

Loss

September 22, 2020

Human life entails a lot of loss. It seems like the longer you live, the more you lose: The people you know and love pass away; your own body begins to deteriorate; institutions that you thought were solid, reliable, turn out to be corrupt—very unstable. There's a lot of reason for grief.

So it's good to reflect on what the Buddha taught about grief. There was the time when King Pasenadi came to speak with the Buddha, and it so happened that his favorite queen died. One of his courtiers came and whispered the news into his ear. He broke down and cried.

The first thing the Buddha reminded him of was the universality of loss. When was it ever the case, he said, that things that are born, do not grow ill, do not age, do not die? It's all around us. The wise person thinks about the fact that it's all around us—and is stirred to action.

First, though, you give expression to your grief. The Buddha doesn't have you bottle it up or pretend it's not there. He said that to whatever extent you feel that something is accomplished by eulogies or making merit for the dead, you do your best to express your grief in a skillful way.

But then you start reflecting again on the universality of it all, and this can give rise to different emotions. One is compassion. Think of all the people out there who are suffering. The list just goes on, and on, and on.

Thinking about the endlessness of this gives rise to a different emotion: terror, *samvega*. Sometimes *samvega* is translated as a sense of urgency, but it's deeper than that, scarier than that. You think about life, the things you've accomplished, the things you enjoyed in the past: Where are they now? You're lucky if they're memories, but then the memories slip away. They get confused.

Some people go through life trying to gather up memories from different pleasures, thinking they'll have something to hold on to. Like that old song: *Preserve your memories, they're all that's left to you*. Well, they're not much to have left, as you start forgetting them, confusing them. You ask yourself, "This is what I'm living for—memories?" They're so ephemeral, so fleeting. And if you really think about that, it does give rise to a sense of terror.

Think of that conversation that Ven. Raṭṭhapāla had with King Koravya about aging, illness, and death: When the king was young he was strong, so strong he felt he had the strength of two men, but now he can't even control his foot. He means to put it in one place and it goes someplace else.

And even though he's king, when he's ill he can't ask his courtiers to share out the pain of his illness so he that feels less pain. He has to feel it all alone.

No matter how much he amasses in terms of wealth, he can't take it with him. And yet he's still a slave to craving. Tell him that there's a kingdom that he could conquer, and he'll conquer it, even if it's on the other side of the ocean.

That's where the terror comes in. Even though we suffer from aging, illness, death, and separation, over and over again, we keep coming back, coming back. Which is why we're fortunate that we've found a path that leads away from all that. After all, this reflection on samvega is not meant to stop there. If you stop there, you get depressed. It's meant to be coupled with *pasada*, a sense of confidence there is a way out.

And so, as you reflect on loss and the sense of grief that comes with loss, when you do it properly it should motivate you to be even more diligent in the path, more devoted to the path, because the path offers something that's not going to slip through your fingers.

Now, when you get started on the path and are thinking about the goal, it often seems really far away. There's that dialogue between the deva and a monk. The monk was a non-returner. He's bathing in the river one day, and the deva is attracted to him. She comes down and invites him to disrobe. In part of the dialogue, the deva says, "Why are you giving up what's immediately available for something that's unsure?" And the monk says, "I actually gave up something that was unsure for something that's immediately available." In other words, the pleasures of the senses are unsure, whereas nibbana, when you find it, is right *here*. And it's not going to change. It's outside of space and time. It's the surest thing there is.

As long as you haven't found it yet, you still have to go on samvega and *pasada* to motivate you. Samvega—that sense of terror of just coming back for things that are going to slip through your fingers like water, again, and again, and again, and creating a lot of suffering in the meantime.

You have the option of following the path. Other people have followed the path and they've reported that it leads to more than you could expect. The fact that it does take you outside of space and time means that it's not going to be touched by anything, but still, it is available. It's going to be found in the present moment, or *next to* the present moment, you might say. It's the end of all craving, not because you try to stop the craving, but because it's perfectly satisfying.

So reflection on loss, when it's done properly, becomes a motivation to the practice. Because you look at the alternative: just more loss, and you come back again for more loss again. Like King Koravya: You come back and you have to fight for whatever you're going to get, and then it goes away. You have to ask yourself, "Is that what you want?" If the answer is No, well, here's your breath, and here's the next breath—make the most of them.