Intoxication

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When we hear the word “intoxication,” we usually think of what happens to the body and the mind when you put intoxicants in the body. But as the Buddha said, “Intoxication goes deeper than that.” He said we’re already intoxicated. This is the normal nature of human beings, the normal nature of all beings, basically. We’re intoxicated with youth, we’re intoxicated with health, and we’re intoxicated with life. When the Buddha was still a prince, he started reflecting on this, a reflection that more people should engage in. He was still young, he was still healthy, he was alive, but he began to realize that the happiness that he was searching for was something that was subject to aging, illness, and death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. If he was searching for happiness in things that age ill and grow ill and die like that, it was not a noble search. Even if he was searching for the most beautiful things, the most artistic things, the most refined things ahead at that time, still, it was basically no different from anybody else. He was searching for gratification in things that age, grow ill, and die. He realized that as a young person, it was not proper for him to look down on old people, because there was some day when he was going to be old. As a healthy person, it was not proper for him to look down on people who were weak and sick, disabled, because there would come a time when he would be in that situation, too. And as a living person, there was nothing proper about looking down on dead people. Or thinking that they were somehow horrible. I mean, death lies in your body. All the possibilities for death are right here. And he said, as he reflected on this, his intoxication with youth, his intoxication with health, his intoxication with life disappeared. Being intoxicated, what was left? He realized that the only thing that would be worth searching for would be an undying happiness, a happiness that wouldn’t age, wouldn’t grow ill, wouldn’t die. And where was he going to find that? He realized that staying at home wasn’t going to allow him to continue the search. He was going to have to leave home, leave his wife, leave his child, leave everything that he had known. And it took a lot of courage. But he made up his mind that if he didn’t make that leap, his life would have been wasted. He wanted to test the possibility. Is there a happiness that doesn’t die? And he was willing to give his life to that question. I think nowadays, who in his position would make that kind of choice? Someone who was powerful, wealthy, famous? How many of those people do you see giving it all away and going off into the forest, disappearing for six years? It’s all pretty amazing what he did, because he didn’t have the example that we have. He set the example. He made an important discovery for the human race, because that discovery didn’t end with him. He was able to teach this path to other people once he had found it. The word of that path has spread to us. It’s up to us to decide what we want to do. We have to decide exactly how much of that challenge we’re going to accept. Because the story of the Buddha’s life is a challenge. Are you going to continue in your intoxication with youth, with health, with life? Or are you going to sober up and give your life to something that’s really worthwhile? Because what does it mean to be intoxicated? You forget. You act as if there’s no tomorrow, and it’s not the sense of devoting yourself fully to the practice today because you don’t know if there’s going to be a tomorrow. It’s just a question of who cares what happens. I’m going to do what I want right now. That’s how intoxicated people act. They act on impulses and they do all sorts of destructive stuff, harming not only themselves but the people around them. No thought for the past, no thought for the future. It’s mindfulness that helps to sober us up. That ability to remember. Even when you get infatuated with something that looks pretty, you remember. How long is it going to last? What would I have to do in order to get that pretty thing, that pretty person? When you remember that, the appeal of the surface attraction goes away. Because, basically, you remember. Where is that attraction going to lead you? Mindfulness is what allows us to see connections. Mindfulness is not simply being in the present moment, but it also means remembering what you’re supposed to be doing in the present moment. Remembering where different kinds of actions lead. Remembering where skillful actions lead. Remembering where unskillful actions lead. Remembering when you look at something attractive, an attractive person, you realize, okay, where is this person’s body going to go? It’s going to go toward aging, illness, and death. Do you want to get attached to that person? Because that’s where it’s all going to go. You look at things. Things go to aging, illness, and death as well. You think of all the things that people do just for things—killing, stealing, cheating—and so what do they get? They end up with just the dregs of the thing. In the meantime, they’ve developed a lot of bad karma. So it’s this ability to remember. Where do things go? Where do different actions go? Where do relationships go? Where does your happiness go? If it’s the happiness you can develop with the path, that goes in a direction that’s really worth going to. It’s a noble search, as the Buddha said, this eightfold noble path that we’re following. It leads to the deathless. It leads to the end of karma, the end of action, the end of the results of actions. That’s where it can take you. No other path of action can take you there. It’s a path for sober people. The Buddha has us reflect on aging, illness, and death, reminding ourselves that we’re subject to this, so we can get our act together and start acting in more skillful ways, given the time and opportunity we have. He also has us reflect on the universality of all this, that everybody is subject to aging, illness, and death. All the relationships you might want to develop are subject to aging, illness, and death. All the things that you might want to gain are subject to aging, illness, and death. That’s to get you on the path. It develops a sense of saṃvega, a sense of dismay over the way life is. It is all over the place for everybody who’s still intoxicated. It gives you a sense of confidence in the path. This is the way out. The people who follow this path seem trustworthy. The happiness that it offers seems special. It’s really something worth giving your life to. It requires sacrifice, it requires doing without a lot of things, but you keep reminding yourself, “What are those things you’re doing without?” Well, things subject to aging, illness, and death. If you let yourself get waylaid, if you let yourself get distracted on the path, you go back to your old intoxication. When people leave this path, it requires a massive act of forgetting. It requires forgetting the possibilities that the Buddha’s life, the example of his life, holds out for us. It requires forgetting that you’re contenting yourself with things that really don’t lead to where you want to go. Staying on the path, however, enables you to remember, because it’s a path good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. It starts out with a good intention. The practice itself is good, and the place where it leads is good. There’s nothing in there that you have to forget, nothing in there that you have to deny. I’ve noticed people as they approach death, if they’ve done things in their lives that they really regret, their memory deteriorates a lot faster. It’s because they’ve been spending their whole lives consciously forgetting, consciously denying, putting up walls in their mind. As death comes, that particular habit of forgetting just takes over. So we’re following a path that keeps our minds alert. It doesn’t require that we deny what we’ve done. It doesn’t require that we deny where we’re going. We can be mindful from the beginning on to the end. We can be sober, and that’s what it means to be sober. It doesn’t mean that you’re not having fun, that you’re not enjoying it. It’s just that your enjoyment sees clearly all the way from the past on into the present, and then on into the future. So it’s a noble search, and it’s a search that gives nobility to our lives. So always remember this. As I say, keep your eyes on your breath. Eyes on the prize, because there’s no other prize that can compare with it.

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