

The Power is in Your Hands

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When the Buddha gave a discourse on what it means to have an auspicious day, he did something very striking. He mentioned death. As he said, an auspicious day is when you don't go chasing after the past or hankering after the future, and you clearly see what's arising right there, right there, in the moment. Then you do your duty with regard to that—because who knows? Tomorrow, death may come.

The fact that he mentioned death in conjunction with an auspicious day went against the customs of his times, which believed that even the mention of death was inauspicious. But the mere mention of the word “death” doesn't make anything inauspicious. In fact, if you're heedful, which is what the Buddha was trying to encourage, that's auspicious, because all skillful qualities come from heedfulness. It's not that we're innately good or innately bad. We have good characteristics and bad characteristics in the mind, good habits and bad habits. We develop the good ones because we realize that if we don't, we're in danger.

This means that our future is auspicious because of things we do, things we decide. To think in this way is putting the power in our hands, and that's very typical of the Buddha's teachings.

I've been reading recently about how some modern Dhamma teachers don't like the idea of kamma. They say it's laying blame on people for the sufferings they meet with in life. But the Buddha was never interested in laying blame. He was more interested in analyzing a problem and seeing what you were doing to cause the problem so that you could stop doing that and actually solve the problem.

The purpose of his analysis is to show how you're responsible for things so that you can be responsible for the solution. If you think you're not responsible for the cause, you try to throw things off on other people, and nothing gets accomplished. That's the ordinary nature of the world. It's always been that way: people blaming other people for their problems. The blame gets thrown around, and the problems never get solved.

But here we are, watching what arises in the present moment because we can do something about it. That's what the Buddha means when he says, “You do your duty.” The duties here, of course, are the duties of the four noble truths. The first is to comprehend suffering. When you find the cause, you abandon the cause. You do that by developing the path. And in developing the path, you get to the most important duty, which is to realize the cessation of suffering. There's a definite

program here. These are the Buddha's shoulds, his oughts. And it's not that he made them up and tried to impose them on other people. He found through his own practice that this is what you've got to do if you want to bring suffering to an end.

That's really auspicious: the idea that putting an end to suffering is possible. But it requires facing some unpleasant things. One is the suffering itself: You can't run away from it. And two, you have to recognize the extent to which it's coming out of the mind. This is why the Buddha chose the word "origination." Throughout the Canon, he uses this word primarily to talk about things caused by factors coming from within the mind. His analysis, of course, points us right here: The craving that causes suffering is not somebody else's craving; it's your own craving.

I know of one Dhamma teacher who objects to this, saying that actually craving comes *from* suffering, and then he leaves it right there: Craving is natural because suffering is natural. He doesn't explain where suffering comes from. But what purpose does that solve, and what problem does it help to solve? If you think of suffering as simply something you have to accept, then there'd be nothing wrong with the craving. You'd have to accept the craving as well. And there would be no duties. There would be no need to abandon it. And you'd wonder, "Well, why talk about this at all?"

Now, it's often true that suffering can lead to craving. But the Buddha says the most useful way to approach their relationship is to start with the craving that develops under the influence of ignorance. That's something you can end with knowledge. So we meditate to bring some knowledge to the process. Why does this happen? How does it happen? We can trace it back to feeling, contact, the six senses, and then the things that happen before contact at the six senses: name and form, fabrication, ignorance. All these things are happening inside.

This system of analysis may sound kind of abstract. And when things are laid out in a line like this, it sounds impersonal. But the Buddha wants you to develop this impersonal perspective on things that are actually very personal right now because we tend to be very attached to the personal things that are causing suffering. That's the whole analysis: We're attached to our ideas, to our perceptions, to the way we pay attention to things, and to the intentions we have. We're attached to the body.

We take these things for granted, and the Buddha's asking us to get a little distance from them so that we can see them clearly. He says that it's when you see these things as separate—that your awareness is one thing and these things are something else—then you really see them. You can pull back from them. At that

point, the question is not who's to blame. It's simply that this is how the process happens. And it's the same in everybody's heart, so nobody's to blame per se. It's more a question of, "Do you want to keep on suffering?" If you don't, you can do something about it by looking inside and looking inside in the right way, so that we can cut the process at its causes.

This is what we're here for, focusing on the breath so that we can bring some knowledge to the present moment because the breath is our anchor in the present. And it turns out that it's one of the forms of fabrication that, if you do it in ignorance, is going to lead to suffering. So focus right here. That's your entry into all of this. Breathe in a way that feels really good so that you have alternative ways of dealing with the different kinds of fabrication, the different manifestations of what the Buddha calls "name and form." You're developing a new relationship inside. That's where the problem is, and that's where the solution is as well.

So keep watching right here. At first, you may not see all that much, just the mind slipping off either into distracting thoughts or into sleepiness. But you can't let that get you discouraged because there's no other way out. You've got to learn how to develop a foundation here. This is going to require some ingenuity so that you can get around these ways in which the mind likes to block things off. After all, part of it doesn't want to solve the problem. It likes the way it's been doing things. It's okay with the way it's been doing things. But you've got to remind yourself that the deeper part of you realizes, "This is not okay."

This world we're in: It's a huge mess. There are times when it seems nice, and everybody likes the idea of interconnectedness. Then it shows its real side—what they celebrate it as interbeing, but it's really inter-eating. I mentioned that in an article one time. The editors of the journal in which the article was to appear really objected. They said, "This sentence has to go." I said, "Why?" They said, "It's confusing." "Well, what's confusing about that? It's three words." But it went against what they were trying to celebrate.

If you just go on being okay with the way things are, those things will definitely turn out to be not-okay. And then you're lost. The very things you were celebrating turn on you, which is why the Buddha said you want to be heedful so that you can develop the right attitude toward what's going on—and particularly the right attitude toward what's going on in the mind. There are parts of the mind that like to block off what's going on inside. And you've got to figure out, "How can I build up the strength so that I can see these things?" That's a lot of what the complaints about the Dhamma are all about. It exposes things that people would rather keep hidden. It points out the drawbacks to things that they would like to depend on.

So it's up to us to decide whose side we're on. Are we on the side of the people who criticize the Dhamma, or are we on the Buddha's side? Do we sympathize with what he did and what that can do for us? It *is* a matter of allegiance. So we deal with this fact that the mind is divided against itself. But we try to strengthen the skillful side—the heedful side that realizes what's really auspicious in life is when you get your act together. And you realize you don't have that much time, even if you live to 100. It's not a very long time. And it's not as if, at the very end, you've gathered up all those years. They've passed away, and they've taken things away with them. All you have left at that point is what you've mastered inside. That's something you can build up, and it doesn't have to wear away with time.

Which is why, when you're heedful, you want to follow the path. Do your duty every day, as the Buddha said, every day with every moment because that is within your power. This is the recurring theme in the Buddha's teachings. Other teachers put power someplace else. They said it was in the stars. The Ājīvakas, who taught determinism, were really avid astrologers, but, as the Buddha said, they taught powerlessness. The Jains taught karma, but they taught that everything you experience comes from past karma. As the Buddha said, that teaches powerlessness, too. If everything comes from a creator god, again, you're powerless.

But with the four noble truths and their duties, the Buddha's putting the power in your hands. So show some appreciation for that fact, and use it well.