All Along the Way

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There’s a passage in the Buddhist teachings where he talks about why he left home to go out into the wilderness. He reflected on the fact that he was drunk with three things, intoxicated with three things—youth, health, and life. And yet he realized that he was going to come to an end. He had a tendency, being young, he looked down on old people. How could they let their bodies get worn down like that? He looked down on sick people. How could they allow themselves to become sick? He felt disgusted at corpses and dead people. How could people allow themselves to become dead like that? Yet then he reflected on the fact that it was going to happen to him, too, and it wasn’t appropriate for him to be disgusted or to look down on those things. He reflected further on what happiness is there in life, what true happiness is there in life, when aging, illness, and death lie in wait all around you. There’s a later version of the story in which they say that as a young man he had never seen any old or sick or dead people. The king, his father, had arranged that these people be kept out of his sight so that he wouldn’t have the inclination to go out and become a monk. But then it turned out that these things were unavoidable. He finally saw them, and he was struck with horror. The story then goes on to say that he saw a wandering forest monk, and he realized that if there was a way out of aging and illness and death, it had to be found by a person like that who wasn’t involved in the daily activities of household life, who had the time, the opportunity, and the environment in which to look inside the mind. Because if there’s a way out of aging, illness, and death, it has to be found within the mind. It can’t be found outside. So he resolved that that was the way he was going to have to go. The emotion he felt on seeing aging, illness, and death is called sanghvega. It’s a sense of shock. It’s a sense of dismay. It’s a sense of urgency. You’ve got to find a way out. As for the feeling he felt when he saw the forest monk, that’s called pasada, a sense of confidence. Okay, there must be a way out. If there’s a way out, this has to be it. And he was the sort of person who was willing to put his life on the line in order to find that way. Because, as he said, the happiness of ordinary life just wasn’t worth anything if it was going to end in misery like that, the indignities of aging, illness, and death. So he looked for a way out. When he found that way out, after six years of trying various approaches until he finally found the true way, he came back and taught it. And part of his teaching was asking everyone to reflect on these things day in, day out, whether you’re ordained or not, whether you’re a man or a woman. Reflect on the five things that we just chanted about just now. The first four are to give us a sense of sanghvega, because we do get to know so much about these things, especially in America. Old people are put away in old people’s homes, sick people are put away in hospitals, dead people are whisked away, and you don’t even see them at all at the funeral, or else their faces are made up. These things are hidden from our sight. And so he says, “Don’t allow them to be hidden from your mind. Remind yourself these things are there all the time.” And he added a fourth one, separation. All things dear and appealing to me that means not only material things but also people who are dear to you. There’s going to come separation at some point. Now, if you stop just there, that sanghvega would get pretty depressing. Then he adds a fifth one, a teaching on karma. That’s the way out. In other words, he says that we have within ourselves this capability of acting in a skillful way to find the way out of aging, illness, and death, even if we don’t get a total escape. At least we can make things milder through our choices, through our actions. Where do our actions come from? They come from the mind, the intentions that come from the mind to say this, do that, think this. So this is why we meditate, is to learn to be more skillful in what we do. All the Buddhist teachings point right here. What are you doing right now? In fact, there’s another reflection that the Buddha recommends specifically for monks, although it’s useful for laypeople as well. Days and nights fly past. What are you doing right now? What sort of answer would you give? For most of us, the answer is, “Well, I’m furthering my time away.” A king once went to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha said, “Well, where are you coming from here in the middle of the day, and what have you been doing?” The king said, “All the typical things of a king who’s obsessed with sensuality, obsessed with power, obsessed with ruling other people and having power.” The king, at least, was honest. Can you imagine our rulers being that honest with the Buddha? Obsessed with power, obsessed with sensual desires. But if you ask yourself that day in and day out, what are you doing right now? Time is slipping away. What of use are you doing right now? For most people, there’s not much to say. So the Buddha has you reflect on that as well. What’s the best use of your time right now? Also learning how to be more skillful in what you do, because what you do is going to shape both the present and the future. So he starts out. His first meditation instructions have to do with just the habit of how you conduct your life. Reflect on your intentions before you do something, before you say something, before you think something. What are going to be the results, both short-term and long-term? If you see any harm that’s going to come from those things, just don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, well, go ahead and do it, but then keep an eye out while you’re doing it to see if any unexpected bad results come up. If they do come up, stop. If they don’t, you can continue acting. When you’ve finished acting, then you reflect on the actual results that came over the long term. And again, if you see any harm, then you resolve not to do that again. If there’s no harm, okay, then you can take joy in that you’re on the path. It’s a simple principle of looking at what you’re doing, and particularly looking at what your intentions are. We tend to be not all that clear on our intentions, because many times some of our intentions are not all that pretty. So we learn to hide them from ourselves. In this way, we hide the most important force in our lives from ourselves, which is bound to have bad consequences. The training is to learn to look at your intentions. When you get used to doing that in terms of what you do and say outside, then you take that same tendency and use it as you sit here quietly looking at your breath. Have a firm intention. You’re going to see that you stay with the breath, and then do your best to maintain that intention. Now, if you just try to do it through force of will, it can only go so far. Your mindfulness slips, your intentions change, and you’re off. So you need to have other techniques as well, other means of keeping the mind with the breath. One of them is to try to take an interest in the breath. What’s going on when you breathe? Exactly what is the feeling of the breath? Where does the breath start? When does it end? When you breathe in, what sensations in the body tell you that you’re breathing in? What sensations tell you that you’re breathing out? Try to get in touch with the breath as a whole body process, and see what ways of breathing feel best right now. Sometimes when you’re tired, you want breath that’s energizing. Sometimes when you’re nervous and strung out, you want a breath that’s relaxing. Try to find the breath that’s just right for any imbalance in your body right now. You find that you get more and more interested in this process of breathing. It’s not just that you’re forcing the mind to stay with the breath. You begin to get curious. You have an opportunity to explore. At the same time, you get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing right now, simply changing your intention about the breath or changing the way you conceive the breath. Most often we think of the breath as the air that comes in and out of the lungs, but when the Buddha is talking about the breath, he’s actually talking about the energy flow in the body. How does that energy flow feel as you breathe in? How does it feel as you breathe out? Do you find any parts in the body that are tense? Does tension build up as you breathe in? Do you hold on to it as you breathe out? If you find that happening, well, change. See if you can breathe in without the tension building up. See if you can breathe out and allow the tension to go out with the breath as well. There’s lots to do right here in the present moment. It’s not just in-out, in-out, in-out. There are lots of ins and lots of outs to the breath. There are lots of ways you can adjust the breath. You can adjust it by putting pressure on it, physical pressure. You can adjust it by simply thinking longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, and see what happens. The purpose of this is, one, to get the mind into the present moment where it can see things, and two, to have a sense of how much you’re contributing to your experience of the present. Too often we think that we’re just passive. We just sit here and the world comes in at us like a TV program. It’s actually a lot more interactive than you might imagine. If you didn’t intend to experience the world, you wouldn’t experience it. You can see that with pain. When pain arises in the body, there are lots of different ways you can relate to it. You can get all upset about the pain, or you can ignore it, or you can be aware of it but say, “I’m just not going to get involved.” Your experience of the pain will be very different. Years back, I found myself part of a psych experiment at a college I went to. It was kind of like a lottery in the computer. If someone was going to do a psych experiment, they would go down to the computer and have a name generator go through the names of the people in the college. Every now and then, my name would come up, just like it would come up with everybody else’s. One in particular that I was involved in with the experiment was to put your hand in a bucket of ice water, and they had three different groups. They didn’t tell you this. You thought that everyone was getting the same instructions you were, but it turned out that three different groups were getting three different types of instruction. One group was told, “Take your hand out as soon as you feel any pain.” The second group was told, “Try to keep the hand in as long as you can.” The third group was given a technique for dealing with the pain in the hand. They said, “Think of the coolness in your hand in the ice bucket, going to the hand that’s not in the ice bucket, and then the warmth in your other hand going in to warm up the hand in the bucket. See how long it can last.” By that time, I had already started meditating, so I just sat there doing this heat transfer. I was in the third group, and after five minutes they told me I could stop. I was breaking the curve. Then they told you what the experiment was all about. They said, “With many people, if you tell them, ‘Take your hand out as soon as you feel any pain,’ within a few seconds they’d pull their hands out.” The ones that are told to try to keep it in with as much willpower as possible, they’d ask it to last a little bit longer, but not as long as the third group. It was given a technique or a method for dealing with the pain. So you see how much the way you approach a sensation makes a difference in the sensation. You find that you can stand things a lot longer if your intention is to not only use your force of willpower, but also to have techniques for dealing with things, to have skillful means for approaching the pain. It turns out this process applies throughout all perception. There’s a given that comes from the past of what you’ve done in the past, but there’s also the element that you’re putting into the present right now. And you really want to be as sensitive as possible to that, because that’s the important part. That’s the part you can change. So as we’re meditating, we’re trying to not just keep the mind still, but keep it still so you can see what you’re doing. So that when the Buddha asks, “Days and nights fly past, you can answer him accurately, and answer him in a way that you’re not embarrassed to answer.” I’m learning how to stop creating unnecessary suffering, both for myself and for other people. That’s the basic motivation you want to focus on as you meditate. That’s why we have the chant right after the contemplation of aging, illness, death, and karma. Reflect on, “Okay, given the fact that your actions are so important, it’s also important that you train your mind to have the right motivation, which is the motivation of as least harm and as least pain as possible.” The Buddha once said, “This is your great protection. There are lots of rewards that come from goodwill, this desire for happiness, this desire for harmlessness. If you don’t wish harm on other people, you’ll find that over time, fewer and fewer people are going to want to wish harm to you. You’re not putting anything bad into the system, so nothing bad is going to come back.” The Buddha once said, “This is your best protection. If you go around harming people, then no matter how big a suit of armor you put on, or how many bombs or anything, whatever you have as your protection, the karma is going to come back at you. You’ve undermined your protection.” But if your intentions are always harmless, there’s no harm that can come back. So this is the kind of power we want to develop, the power that comes from training the mind to be clear about its intentions and do the best to have the most skillful intentions possible, motivating our actions. So that’s what we’re trying to do as we sit here with our eyes closed, breathing in and breathing out. The Buddha came along and said, “Days and nights fly past, fly past, what are you doing right now?” You always hope that he’s going to come and ask you why you’re really focused on the meditation and doing it well. He has a tendency to come along, though, when you’ve slipped off. So try to be as alert as possible throughout the whole meditation, just as if there was someone going to come along and test you at any moment and you don’t know when. Because this issue is that important. We’re constantly creating karma because we’re constantly acting, we’re constantly having intentions. So we want to be as clear as possible all the time about what we’re doing, making sure that it’s as skillful as we can make it. That’s how the path develops all along the way.

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