

The Buddha's Universal Solvent

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There's a poet who once said that the universe isn't made of atoms. It's made of stories. That's certainly true of the universe of the mind. And most stories involve suffering. There's a passage where the Buddha uses the pattern of dependent co-arising—which he usually uses to describe the origin of suffering—to describe the origin of the world. Our sense of the world comes from the processes of dependent co-arising. You start with ignorance and then end with suffering.

But there's another passage where he goes through dependent co-arising, arrives at suffering, and then says that the next step is conviction. In other words, you're looking for a way out of suffering, and you decide you've found a way out in the story of the Buddha. After all, that's what conviction is all about. It's through that conviction that we can actually get the strength of mind and the motivation to practice, so that we can find a way out of suffering, too. And the main topic of conviction is being convinced of the Buddha's awakening. That's a story that helps lead out. It shows us how the Buddha led himself out of all the narratives and stories that had bound him for so long.

You remember the first knowledge he gained on the night of his awakening. It was the knowledge of his previous lifetimes: back eons and eons and eons. And when you see so many stories like that, the stories themselves begin to become meaningless. He saw that he was born with a certain name, lived in a certain species or clan, had this experience of pleasure and pain. This was the food he ate. Then he died. That was it: again, and again and again, the same pattern, over and over again: pleasure, pain, eating, dying; pleasure, pain, eating, dying. It gave him a sense of urgency—a sense of terror, actually.

When we translate *samvega*, it's good to remember that it's not just dismay. It also means terror: that if this process doesn't end, it's just going to keep on leading to more and more suffering. But notice how the dimension of time changes the meaning of the stories. It's an immense dimension of time. As the Buddha once said, you can't find a beginning point of time. It's inconceivable: so out there that you can't even think about it. But he would use this sense of time when he was teaching his students. He said that it's hard to find someone who hasn't been your mother, someone who hasn't been your father, someone who hasn't been your brother or sister, son or daughter in the course of that long, long time. This is especially true of people who are currently close to you. A person who is now your mother might have been your son in a previous lifetime. Your daughter might have been your brother. It gets mixed up again and again and again: all kinds of combinations.

And when the Buddha talked about how all the people you meet have probably been your mother at one point, it wasn't to give rise to a sense of compassion for everybody you meet. It

was to give rise to a sense of terror and a desire to get out. When we think about how difficult our relationships are with our parents, and with our children and our siblings, well, it hasn't been this way just in the 20th and 21st centuries. It's always been difficult. But we keep coming back for more, getting entangled over and over again.

So what the Buddha looked for was a way to dissolve these entanglements and these stories. That's why he went to the second knowledge. The question was, how was it that people are reborn? When he looked at his own many, many lifetimes, he didn't see the pattern as to why sometimes he was a deva, sometimes he was down in hell, sometimes he was an animal, sometimes he was a human being. What was the pattern? He later commented on how a lot of people who gain knowledge of previous lifetimes come to all different kinds of conclusions because it's a very complex process.

But with that second knowledge, he saw that it was all because of our karma—the intentions we act on—and the views we hold in mind. That insight began to dissolve a lot of the stories: the stories where you've been the victim of something or of somebody's actions. Well, you have to accept the fact that you've probably victimized other people in the past: not necessarily the person who's victimizing you now, but somebody. And it makes the desire for justice, trying to get back at somebody, seem very petty. And yet that's often why we keep coming back again and again. There's a Pali term, *vera*, which means the kind of animosity where somebody has done you wrong, and you want to get back at them. That's what can lead people to be reborn, so that they can get back at the other side. But then the other side will want to get back. And who knows how the story started? This, too, should give you a sense of dispassion or disenchantment with the whole process.

The Buddha's view of the cosmos is immense not just in terms of large dimensions of time, but also of large dimensions of space: all the different levels of being. And he saw there was no lasting happiness to be found in any of them, which means that no matter how much we care for other people, we can't be responsible for their happiness. There's nobody in charge. Remember that chant we recite again and again: "There's no one in charge." Well, this is what it means. There's no plan. There's no rhyme or reason to the universe. It has its patterns and, as with any complex system, if you learn how to manipulate the patterns, you can use them to get out. That's the Buddha's recommendation. We've been good to one another; we've been bad to one another, but you have to realize you can't be there always for somebody. This is why our chant for goodwill says, "May all beings look after themselves with ease." You're not promising to be there for them, because you can't. You can be there for a little bit, but then there comes a point where it's beyond your control. So the best course is to find the way out.

As the Buddha said, the path out is the most valuable thing: having right view; having your virtue. There are times when people are tempted to go against their virtue, either for fear of losing their relatives or harming their health or harming their wealth, but he says that with

health, wealth, and relatives, losing them is nothing important. And he's the same person who said we have this immense debt of gratitude to our parents.

Yet at the same time, he says that if it comes to the precepts, you have to hold on to the precepts as being more valuable, because if you break the precepts for the sake of your relatives, then when everybody dies—as they're bound to, anyway—then what are you left with? You're left with the karma. And you're also left with having set a bad example for your relatives, your friends, or other people who saw what you did. That can have an impact for a long time.

So it's good to think about the Buddha's first two knowledges because they put things into perspective in these huge amounts of time and expanses of space: big enough that you might as well say they're infinite. We're dealing with individual people right here, right now, but you have to think of what you're doing in terms of that much larger picture: that you try to have goodwill for one another, you try to help one another as you can, but you can't really be there for anybody else for any really secure length of time. The best thing we can do for one another is to be kind to one another and set a good example through our own practice and try to dissolve the stories away as much as we can.

This is what the Buddha's awakening knowledge is. It's a solvent, a universal solvent that can dissolve all the worlds, all the universes, all the stories we've been involved in. When you get down to the four noble truths—and that's the third knowledge of the Buddha's awakening—"beings" and "worlds" disappear. These truths are expressed just in terms of suffering and the acts of the mind that lead to suffering—in other words, the things that you experience directly inside that nobody else can experience.

Each of us has to experience these things on our own: the suffering, the actions inside that lead to suffering, and also the qualities we can develop that can take us beyond suffering. There are no stories there. When you're really with the breath, there's no story there. You might make a little story about how, "Last night, I meditated really well. I stayed with the breath." But if you were to give a really detailed story of your meditation, well, the breath came in. Then the breath came out. Then the breath came in again. Then went out again. Then it came in again; went out again. You adjusted it, then it came in again. Not much of a story. But when you get to nibbana, there are no stories at all; no suffering at all.

So the Buddha's knowledge is a solvent for all the stories and all the suffering that we've been creating for ourselves and with other people. Now, other people may continue to want to create suffering, but you can't say, "Well, I'm going to put my practice aside for their sake," because they're just going to keep on wanting to create suffering. You can't keep on playing their games. There comes a point when you have to say, "Enough." You do it with kindness and you do it with firmness, remembering what your true valuables are: not your relatives, not your wealth, not your health. Your right views and your virtue: Those are the things you could really hold onto, because if you lose those, you lose an awful lot. You just go back into that maelstrom of worlds again. And who knows when you're going to come out again?

There's an image in *The Divine Comedy*, Francesca da Rimini is in a whirlwind in hell with her lover. Dante tries to talk to her, but she keeps getting whirled around. Every now and then, her face appears again in the midst of the whirlwind and they exchange a few words, but before the sentence is done, she's off again. That's what our encounter with one another is like in these worlds. We pass briefly, nothing gets fully communicated. So we try to make whatever message we get to one another a kind message, a helpful message, but ultimately realizing that each of us has to be responsible for his or her self, his or her own happiness.

When I was first ordained, there was another young man who was ordained at the same time. He was going to get married, and his fiancée said she didn't want marry someone who hadn't been a monk. So he planned to ordain for just a couple weeks. Well, at the end of the couple weeks he decided he really liked being a monk. It was something he didn't expect at all. So the day before his parents and his fiancée came to pick him up, Ajaan Fuang gave a talk on how we're not born into this world alone, that we have a huge debt to our parents. So the young man eventually was willing to go back home, disrobe, and get married. That was what his parents and his fiancée wanted.

Then I started thinking about my own parents and my own family. A couple of days later I mentioned this to Ajaan Fuang, and he said, "Look, when we were born in this world, we came alone. We go alone. Nobody hired us to be born. We have to figure out our own meaning in our own lives, find happiness for ourselves. We try to do it wisely and not harm anybody, but ultimately it's each person for him or her self." Something of a paradox. He told the young man that we didn't come into the world alone. He told me we come into the world alone. A different teaching for different people at different places in their practice.

But as practitioners, we have to realize that we're here practicing because we've seen that we can't find happiness in the world. The world isn't there to give us happiness, and we can't give full happiness to the world. And all the stories that make up our worlds are not going to end unless we have conviction in the Buddha's awakening as the way out. That provides the solvent that can dissolve these stories away. It's only then that a true happiness can be found, a happiness that doesn't harm anybody—because that's the other part of these worlds that we go through, these stories we go through: Even as we try to help one another, we end up harming one another in lots of ways. So the best course of action is try to find a way out.