Is It Worth It

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Over in Thailand, old people, sick people, dead people are a common sight. Over here, you have to go to special places to see them. Hospitals, old people’s homes. And as for dead people, they hardly let you go at all. Although they let you see other people, the ones that are made up. And so we live in this bizarre, sanitized world where all we want to see are the good-looking people. Someone once made a comment about seeing some really obese people in Arizona that here in California they wouldn’t be allowed on the beach. That it was an affront to other people if someone with an unattractive body showed it. And so we get very bizarre ideas about what life is like. So it’s good to reflect on a regular basis. Remember what spurred Prince Siddhartha to leave his family to go out into the wilderness? The sight of an old person, a sick person, a dead person. And then reflecting on the fact that that fate was waiting, lying in wait for him. And what was true for him is true for us. I had a student one time who, one night, when he was meditating, started remembering previous lifetimes. And whether his memory was true or not, that’s not the issue. What was interesting was that at the end of each lifetime, a sort of exclamation that came out naturally was just, “What suffering? All that effort for what?” You think of all the effort we put into our lives, and then the question is, “What’s left? What do we have to show for it?” And usually it’s not even nothing. It’s less than nothing sometimes when you put things into the balance. So the question is, “What suffering is it?” Where is the effort put that it really does pay off? That’s what the Buddha called “right effort.” Right effort has to build on right view. Right view starts with this kind of view, looking at life, seeing what it’s like. The world is insufficient, a slave to craving. And it all comes from our desires. But then the Buddha doesn’t say that all desires are bad. Some of them are skillful desires that can actually take us away from suffering. That’s the kind of effort that’s worthwhile. It builds on our own actions. And our actions build on our state of mind, which is why we’re sitting here meditating, to see what’s going on. See if we can master these skills, the skills where our desires no longer keep on creating suffering and actually create a path to the end of suffering. That’s the kind of effort that’s well spent. And the desire that lies under that effort, those are desires that are worth cultivating. Always keep that in mind. Desire is an important part of the path. It’s right there in the description of right effort. Of course, desire needs something to feed on. That’s why we have these contemplations about the body, about aging, illness, and death. And it doesn’t just stop with the fact that we are a subject to aging, illness, and death. Everybody born is subject to aging, illness, and death. We’re not the only ones who get separated from the people and the things we love. Everybody has to suffer from that. As long as there’s birth, these things have to happen. When that hits you, that’s what’s called saṃvegā. But at least saṃvegā offers a way out. Because you don’t have to sit around wondering, “Well, I suppose I came back and tried living like this, or tried living like that, or tried to get born into this level of society, or tried to get born into that level of being.” You see that those queries are really ill-advised. They really go nowhere. Again, more effort is spent on what result. When the Buddha advises us to look at things as impermanent or inconstant, stressful and not-self, it’s to remind us that we put a lot of effort into these things, and that’s all that can be created through our effort—things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Most things just end right there. The one thing you can put effort into that’s different is the path. It actually opens you up to something different, another dimension entirely. So that’s where the effort is well spent. That’s where it’s worth it. Because you look at the rest of life and ask yourself, “Look at all that effort that goes into it, and is it worth it?” I remember listening to a lawyer who had fought for years and years and years for civil rights and other progressive causes. And then he started seeing the change that was coming into our country. He felt that all that he’d worked to build was just beginning to fall apart, was being torn apart. That’s the way it is in society. The pendulum swings back and forth. So the question is, where is the effort worth it? And the Buddha said, right here, in right effort. Because not only are you doing good things for yourself and other people, you’re also developing good qualities in the mind. And those good qualities can take you beyond cause and effect. That’s what’s really amazing about the Buddha’s analysis of cause and effect. It’s the only type of cause and effect where you use a causal process to take you beyond a causal process. So you finally get to the point where you don’t have to depend on desire or effort, but there’s a deathless happiness. The Buddha once said, if you could make a deal, that you’d be speared every morning with a hundred spears, every noon with a hundred spears, every evening with a hundred spears, and this would happen every day for a hundred years. But at the end of that time, you’d be guaranteed awakening. He said it would be a good deal. And when the awakening finally arrived, you wouldn’t think that it had been attained through pain and suffering. The experience of the bliss, the sense of freedom, would be so great. It would more than make up for the pain and suffering of all those spears. Fortunately, we don’t have to sit around and be speared. We can meditate, sit here quietly, and work on the qualities of the mind. And that’s what actually makes it happen. And so when the meditation gets difficult, keep asking yourself, “Okay, is this nearly as difficult as a hundred spears every morning, every evening, every day at noon?” Keep things important. Keep it in perspective. This kind of effort is really worth it. It goes someplace, and it leaves you with something solid. Other kinds of effort in the world go a little place, and then they turn around, and then they go back. So it’s up to you to decide where the effort is worth it. But just keep remembering, we’re fortunate that we have this path. We have the Buddha and the Dhamma to point it out for us, and the Sangha to keep it alive.

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