re going to also be subject to the pains, because they keep coming back, coming back. But if you can learn to focus on the drawbacks of these things, learn how to let go of them, the mind opens to something much bigger and much better. That’s where the brightness lies.

So the Buddha’s approach is strategic. He doesn’t say, “Life is suffering,” simply, “There is suffering in life.” He doesn’t say, “Everything is bad.” He just points out that, if you stay focused and obsessed with the pleasures of the things that people normally get obsessed about, there’s going to be a lot of suffering. But if you learn how to undo that obsession, the mind can open to the Deathless, which is something really special. That’s where the brightness lies.

Years back, when Ajaan Fuang commented on what he owed to Ajaan Lee, that was his comment: that Ajaan Lee had shown him the brightness of life.

So what’s bright in life? The fact that there’s a path, the path leads to the end

of suffering, and the end of suffering is not a blank-out or a dull state or just simply learning how to be equanimous about things. There really is another dimension that the mind can touch—a dimension in which there’s an awareness that all the suffering is gone. There’s an awareness of freedom.

That’s why we’re practicing. The path is still open. It’s still remembered and we’re still in a position where we can practice it. Now, there will come a day, and the Buddha forecast it, where people will forget the path. This has happened many times before.

He himself compared himself to someone who has gone into the forest and has come across an old road. He follows the old road and he comes to a deserted city. The person then goes back to a king and says, “There’s this beautiful deserted city. If you can clean up the road, clear away the roots and the vines, people will be able to inhabit the city again.” So that’s what he did. He cleared up the roots and the vines, opened up the road.

So the way is still open. We should take advantage of that. It’s not like we have a lot of time. Even a hundred years is a short time for a life. When you come to the end of your life, it seems like there’s nothing left—it’s all gone. So while you still have life and still have the opportunity, devote it to the practice. This is where the brightness lies.

We get side-tracked by the glamor of other things: beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations; the desire to be beautiful, the desire to be wealthy, the desire to be powerful. All these things have a glamor that distracts us. It’s like fools’ gold. It’s shiny but it’s not the real thing. So you have to look a little bit deeper, to see behind the shine. What is there?

You take the body apart, and there’s really nothing that you want to look at in there. You look at wealth and you see all the problems that wealthy people have. You look at power, and everybody who’s got power is afraid to lose their power so they end up doing all kinds of unskillful things.

So the goods of the world are not really all that good. Or as Ajaan Lee said, “Their goodness isn’t true, and their truth isn’t good, but the path to the end of suffering is something both true and good.” It’s a noble truth.

When the Buddha used the word “noble,” he was contrasting it with what he called individual or partial truths—in other words, things that are true for people who only have a partial vision of what life is and what its possibilities are. Noble truths are true all the way, and they’re true for everybody.

That definition of Dhamma as “what maintains its quality”: It doesn’t mean that things are permanent, maintaining their quality permanently, but it does mean that they’re qualities the same for everybody. The path is true for me, the

path is true for you, it's true for everybody. If we practice it. It's a truth of the will.

In other words, there are certain parts of the path we have to accept as working hypotheses. The fact that suffering can be ended is something you have to believe if you want to work with the path. You don't have any empirical evidence. But you can ask yourself, "What would life be like if you didn't make that assumption and didn't take this path?"

You'd be back in the darkness that Anathapindika had lived in before the Buddha came. He lived a good life, he was a generous person, but until he met the Buddha there was a sense that something was missing. And what was missing was the way out, a way to a genuine happiness.

So you take the truths of the path as your working hypotheses and you do your best to see if they're true. Because the alternative is so depressing. That's the irony there. The people who look at Buddhism as being pessimistic: What do they have to offer as an alternative path to happiness? Nothing really reliable, nothing that would really measure up anywhere near to what the Buddha has to offer. They're the pessimists. "You have to take the good with the bad," they say. "You have to put up with this in order to get that."

Now, the Buddha does say that there are hardships on the path, but once you get to the end, you're not putting up with anything at all anymore. The mind is totally freed, totally relieved of its burdens. There really is a path and it really is good. But you want to be able to test that for yourself. If you don't, it'll always be a question mark. And it'll be a question mark that'll be haunting you.

As with Anathapindika: He didn't consciously think about the fact that the world was lacking a Buddha before he met the Buddha. But as soon as he found one, he realized, "Oh. This is what it's been missing."

So don't just lie around and wait until the path is closed, when it gets forgotten. It gets buried by what the Buddha called "improved Dhamma." And we see this all around us. People saying, "Well, why don't we change the Vinaya here, why don't we change the Dhamma there, make it nicer?" That's what's going to kill the Dhamma.

So while the true Dhamma is still alive, take advantage of it. It's still available. It's simply up to you to decide whether it's important enough to focus all your attention here.