

The Buddha's Compassion

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There's a passage where a monk is trying to explain the Buddha's position on the status of an arahant after death. We all know that the Buddha refused to say whether the arahant existed or didn't exist or both or neither, but this monk had said, "There's another alternative for describing the arahant." He didn't say what the alternative was. He mentioned this to some sectarians, and they said, "Well, that's not what we've heard from other Buddhist monks. You'd better go check that with the Buddha."

So he does. The Buddha gives a long explanation as to why he took no position at all—whether you could say that the fully awakened person existed, didn't exist, both, neither after death, and there was no other possibility of describing the arahant. He didn't describe that person at all. He finally explained why until the monk understood.

Then the Buddha concluded by saying, "It's only stress that I teach and the ending of stress." Or if you translate *dukkha* as "suffering": "It's only suffering that I teach and the ending of suffering." Some people take that to say, "Well, in that case, all the teachings we have about devas and nagas and other levels of being are probably not part of the Buddha's teaching because they have nothing to do with stress and the ending of stress."

Then, in response, there are other people who say, "Maybe the Buddha meant something else. Maybe he didn't say 'only.'" But it's there in the text: "*only* stress and the ending of stress." The point is that the Buddha's teachings on the cosmos are not totally irrelevant to the ending of stress. After all, he wants to describe what stress is, and part of stress is birth. And what kind of births are there? There're lots of different kinds of birth. Wherever there's birth, there's going to be aging, illness, death—except for some of the deva realms where there's no illness, no aging. But even so, wherever there's birth, there's death, and it's good to know that. There were Brahmans who felt that they were going to live eternally because they'd been born into a world that didn't seem to change at all. But the fact that they were born there meant that someday they were going to leave.

All this comes under the truth of stress: all the levels of the cosmos. And it's good to keep that in mind. A lot of us aren't going to experience those levels in our meditation, but some people will and it's easy to get waylaid, easy to get misled by what you see there. You think you've attained the goal when it's simply a level of concentration or one of the sensual levels of pleasure.

So all these teachings come under stress and they all perform a function. It's good to notice also, when the Buddha talks about cosmology, that he doesn't talk about it in a lot of detail. It's a sketch, just a sketch, just enough to gain a sense that these are among the possible rebirths; these are the things we're trying to grow out of, trying to go beyond. There were not a lot of

other issues like that, in terms of cosmology, that the Buddha taught. He taught just what was relevant to the issue of putting an end to stress, and he taught those details only from that angle. He didn't go into them beyond that.

So, in looking at his teachings, remember, they're all relevant. He once stated that the only things that he would say would be true and beneficial and timely. When he laid out the different permutations of those three tests, the idea that something could be beneficial but untrue wasn't even considered as a possibility. There's no room for useful fictions in his teachings.

Now, for us, we don't know. As long as we're practicing and haven't encountered any of these things, we just file them away for future reference. Focus on what you're doing right now, but file them away with a sense of appreciation that there is someone who actually went to all the trouble to discover all this and then to teach it.

There's that other story in the Canon, where the Buddha, after his awakening, was thinking about teaching and saw how difficult it was going to be. Think about it: He was going to set out a Dhamma and a Vinaya. And the Vinaya, especially, was going to be difficult, because it entailed fighting with people's defilements. Of course, setting out the Dhamma is fighting with defilements, too. People took umbrage at what he had to say. They got upset by what he had to say and they would come and they would argue. In some cases, he saw that they were sincere in their arguments so he would engage in debate with those people.

But there were others who were just out there to cause trouble. There was one guy who went around with the thought, "I'd like to go out and stir up some trouble. I'll find some contemplative and whatever he has to say, I'll argue with it." There's a lot of that kind of thinking in the world even today—or maybe I shouldn't say "even." So the guy came to the Buddha, and the Buddha put him in his place.

Think about it: Here's the Buddha who went to all that trouble to gain awakening and he could have not taught at all. After all, once you gain full awakening like that, you have no debts to anybody. We sometimes think about the kindness of our parents, the kindness of our teachers, and part of the mind will say, "Well, they had to be kind to us." If our parents had aborted us or thrown us away, they would have broken the law. So in some cases, they felt compelled to look after us. But with the Buddha, there was no compulsion at all. There was no debt at all that he had to repay. That's what the whole point of that story is: He thought of not teaching after thinking about all the difficulties.

One of the Brahmas got upset, "Oh my gosh, here he has gone to all this trouble to gain awakening and now he's not going to teach!" So he came down and invited him. He said, "There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will understand the Dhamma." So the Buddha contemplated that and said, Yes, there would be.

So out of his totally pure compassion, he gave us the teaching. He spent 45 years setting up the Dhamma, setting up the Vinaya, setting up the monastic Sangha, teaching people to

become members of the noble Sangha, so that the Dhamma would last long enough. Here it is, 2,600 years later, and it's still with us. So, when you take on his teachings as working hypothesis, we should also taking them on with a sense of appreciation for all that trouble he went through to bring us these teachings, to find these things out.

So the proper response is gratitude. In fact, this is a proper response for a lot of things in the world, but especially for the Dhamma. There's such a large sense of entitlement in our world right now. People feel they're owed this, they're owed that. And whatever good things come their way, they just take it for granted, without realizing all the difficulties that people have gone through in order to create a society that works somewhat. It may not be perfect, but think of what society would be like if everyone just decided, "Okay, I've had enough of this." We wouldn't be able to live.

So, it's a good reflect every day: We're dependent on the goodness of a lot of people. And there's the fact that someone went to all the trouble of going beyond just making sure that we could live together, but we could live in such a way that we could find meaning in life. After all, we engage in so much needless suffering and we cause so much needless suffering. We fight one another over that, creating even more suffering. So, here's the Buddha coming to see how to find a way out. He's found the way out and he shows us the way out. A lot of people don't appreciate that.

Remember the case of Ajahn Maha Boowa in Thailand: He went to so much trouble to defend the Forest Tradition, to defend the Dhamma, from people who were trying to put an end to it, and there was actually someone who tried to kill him one time. You can imagine how he felt. He didn't owe anything to anybody. It was out of the pure goodness of his heart that he taught, and yet there were people who took offense.

Of course, there were people who tried to kill the Buddha, too, and he had nothing but compassion for them: the hired—you can't call them hired guns, because they didn't have guns in those days—but the hired bow and arrows. One guy was hired to kill the Buddha, and then two people were hired to kill the first one, and then four were hired to kill the two, and eight were hired to kill the four, and sixteen were hired to kill the eight.

The first one came to see the Buddha and he just couldn't do it. The Buddha taught him and actually led him to become a stream-enterer. The same with the two and the four and the eight and the sixteen. He had that much compassion.

So, it's good to reflect on that as we practice. Without all the Buddha's efforts, where would we be? Those six years of austerities and the many years of teaching difficult people, just so that the Dhamma and Vinaya could be established. And here it is, it's free. We should be overwhelmed with gratitude and practice accordingly.