

The Noble Search Makes Us Human

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As the Buddha noted, when we encounter suffering or pain in life, we respond by searching for a way out. And that search comes in two forms. One is what he calls the ignoble search: You look for happiness, you look for an escape from pain and suffering, in things that will age, grow ill, and die, or that will be affected by your own aging, illness and death. And then there's the noble search, in which you search for something that is free from aging, free from illness, beyond death.

That's what his search was. And when you think about it, it's *this* search that makes us human. Common animals can look for things that age, grow ill, and die, but they can't look for the deathless. This is something that's specifically a human pursuit. And it's something that should be honored. After all the Buddha does call it a noble search. Even if you don't get to the deathless in this lifetime, still the search itself is noble. It asks special things of you: in terms of what you have to give up and the work you have to do to develop the qualities that will take you to the deathless, or simply the motivation that you want to find a happiness that's not going to depend on conditions. That's a noble motivation. And it's important to remember: This is what makes us human.

There was a famous physicist, Richard Feynman, who in addition to working on quantum theory also played the bongos. He once received a fan letter from someone who'd read one of his books, saying that it's learning that you play the bongos that makes me realize that you're a human being. And Richard Feynman fired back a letter – and *fired* is the operative verb here – saying that No, it was doing physics that made him a human being. How can you say doing physics isn't human? Even though it involves a lot of calculation – and maybe to some people calculations seem to be fairly arid and very demanding – but that's an important part of being a human being is: pushing yourself, using *all* of your faculties.

One of the problems in our culture is that we don't appreciate this aspect of being a human. Just this evening, I was reading an article by a psychologist who was talking about her Dhamma teacher who'd had some training in a monastery, and yet he didn't have any training in being a human being – or so she said. In the monastery they taught detachment, whereas being human, of course, is all about being attached, entangled.

Now that view places a very limited, very domestic view on what it means to be a human being. Our desire for true happiness is what makes us human – with

an emphasis on the *true*. We've looked for pleasures in all kinds of things. And as Ajaan Lee once commented, even dogs can find pleasures. But the desire for something special, for a happiness that's not going to disappoint, for a happiness that's not going to harm anybody: Common animals don't think about whether their happiness is going to harm anybody, they just take what they can get. But as human beings, we have to think about what impact our happiness is going to have on others. So the search for the deathless is a way in which we find a true happiness that gets us out of the feeding cycle entirely.

Look at the world: Everybody's feeding, feeding, feeding on one another. The Buddha's image was of a puddle of water that was drying up, and the fish in the puddle were fighting over what little water is left. He looked at that happening and he knew that the water was going to dry up eventually someday and the fish were all going to die. But in the meantime, they'd be fighting one another, hurting one another, over that last little gulp.

So that vision gave rise to *samvega*, which can be translated in lots of ways. It can be translated as dismay or even terror: the realization that if your happiness depends on that little bit of water, you're going to create a lot of bad karma and then you're going to die anyhow. Is that all there is to life? And his answer was No. That No is what constitutes *pasada*: that defiant answer to the limitations that people normally accept in life. It's the conviction that there's a way out and that through human effort, you can find it.

We're lucky we have the example of the Buddha. The Buddha didn't have any examples in his day. People within Indian society apparently knew that at some point in the past there were Buddhas, but nobody knew what they were or what they taught. All they knew was that Buddhas were inspiring. But for the most part, people just said, "Well, just take what you can get. The world offers only this much, so grab as much as you can get before you go because if you don't grab it, somebody else will grab it." But then whoever grabs it, of course, is going to have to let it go. If they don't let it go, it'll be ripped out of their hands. There must be something better. This conviction that there's something better and the willingness to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to find that something better: That's what makes the search noble. That's what makes it really human.

So even though the culture at large doesn't appreciate this search, at least *we* should learn to appreciate it. In Thailand, with all the failings and faults of Thai culture, at least this is something they do appreciate: that when someone goes forth, it's something to be honored, something to be celebrated. This is what they know makes their culture valuable because it provides an opening to the culture of the noble ones. So they encourage it.

And the going forth of an individual is not just an individual thing, because after all, there has to be support. Both sides are responsible for the other – are responsible *to* the other. If you're the person going forth, you have to make sure that your needs are as minimal as possible so that you're not burdensome on others. And there's that sense of indebtedness to the support you get. People who are in no way related to you treat you as a relative. They give you food and they don't ask for anything in return, aside from the fact that you practice.

There were times in Thailand when I'd be on my alms round and walk past a little shack. One in particular I remember was a newlywed couple. They had a little shack that was just big enough for the two of them to lie down and they had a little kitchen in the back, which was no more than a little charcoal stove and a few cabinets. That was it. And almost every morning they had some food for me: a little piece of sausage, a little piece of dried fish, a little rice, whatever. And the sense of indebtedness that came from being the beneficiary of poor people's generosity: I'd come back, have my meal, and I'd remind myself, "Okay, now you've *really* got to practice today."

So the act of going forth is a social event. It's an interconnected event. That psychologist who thought that life in a monastery was just very detached and cut off from the human race, didn't know anything about monasteries. As you can see here, we have a lot of contact with human beings of all kinds. And we're all coming together in a voluntary way to help one another deal with a very specific and important problem, the fact that everybody's suffering and wants a way out. So we're *all* working together on a noble purpose, with a noble motivation – to the extent that we want to find that happiness that doesn't turn into anything else, something that's ageless, free of illness, and deathless. That's what makes our human life noble.