Life Crises

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People tend to have three big crises in life. One is when you’re young and you’re thinking about what you’re going to do with your life. The other is a midlife crisis, when you look back at what you’ve done and it’s not what you thought you were going to do. It’s not as satisfying as you thought it would be. And you thrash around trying to find a new course. Even at the end of your life, when you look back, and it seems like a dream, and you wonder what it was all about, and the things that you worked so hard to gain just slip through your fingers. That’s the way it is for most people. But it’s not the way it was for the Buddha. His crisis was the first one. But he made a very wise choice at that point. He saw that life is a search. Where does the search come from? It comes from the fact that we’re all suffering. This is everyone’s reaction to suffering, that there’s bewilderment. Why is this happening? And two, the search is if somebody knows a way out of this suffering. And the things we search for in life are for that purpose, to find some way out of suffering, something to fill this big gaping hole we seem to have inside, where everything seems out of joint. He saw that search takes two forms. One is to search for something that changes. In other words, to search around in sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, ideas. Try to find some happiness there. Try to find an end to suffering there. But the problem is, you’re suffering, isn’t it? You age, grow ill, and die. And the things you’re searching for, or the things among which you’re searching, they age, grow ill, and die as well. They’re going to be separated from one another. That kind of search, he said, is an ignoble search, a search that’s not noble, because it doesn’t take you beyond aging and illness and death. The happiness you gain is very fleeting, and many times it’s not really happiness. It’s often the happiness you gain from things. It’s like the money you’re paid to be a mule. You know, those drug mules that they send off. They give you drugs, and they say, “We’ll pay you a little bit to go through this, go through customs, go here, go there, deliver the drugs.” They give you a little bit of money, and then it turns out that you get caught. And who gets caught? You get caught. The people who gave you the money, the people who gave you the drugs, or the people to whom you’re supposed to deliver that, they don’t get caught. In other words, the desire that makes us search for happiness among sensory things. They promise all kinds of rewards, but they give just a little bit. And then when you get caught, you’re in the midst of having done things you wish you hadn’t done. Where is that desire? It’s gone. It’s skipped town. You can’t make it suffer the consequences. You’re the one who’s suffering the consequences. And even if you didn’t do anything regrettable to gain that happiness, think about the sensory happiness you had last week, last month, last year, even yesterday. Where is it now? It’s gone. It touches you for a minute and it’s gone. When you really look at pleasure as it comes, it is so fleeting. The actual pleasure itself is something very small, and then you latch onto it and try to dress it up. And the latching on and the dressing up usually has very little to do with the pleasure. You’re trying to milk as much out of it as you can. And this is why advertising works. Advertisers have found that they can use the same way of dressing things up that the mind normally uses to dress things up for itself. That’s why it gets into the mind. It stays there. Because the advertisements simply use the same tricks, the same subterfuges that the mind uses on itself. It’s like psychologists have looked at people in terms of their search for happiness. Many times, things that you’ve done in the past, the things that people have done in the past, they should know better. If they actually look back at the amount of happiness they did the first time they did it, it wasn’t all that much, but they go back and they do it again, and they do it again, each time anticipating there’s going to be more the next time. But it’s not. So this is what’s ignoble about the search. Many times it does involve doing things that you can’t feel proud about. And the results really don’t transcend where you are. They don’t take you out of the suffering that you’re trying to get away from. The other kind of search is the noble search, the search that looks for happiness in something that’s deathless, without aging, without illness. This is the noble search, both because it requires that you do noble things, not just in and of itself. The noble search is a good life, the life that’s on the path to the deathless. You develop generosity, you develop virtue, you develop concentration, wisdom, discernment, all things that you can be proud of, all the things that feel good. Like generosity, you look around, a lot of people feel that happiness comes in getting things. That attitude in and of itself is a miserable attitude. And then you see people, when they feel bad, they go out and they try to buy something to make up for their feeling bad. Actually, the buying actually makes them feel worse. You go down, you make a purchase, and you come back and it doesn’t give you the satisfaction you thought it would. This is why people who are trained that happiness lies in getting are miserable people. It’s sullen. And people realize that happiness lies in being generous. It’s a very different attitude, a very different quality to the mind. There’s always the opportunity to be generous. There’s not always the opportunity to take and acquire, but there’s always the opportunity to be generous. The same with virtue. There’s always the opportunity to be virtuous. Concentration, discernment, these are things you can do at any time. Total freedom to do these things. So you look at these two different paths. Which path would you like to look forward to in your life? When you’re halfway through life, which path would you like to look back on and say, “I followed this path. This is the trajectory of my life.” And at the end of life, looking back on what you’ve done. What will you have at that point to show for all the effort that goes into life? It’s not just a question of taking a materialistic or non-materialistic approach to life. It’s also the question of trying to find happiness in relationships. This is really Russian roulette. You have no choice. You have no idea what you’re getting yourself in for. Either as you pair up with someone, if you have kids, you don’t know who’s going to stick his head out of your jean pole. In terms of past karma, you don’t know what issues these people who are coming into your life, what old scores they want to settle. Recently, I’ve been seeing a lot of the insanity that’s going around father as he approaches death. And the attitudes of different members of the family towards the inheritance. And I’ve mentioned the stories of the weird things that are going on in the family. And whoever I tell it to, they have their stories about their families, about people who seem perfectly normal, perfectly fine, perfectly at one. But all of a sudden, as the death of one of the family members approaches, they show a very different side. This is the scary thing about human relationships. It’s that other side that people suddenly show when the chips are down. It’s kind of like that story of the woman with the dead child in the mustard seed. The child is dead. She refuses to believe that it’s dead. And after going to different doctors, they finally send her to the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “Oh, this illness is easy to cure. It’s a certain kind of mustard seed, just ordinary mustard seed. But you have to get it from a home in which there have been no deaths in the family.” And so she goes out and asks for mustard seed. Everybody’s willing to give mustard seed because it’s so cheap in India. But she says, “Oh, by the way, has there been any death in this family?” “Oh, yes. Cousins, aunts, parents, children.” And then she goes from house to house to house through the city. There’s no house where there’s never been a death in the family. So finally she’s going to admit the reality of her situation, that the kid is dead, and that she has to go on with life. Well, stories about craziness around the inheritance, that’s just like that story. No matter who you tell these stories to, everybody has a story to share. So you look at material things, there’s no real satisfaction there. You look at relationships, there’s all kinds of duplicity that goes on. Relationships. Do you want to search for happiness there? You look at your own body. We have that chin on the 32 parts of the body. Many people have complained that they don’t like that. They take a negative attitude towards the body. As Ajahn Suet often said, “Look, are you lying about the body and that chin on the 32 parts?” That’s what you’ve actually got right here. You think of all that you have to do in order to keep this body going. You feed it, you care for it, you bathe it. And then what does it do? It goes and gets sick on you. Then it ages, subjecting you to all the indignities of age. And then there’s death. And if that weren’t bad enough, look at the situation in the country right now about health care. This evening, people are being thrown in jail because they can’t pay their hospital bills. What was their crime? They weren’t insured. They were poor. So now it’s becoming a crime to be poor and uninsured and sick. The person writing the article said at the end of the article, “Why don’t we just, as soon as someone is poor and uninsured, they find out they’re sick, why send them to the hospital? Send them straight to jail. At least in jail they have medical coverage.” It’s not adequate, but it’s better than nothing. So this is the kind of society we’re living in, where people who are sick are no longer treated with kindness. They’re treated as criminals. And for a long time in America, it’s been a crime to be old. So look at your life. Where are you going? Where have you been going? Do those questions raise a crime? Do they raise a crisis in your mind? The only way for them not to raise a crisis is if you choose to take the noble search. Even if you don’t get all the way to the end in this lifetime, at least the path itself is a noble path. And looking back on a life that’s lived with wisdom, with all the other good qualities of life, it’s a good life to look back on. And what are the other paths that are available to us? As the Buddha said, they’re all ignoble paths. You look back at them and it’s all a waste. What little you get from them is gone, gone, gone. Especially when you didn’t have the knowledge that there was the opportunity to do something better and you didn’t take it. That eats away at you. for a long time.

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