Good Narrative, A

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We like to think that our lives have a narrative line. But when you think about what makes a good narrative and the actual narrative lines of most people’s lives, they’re worlds apart. In a good narrative, there’s an aim, something you want to achieve. And when you think about your own life, you’d rather not have any obstacles. But when you’re actually reading, say, a novel or a short story, if there’s an aim with no obstacles, it’s not satisfying. We like to read about other people overcoming obstacles, maybe having setbacks, but finally reaching a satisfying goal. And then the story has a nice, neat ending. But when you look at people’s lives, how many lives are like that? A lot of people live pretty aimless lives. The main aim is just to survive. Of course, that’s a pretty hopeless aim. It’s just a question of how long you’re going to be able to survive before you finally die. There are higher aims than that. But just look at the human condition. A lot of people never reach their aims. They start straying off someplace else. Or they die or get crippled before they can actually get anywhere. And some people reach their aims and then it’s a question of their feeling of, “Well, so what?” What’s really been accomplished? Sometimes you live to see your aim totally demolished. Or you achieve your aim and it’s not that satisfying. And then you start growing ill, get old, and all the things that you accomplished in life start to unravel. Think of sportsmen, all the sportswomen, too. All the time they spend on mastering a game. And then, well, so what? They start getting old. The younger generation comes up and beats them. And what do they have left? All that effort for what? You start thinking in this way and it induces a strong sense of samvega. It’s like the Prince Siddhartha’s vision of the sick man, the old man, and the corpse. You start thinking about what is life for? What is the meaning of all this? Where does it go? It doesn’t seem to go much of anywhere. Then you think of all the effort that goes into human life. And Prince Siddhartha thought about this, and he realized that as long as he was pursuing aims that would themselves age, grow ill, and die, he wasn’t accomplishing anything at all. Beauty, fame, power, all of these things are going to change. That wasn’t a worthwhile way of ordering your life or finding a meaning in life. The only thing that really is meaningful is the deathless, something that doesn’t change, doesn’t grow old, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. That’s the one aim that’s really worth focusing on. Of course, yes, the question is, is it possible? That’s the fourth vision he had, the vision of the forest ascetic, the wilderness ascetic. If there was any lifestyle, he said, that could accomplish this, it would be this one. And the feeling he felt when he saw that was a sense of passada in Pali, which on the one hand means a sense of clarity. Samvega, the other feeling of a little bit of the aimlessness of life, or the meaninglessness of the whole thing as is ordinarily lived. The image there is something that stirs you up, like a lake that gets stirred up. It’s muddy. There’s a sense of urgency, but there’s also a sense of hopelessness, if it’s not balanced out by the sense that there is a way out. Once you sense there’s a way out and it’s something that you can actually do, that calms the lake. As the lake grows calm, it grows clear, and there’s a sense of confidence. This is reflected in those five reflections that we chant often. The first four induce samvega. I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. Not only are you subject to those things, but everybody is subject to those things. We’re all subject to being separated from the things that we find dear and appealing. Now, if you were to stop right there, it’d be pretty depressing. But the reflections don’t stop there. There’s the principle of karma. I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, for that will I fall heir. Again, this applies to everybody. So our actions really do accomplish something. They’re not meaningless. It’s not just taking a stick and riding in the water. When you do something, it has an effect. And they’re skillful and unskillful actions. As the Buddha said, it’s the beginning of right view. When you’re generous, it really does accomplish something. When you train the mind, it really does accomplish something. But often we find it hard to keep up the effort. This is why vipassana needs samvega, and samvega needs vipassana. Without vipassana, as I said, samvega gets depressing. Without samvega, vipassana starts getting Pollyanna-ish, and you start getting complacent. This is why the Buddha said the way to the deathless is to contemplate death frequently. In one passage, he says you should do it with every in and out breath. Realize that life is something precious. Why is it precious? Because you have the opportunity to do something, to accomplish something. Even if you may die before you get to your first taste of the deathless, still, what you’ve done is not erased. In the next lifetime, you can pick up where you left off. There are setbacks. Think about this. Think about all you went through before you found the Dharma in this lifetime, and then happen to go through that all over again. Just the prospect of having to go through grade school and high school is enough to induce huge bouts of samvega. But still, there comes a point when we start picking things up again. There’s another passage where the Buddha says reflect every evening at sunset instead of just basking in how pretty the sunset is. Remind yourself, this could be your last night. Are you ready to go? The same with sunrise. In the sunrise, you can think, “This could be my last day.” Are you ready to go? If you’re not, okay, there’s work to be done. That gives you an incentive to practice. This is how contemplating death leads to the deathless. It’s a spur to keep you going. As for the setbacks that inevitably come, let’s chalk those up to past karma. But they don’t mean the end of anything. We got the news this morning that a young monk had died in a freak accident over in Thailand. He’d been ordained only five years. He showed a lot of promise. He encountered a lot of obstacles in his life as a monk. Bad health. But still, he kept at it. And he didn’t know the night before that that last sunset was going to be his last sunset. It turned out that he didn’t die from his bad health. He just had a freak accident. So there’s a lesson there for all of us. Death can come at any time. But that doesn’t mean that the effort you put into the practice is meaningless or gets wiped out. The story continues. For most people, the continuation of the story is just kind of an aimless wandering around. The Buddha gives the image of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on one end, sometimes it falls on the other end, sometimes it falls flat in the middle. It doesn’t really seem to go anywhere. But if you decide to make it go someplace, it starts having a purpose. It starts having a narrative shape. The most satisfying of all the narratives is the narrative of the Buddha’s life, the narratives of the monks and the nuns, the laymen and laywomen, who actually went through all the various obstacles that lay in their way and finally attained the deathless. Because that’s the accomplishment of an aim that no amount of aging, illness, or death is going to wipe out. So look at the human condition. Look at your condition. What kind of narrative do you want in your life? Remember, it focuses on the aims you have and working towards that particular aim. Is the aim worthwhile? Is it going to be the kind of aim that gets wiped out by aging, illness, and death? Or is it going to be something that lies beyond their reach? When you find yourself starting to get complacent, think about the things that can induce a sense of samvega. When you start getting depressed, think about the things that will induce a sense of passada, confidence, and clarity. Try to keep those two in balance. Can they help you attain a really worthwhile aim?

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