Mountains Moving In

December 29, 2006

The passage we chanted just now, “On the Mountain,” comes from a discourse in which King Vasanidhi Gosala is coming to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him, “Well, where are you coming from here in the middle of the day?” The king is remarkably frank. He says, “Oh, I’ve been spending my time doing the typical sorts of things of someone obsessed by his power, ruling over a great country.” The Buddha says, “Suppose a messenger were to come from the East and say, ‘Your Majesty, it should please you to know that there’s this huge mountain coming in from the East, crushing all living beings in its wake.’ Another messenger were to come from the South, another one from the West, another one from the North, each with a similar messenger, these four mountains moving in. From the four main directions, crushing all living beings in their path. In a situation like that, with such a great loss of human life, what would you do?” The king says, “What else could be done but to practice the Dhamma?” The Buddha says, “Now I inform you, aging and death are rolling in, crushing all living beings in their path.” And that aging and death are rolling in, what should you do? Of course, the answer is the same. Practicing the Dhamma. Training the mind. So that when aging and death come, you don’t have to suffer. This is a constant theme in the Buddhist teachings. In the very beginning, when the young prince reflected on aging, illness, and death, realizing that these things were going to destroy whatever happiness he found, his family, his wealth, and his power, he wanted to find something that would go beyond that. As the Buddha said, he wanted to find something that was free from aging, free from illness, free from death. He said that if he didn’t make the effort to find that, his life would have been lived in vain. He told the story in the Buddhajanata, which is a biography of the Buddha written around the turn of the millennium, that the king and his friends tried to dissuade him from his path, saying, “Look at all the great people in the past who contended themselves with the pleasures of everyday life.” And the prince’s response was, “Well, then they really weren’t great people.” In other words, it’s the normal search for happiness. It’s something that goes nowhere. It gets results for a little while, and then they get crushed. At first, when the prince left his home, went out in the forest, and after he’d found that the teachings that were available in that time didn’t satisfy him, he went out and he decided, “Well, maybe the search for happiness is the problem.” So he tried to eradicate all attachment to pleasure in his mind by tormenting himself, and that didn’t work. It was his great insight that it’s not so much the search for pleasure that’s wrong; it’s the fact that we’re looking in the wrong places for our happiness. We’re looking in the wrong way. We’re looking in very short-sighted ways. So what the Buddha discovered was that if you still search for happiness, that’s the middle path. In fact, the two extremes that he said the middle path avoids were criticized both because they created suffering. The search for happiness and among sensual pleasures creates suffering. Self-torment creates suffering. The only path to true happiness is the middle way, the yet-full path. That’s why it’s his first teaching. And you look at the qualities you develop there, and they’re very different from the normal qualities we think about in the search for happiness. For most of us, it’s buying this or getting it, snaring a good woman, getting a good job, creating suffering, something that we’ll leave behind. But still, the things that we leave behind, they get blown away by time. And the things you have to do in order to create those forms of happiness, many times, are not things you’re really proud of. But if you look at the qualities that the Buddha is asking you to develop as you practice the path—virtue, concentration, discernment, or wisdom, purity, compassion—these are all qualities you can be proud of. Jon Sowat used to make the point that sometimes you hear in Thailand that you shouldn’t be selfish, that you shouldn’t just look after yourself. He says, “Well, you really should look after yourself, but look after yourself in a wise way. Look for your happiness in a wise way.” In other words, realize that it’s going to depend on your actions. It’s not anything anybody else can do for you. When I was a kid, we lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, in Thomas Jefferson’s home. I remember visiting Jefferson’s grave one time. It was interesting. His epitaph was something he had requested, and there wasn’t any mention of the fact that he’d been president of the United States on his epitaph, on his gravestone. It was all things that he had done. The Declaration of Independence, the Virginia Bill of Rights, the father of the University of Virginia—things that he had done. Those were the things he was proud of. As for the presidency, he said, “Well, that’s something somebody else gave him. It didn’t really mean that much to him.” That’s really the right attitude. The things we’re going to find our happiness in are the things that we do. Once you realize that, then you realize that the only kind of happiness that’s worth looking for is the happiness that’s long-term. That’s the beginning of wisdom. So it takes that desire for happiness and uses it in a way that leads to wisdom. It’s the same for compassion. You realize that you desire happiness; other people desire happiness as well. If your happiness depends on their suffering, it’s not going to last. It may sound calculated, but this really is the basis for compassion. You start thinking about other people’s desire for happiness. You begin to sympathize with their desire for happiness. Otherwise, you can’t understand them. Once you sympathize with their desire for happiness, you realize you have to adjust your ideas about what happiness consists of and where you’re going to find it. You want happiness that doesn’t cause anyone any harm. So you want something that’s long-term, harmless. Then you have to look at your actual actions, the things you do. Do they cause any harm to anyone else? If they do, you’ve got to learn how to stop doing those things. If you find yourself acting in a way that doesn’t cause harm, rejoice in that. Western psychology has taught us to be suspicious of our altruistic actions, our good actions. But that’s not the Buddhist attitude. All actions are fabricated. All motivations are fabrications. So you learn how to encourage the ones that are skillful. Even though you may have unskillful attitudes in the mind, you don’t have to regard those as your true nature. They’re no more true than the good motives. So encourage the good ones. Discourage the unskillful ones. Keep caring for the good ones. Be careful. Watch over your actual actions so that they do fall in line with the principles of wisdom and compassion. This is purity, integrity. These are all really important virtues. They’re considered to be the basic qualities of a Buddha, and yet they’re all based on that skillful search for happiness. This is the kind of search that leads to happiness. Happiness doesn’t die. This is the kind of search that makes your life worth living. Even if you don’t get all the way to the end of the path in this lifetime, you can look back on your life and see that at least it was well lived. After all, Prince Siddhartha didn’t know for sure that he was going to find this way. But he felt that a life that didn’t take this search into account, that wasn’t devoted to the search, was not a life that you could be proud of. But the fact that you are following this path, that’s something to be proud of. That you’ve been able to give up all the things that have snared everybody else, kept them from coming here, kept them from giving themselves to this practice. That’s something to be proud of. There’s that question they ask in one of the suttas, “Days and nights fly past, fly past. What are you doing right now?” It’s the same question, basically. The Buddha asks King Pasenadi, “Aging and death are rolling in. What should you do?” And your answer should be, “You should practice the Dhamma.” And the answer to the other question, “What are you doing right now?” is, “I am practicing the Dhamma.” That’s an answer you can be proud of. But it requires that you stick with the practice all the time, because you never know when one of those mountains is going to land on you. So you always want to be prepared.

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