

Keeping Your Head

January 12, 2018

There's a passage in the Canon where King Pasanedi comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him, "Where are you coming from in the middle of the day? What have you been doing?" And the king, in a remarkable display of frankness, says, "Oh, the typical things that obsess someone who's obsessed with power, gaining power, keeping power."

And the Buddha asks him, "Suppose a trustworthy person were to come from the East and say that there's a huge mountain moving in from the East, crushing all living beings in its path. And then a trustworthy person would come from the South, saying that there's a mountain moving in from the South, crushing all living beings in its path. Similarly from the West and the North: altogether, four mountains moving in. Given this terrible destruction of life, and realizing that human life is so fragile, what would you do?" And the king says "What else could I do but practice the Dhamma?"

Then the Buddha says, "In the same way, great king, aging, illness, and death are moving in, crushing all living beings in their wake. What are you going to do?" And the king says "What else can I do but practice the Dhamma?"

And how would you practice the Dhamma in a case like that? In the case we're in, you have to calm your mind. In other words, you need to have your priorities as to what's important, what's not important, and focus on what's important.

As the Buddha said, the sign of a wise person is realizing the duties that fall to you and focusing on those duties, and not taking on duties that don't really fall to you. And one of your main duties is to get your mind in order.

It's telling to note that when the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, it's never because the present moment is a wonderful place or because it's the only reality there is or anything like that. He said it's because there's work to be done here, and you don't know how much time you have to do it. His focus on the present is always in the context of realizing how close death can be. It could come at any time. And you've got work to do. You don't know how long you have to do it but you do have right now.

So you have to get very focused on this point. Drop all your extraneous concerns and keep your head. There's a saying that if you can keep your head when everyone else is losing theirs, you're a person of value. That's a strength. It means, of course, that you have to have some equanimity about the things that are not your duties, that don't fall to you. Otherwise, they fritter away the time and the energy needed for things that really do fall to you.

I think this is one of the problems in our society: We tend to see equanimity as indifference and indifference as a weakness of character—that you don't care when you should be caring. But ask yourself: Who's placing the shoulds on you there? Even the Buddha himself didn't place shoulds on people. The duties that he gave in the four noble truths are for people who, of their own accord, want to put an end to suffering, who see that their untrained mind is causing trouble for themselves and for other people. They see that this is the area where they have real responsibility as well as the ability to make a difference. You do have some control here, and you want to take advantage of that.

There are lots of things out there that you can't control, and if you get upset about them you're going to lose your head. In other words, you're going to forget about what your real duties are: the duties that you've taken on yourself for the end of suffering.

So it doesn't matter who's riding the mountains or what path the mountains are taking: They're moving in. There's a morbid fascination now in reading the news. But how much of the news can we trust? And how much of it do we really need to know? It doesn't take much to size up the situation and to tell yourself, "Okay, I've got to focus on my business." Because the news—regardless of where it's coming from—is telling you that what you're doing right now is of no importance. They're happy to move into your space and into your time and into your mind, to tell you what to think and what to do. You have to say, "No. I've got to set my own priorities. I can't let my time be invaded like this. I can't let my mind be invaded like this."

So you try to extend goodwill to all. And that means everybody. Even the people you don't like. Even the people who are the main causes of trouble on Earth right now. And what does goodwill mean in that case? It means that you wish they would understand the true causes for happiness and be willing and able to act on them. That's something we can fervently wish for everybody. But goodwill has to be tempered by the realization that not everybody is going to follow through with our wish.

Someone once asked the Buddha about this teaching that he's given that leads the world out to freedom: Is the whole world going to go or half the world or a third of the world? And the Buddha didn't answer. Ven. Ananda, who was sitting nearby, was concerned that the person asking the question might get upset that here he was, asking an important question, and the Buddha was playing silent.

So Ananda took the person aside and said, "It's like a fortress. You've got a wise gatekeeper at the fortress and there's one gate. He goes walking around the fortress and he doesn't see a hole even big enough for a cat to slip through—a nice image. And he comes back from his walk and, from what he's seen, he

can't conclude how many people are going to go in and out of the fortress. But he does know that whoever's going to go in or out of the fortress on foot will go through the gate.

In the same way, the Buddha doesn't know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, i.e., follow his path. After all, people have the choice to follow the path or not. But he does know that if they're going to go to release, they'll have to follow this path: the noble eightfold path, the seven factors for awakening, the establishings of mindfulness. This is the path.

There's no telling how many people will be willing to search for true happiness, and you can't make your happiness depend on their choices. If your happiness depends on the choices of other people, it's going to be very unstable. You've got to make your happiness depend on *your* choices. Which means that when it comes to the choices of other people, you have to be equanimous. You have to keep your head so that you can make *your* choices well. Because that's the area where you do have some responsibility and do have some power to make a change.

So as you're training your mind, you remind yourself this is where the work is. This is where you want to be if you want to put an end to suffering, if you want to be responsible about how you look for happiness. And remember, too, that having equanimity about the things around you that you can't change is actually a strength of character and not a weakness. Do your best not to let your head get cluttered up with things that will make you lose your head. Try to stay focused so that even when mountains come moving in, they can't crush your spirit. They can't crush the goodness of the heart. They can't crush the strength of your heart.

Even as the body gets crushed, the heart will move on. Consciousness will move on. That's the time where you really need to keep your head. So if the news is making you lose your head right now, how will you keep your head when you have to leave this body? You've got to develop the strength of equanimity to make sure you make the right choices as a habit, for your protection now and into the future.