Turning Points

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There are two moments in the story of the Buddhist life that are particularly inspiring. One was the point where he realized he had to leave home. He’d lived a life of luxury, of pleasure, and although the account that we often hear of him seeing an old person, a sick person, and a dead person for the first time is the one we’re most familiar with. The actual account in the Pali Canon is different when he tells the story. There are two places where he puts it in his own words. One was when he realized that he was intoxicated, not intoxicated on alcohol or drugs. He realized he was intoxicated with his youth, with his health. He was intoxicated with his health and with his life. He looked down on people who were old, sick, dead, and dismissed them. But then when he realized that he himself one day was going to be old, sick, dead, he realized that that intoxication, that pride, was unbecoming, was inappropriate. Worse than that, he looked around him and he said he saw the world just totally filled with competition and conflict. There wasn’t a single spot that somebody hadn’t already laid claim to. He said it looked like the world was like fish in a puddle that was drying up, flopping around, fighting with each other for what little water was remaining. He gave rise to a strong sense of despair and dismay. In both cases, he realized that he had to find a way to pull out the arrow in his heart. So his first reaction, after having lived a life of luxury, was to go into the forest, leave behind all his responsibilities, all his comforts. He could really devote himself full-time to see if there was something, instead of looking for happiness in aging, in things that age and he’ll grow ill and die, to find happiness that wasn’t subject to aging, illness, and death. It wasn’t too long after that that he fell into the opposite extreme. He decided it was the search for pleasure that made people struggle, that made people compete, feed off each other, and kept them intoxicated. So he resolved to go the other direction, to not allow himself to fall for any pleasure at all. He denied himself every kind of pleasure, even the pleasure of breathing, the pleasure of eating. He kept that up for five or six years, which is where we come to the second really inspiring part of the story. You might ask, “What keeps someone going for five or six years like that?” The most likely answer is pride, the pride that you’re not going to let yourself get dismayed by any kind of pain. So what pleasure is there? Well, there’s the pleasure of pride, that you’re better than anyone else who’s ever done that. In fact, he reports that there was one point where he reflected that nobody had ever excelled the austerities he had done. But still, they hadn’t led to the peace that he’d looked for, the goal that he’d been searching for. So he reflected that maybe there’s another way. And that’s really inspiring. He was able to drop that pride. He reflected back on his childhood. There had been a time when his father was plowing and he was sitting under a tree and his mind had entered the first jhana. There was pleasure and rapture born of seclusion. He asked himself, “Could this be the way to awakening?” And something inside him said, “Yes, it could.” The next question he asked himself was, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure? What’s blameworthy about it?” The more he thought about it, the more he realized that that kind of pleasure had nothing blameworthy. So that’s how he got started on the path. He had to start eating again so he’d have enough strength to get the mind to that level of concentration, that level of clarity. But he realized that this pleasure was not blameworthy in either way. In the sense that, one, it wasn’t feeding off of other people. It wasn’t taking anything away from them. And then secondly, it wasn’t the kind of pleasure that would lead to intoxication. It wasn’t the intoxication of youth, health, and life. On the contrary, it was a pleasure that allowed the mind to see things clearly. In fact, he discovered, as he pursued that path, that it led to a state of concentration. He had total purity of mindfulness and equanimity. The mind was clear, malleable, and bright. That’s how right concentration became the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered. The other seven factors clustered around that as he developed the right concentration and then tried using it in various ways to see what he could learn. He learned about the question of whether he had previous lifetimes or not, and he discovered that he could remember them. The question is, why do people go through so many different levels of being? He had a vision of the whole cosmos, with people dying and being reborn in line with their karma, in line with the intentions that they had acted on, skillful or unskillful. That led him, finally, to his third knowledge, which was looking at the intentions in the present moment. Which are the intentions that cause stress and suffering? Can you see them in action right now? Can you see their effects right now? How about if you stop them? This is when he arrived at the Four Noble Truths. And through the Four Noble Truths, as he said, he realized not only what the truths were, but also the tasks that he had to complete. So he completed them. That was when he gained awakening. Central to this story is his discovery of right concentration, that a form of happiness could be a path to a higher form of happiness. He didn’t have to put himself through the ultimate of pain in order to get the happiness that was supposed to lie on the other side. There would be pain. There would be struggle in the path. But he was kept going, not by a sense of pride, but by the actual pleasure that comes from focusing the mind, getting it centered, totally secluded from all its other preoccupations. And his discovery that this was a blameless happiness is really important. Because his understanding of the mind focused all around that. The path that he set up, the Right View, which contains all the “shoulds” of the Buddhist teaching, is centered on the question of “Why do we suffer? How can we put an end to suffering?” It’s a very humane question. It’s not a question imposed on us from the outside by some higher force. It’s a question that’s supposed to bring us up. Basically, every time we choose to act, what can we do to find some pleasure? It’s interesting that the Pali word for happiness, sukha, also means pleasure, bliss, well-being, ease, contains all of these things. So the Buddha discovered that our search for happiness is not something that we should be scolded for or should be ashamed of, but we should learn to do it in a clear-sighted way. Because for most of us, our pleasures do blind us, they do get us intoxicated, and they often do cause us suffering and suffering to other people. But there is a way to look for happiness that’s not going to harm anybody at all. Our desire for true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with other people’s desire for true happiness. The “shoulds” in our mind don’t have to conflict with our desire for happiness. So this is kind of the doctrine that the Buddha is in terms of diagnosing our problem of suffering. He doesn’t say that there’s an irrevocable struggle between our ideas of what’s morally right and wrong and our desire for happiness, like some people do. And he doesn’t say that our happiness has to conflict with the happiness of other people. In other words, there are conflicts, but they’re resolvable if you look for happiness in the right way. So as you meditate, you find that there are struggles inside the mind. Struggle that says, “On the one side, I would like to get some immediate pleasure, and why isn’t it happening fast enough?” On the other side, it says, “Oh, I really want to train the mind so it gets under control.” It says, “I’m willing to take the time.” There’s going to be a struggle there, but it’s not irreconcilable. You have to realize that both sides are basically looking for pleasure, looking for happiness. It’s simply a matter of learning how to teach them to work together rather than working at cross-purposes. So when you find conflicts in the mind, don’t go down that path. You seem to be up against a wall. Step back and say, “Okay, everybody here is looking for happiness. It’s just that we have a different understanding.” It’s not that our desires are blind or come at us wordless. Each desire has its rationale, it has its reasons. So when you find yourself up against a wall like that, sit down and try to sort things out with the idea that we’re all here working together. We don’t have to be at cross-purposes. This applies both inside and outside. Everybody wants happiness. It’s simply a matter of training our head and our heart to be more in alignment. The Pali word for “alignment” is jitta. Again, there’s no necessary conflict between the two. Our heart teaches the head that the important issue in life is suffering. The head teaches the heart that you have to work inside the laws of causality. You can’t just wish for something and have it happen right away. It takes work, it takes time, it takes strategy. So learn how to get both sides working together. It’s in this way that the path comes together. It’s how the mind achieves unity, not by pushing out the evil. Insiders are pushing out the evil outside us. It’s realizing that our ignorant desires are just that—ignorant. They contain a desire for happiness, but they’ve got it wrong. So you’ve got to listen to them. This is one of the things you have to do when the mind gets still, when you’ve got it, so that you can sit and watch your thoughts without getting carried away by them, to follow along in the flow of them. You can ask the question, “Why do they think this way? What are these angry desires? Why do they feel they should take over? What do they want? What are their assumptions based on?” So you thwart them and see what they have to say in response. You may not learn anything for a while, but after a while there will be an insight into, “Oh, they think this way. This desire comes from this idea,” which, when you look at it in the light of the day, makes no sense at all. When you see that it makes no sense, it loses a lot of its power. This is how insight diffuses a lot of our unskilled notions, with the assumption that every notion in the mind is based on the desire for happiness, but it’s based on a misunderstanding. This is why right view is so important. It’s also why you can’t expect your defilements to go away simply by watching them and think that when they go away, they’re gone. For good. If that same misunderstanding is still buried in the mind, it’s going to come up again. This is why discernment is what cuts through all these things. But it’s a discernment that’s based on that practice of learning how to give the mind some pleasure right here, right now. So you’re not so hungry, and you don’t hunger along with your hungry desires. When the mind is well-fed with a good sense of ease, pleasure, and rapture, it can look at its unskillful emotions with a lot less sense of compulsion. It can create the atmosphere in which they start talking, and you can start hearing them for what they’re saying, what they’re really thinking. And you can diffuse them that way. All the Buddhist teachings are based on the assumption that we all want happiness. He doesn’t assume that we have Buddha nature. He doesn’t assume that we have original sin or anything. He doesn’t talk about our basic nature in any way at all. But he does base all of his teachings on the fact that everything we do is based on the desire for happiness. So his tactic is to take that desire for happiness and not try to snuff it out the way he did when he was practicing his austerities. But to train it so that it becomes a noble desire for happiness. This is why the path is called the Noble Path. It leads to unbinding, which in his day was a common word for the ultimate in happiness. So both the path is noble and the goal is noble as well. This is what makes it such a good path to follow.

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