Intoxication

July 23, 2008

The traditional story of the Buddha’s life that developed in the centuries after his death starts with a moment of his great aspiration, a time many aeons back when he aspired to become a Buddha. In contrast, if you look at the Buddha’s life story told in his own words, it starts with him intoxicated. He’s living in utter refinement. All his desires for pleasure are taken care of, and he’s intoxicated. He’s intoxicated with his youth, he’s intoxicated with his health, and he’s intoxicated with his life, looking down on people who are old, looking down on people who are sick, looking down on people who are dead—the typical heedless youth. Those two themes, intoxication and heedlessness, go together. The fifth precept against intoxicants is to find in such a way to cover anything that causes heedlessness, whether you smoke it or drink it or snort it. If it has that effect on the mind, it’s an intoxicant. The Buddha uses the same word to describe a basic condition of all human beings. We’re all intoxicated to some extent. We want our pleasures and we don’t want to think about the consequences. So that’s where the Buddha’s life story started. It starts basically where we all are, in a state of intoxication. It ended with his teaching his monks to be heedful. That, he said, was the essence of all the skillful qualities. All skillful qualities you develop are based on heedfulness. Sometimes the word for heedfulness, appamatta, is translated as diligence. But it’s right here where you see that that’s not a good translation. Diligence is not necessarily the beginning of all skillful qualities. You can be diligent in all kinds of unskillful ways. But if you’re heedful, you essentially see that your actions have consequences, and you want to be very careful. If you’re not careful, you’re going to do things that are going to have bad consequences down the line. So that in essence is the cure for intoxication, is being willing to look at the consequences of your actions and keep them in mind. To do this, you have to strengthen the mind because the desire for immediate pleasure, the pleasure that allows you to forget whatever you don’t like in your life or don’t like about yourself, comes with a lot of force, a lot of vehemence. When it hits hard, it doesn’t want to listen to reason, because it knows that reason will point out that this is not a wise thing to do. And so, as often happens, when the course of action is unreasonable, the desire for that action turns into a bully. Now, bullies can have their strength only as long as everything else in the mind is willing to be weak. This is why you have to strengthen the mind in terms of its conviction that it really does matter what you do. It really is possible to find a true happiness that’s more than worth the effort. After all, that’s what the essential message of the Buddha’s awakening is. Human effort can lead to a state of true happiness, deathless happiness, that more than repays the effort that goes into it. Also, it’s possible for all human beings to do that, because the Buddha used qualities in his mind that were not exclusive to him. He never claimed that he had qualities that nobody else could develop. Qualities of resolution, heedfulness, ardency—these are things we can all develop. But they have to start with that strength of conviction that it really does matter. In fact, that’s one of the arguments that the disciples are for. A quick hit will always say, “It doesn’t matter. Just this once, one more time. You’ve done it so many times in the past. What’s one more time going to harm?” Well, it just drives the nail deeper and deeper into the coffin of your heedfulness. So you have to remember, each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, it does matter what you choose to do. You have to learn how to appreciate the pleasure that comes from concentration, that comes from the path. In one way, it’s an acquired pleasure, an acquired taste. In another, it’s not. It’s an acquired taste in the sense that it takes work. Nobody likes pleasure that takes work. We want the pleasure that’s easy, that’s quick. Regardless of the consequences, we would prefer a pleasure that doesn’t have bad consequences. But if our quick fix has bad consequences, we’ll just put them out of mind. So a pleasure that takes time and energy and skill and discipline requires all the skills you can think of in learning how to cajole the mind, encourage the mind. Give it a carrot when it needs a carrot, give it a stick when it needs a stick. Basically, you have to be your own parent. To that extent, it’s an acquired taste. When you actually get the taste of deep concentration, nobody has to tell you to like it. It’s there. It penetrates parts of your body, parts of your mind that have been starving you for pleasure for a long time. So that’s the easy part. The hard part is learning to be self-directing. That’s one of the protections that the Buddha talks about in the Mangala Sutta, the protection of being rightly self-directed. So much of our lives depend on outside direction. We go through school, and there’s that book about being punished by rewards, where we learn to please other people. And that sometimes can get you all the way through school and into a job. But then the question comes up, “Well, what about your happiness?” And if you find yourself in a situation where there’s nobody you really care to please, you start to flounder around. So you’ve got to learn how to be self-directed. This means picking up whatever skillful parenting habits you may have learned from your parents. If you were unfortunate enough to learn some unskillful parenting habits from your parents, you’ve got to unlearn them. Basically, you learn how to be skillful in keeping yourself in line and asking yourself “What do you really want out of life?” And John Lee has that great passage where he says, “The Buddha sat down. What do you want out of life?” And the Buddha’s answer was, “Ultimate happiness,” which is an answer that all of us would give if we were really honest with ourselves. The hard part is then saying, “Okay, sticking with that aspiration, whatever is required for ultimate happiness, you’re going to do it.” And learn not to be a traitor to yourself, because that’s essentially what you’re doing when you settle for something less. You’re a traitor to your own best interest, your own deepest desire. So your parenting skills have to be the sort that keep you honest. You want to see good parenting skills? Look how the Buddha taught Rahula how to reflect on his actions, how to recognize mistakes, how to learn from his mistakes, be willing to talk them over with other people and not be ashamed of them or hide them from other people, and then doing what he can to resolve not to repeat the mistakes. In other words, the Buddha didn’t say, “Don’t make mistakes.” He said, “Look, you’re going to make mistakes, but this is how you deal with them.” Before teaching Rahula breath meditation, he taught him the importance of patience. He also taught him the importance of not giving in to the conceit, “I am,” which is one of the last things you end up giving up in the practice. In Arahant from Ananda Vipassana, the Arahant has finally given up conceit, but it’s one of those things you have to work on from the very beginning. In particular, the conceit that, “Well, if this intoxication is something I like, this must be me,” and you hold on to it. You build an “I am” around your bad habits, or you build an “I am” that you then come down on hard. The judging mind that you have to deal with. It berates you. It’s just the flip side of the coin that wants to hold on to bad habits. It’s a dialogue that goes back and forth and goes nowhere in the mind. The way to get out of it is just to stop thinking in terms of what “I am” and thinking in terms of what would be the skillful thing to do right now, and learning how to cajole yourself into doing the skillful thing. Using whatever tone of voice in your internal dialogue, that will get you to abandon unskillful behavior and keep on the track of skillful behavior. So this quality of being rightly self-directed is the key. This is how you embody the principle of heedfulness and get away from intoxication, so that your life story, even if it starts in intoxication, can end up with heedfulness just like the Buddha’s.

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