Taking Charge of Your Life

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People sometimes comment on one of the seeming ironies of the Buddhist tradition, which is that, even though there’s so much talk about anatta, there are an awful lot of autobiographies, starting with the Buddha himself. In fact, it’s seems that the earliest spiritual autobiographies are the Buddha’s own accounts of his awakening, the events that led up to his awakening, and the awakening itself. You would think when people talk a lot about not-self, or sometimes it’s translated as no-self, that the self part of the biography, writing about yourself, wouldn’t fit in with the teaching. Well, that’s a very large misunderstanding of the tradition, of the teaching as a whole, because the Buddha, in recounting the events that led up to his awakening and other practitioners who’ve written similar accounts, they’re not just events. They talk about decisions, things they decided, things they decided they wanted to pursue. And then they ran into obstacles, and how they overcame those obstacles. Very much is a sense that, in the course of their lives, they were writing their life stories. They were the ones in charge. They took charge of their lives. And the result was that they came up with something really special. And it was worth telling other people, to let them know that they could do the same thing. They could take charge of their lives and find a happiness that wasn’t affected by time or space, i.e., that goes beyond the biography. Which means, of course, that we should reflect on our lives. What kind of life story are we writing? Are we taking charge of our lives? Or are we just letting things drift along in line with circumstances? And it’s a decision each of us has to make. And given the time, given the fact that we’re sitting here quietly, with not that much happening outside, we get a chance to look into our minds. What kind of narrative is your mind telling itself about how you got here and where you want to go from here? There may be several narratives, and they may be conflicting. They may be vague, or they may be very clear and focused. And you compare your narratives with the narrative of the Buddha’s life, and you realize that his narrative was extremely focused and very determined. He knew how not to let obstacles deflect him from what he really wanted out of life, which was a true happiness that wasn’t subject to aging, illness, or death. He talks of his life as a noble search, and anyone else who pursues the same goal is participating in a noble search as well. Everything else, he says, is ignoble. Any happiness that you look for that is subject to aging, illness, or death, there’s nothing special about it. You’re a subject to aging, illness, or death. What are you looking for in other things that are subject to aging, illness, or death? It all gets blown away, washed away. It’s like writing your name in water. This is one of the reasons why it’s good to read the story of the Buddha’s life, the story of the lives of his Arhat disciples. This is something that’s possible. You have a human birth. This is what can be done with a human birth. You can ask yourself, “What other narratives are you telling yourself that are going to get in the way of that, and are they really worth following?” Because we create our life story in two ways. First, through an act of the imagination, we chart out a plan for the future of what’s possible in our lives. And then, secondly, through our actual actions, day to day to day, as we make our choices in what we do and say and think. That’s writing a life story as well, and sometimes they’re very different. Sometimes they’re in alignment, but the original act of the imagination was pretty stunted to begin with, very narrow and confining. How many people in the world limit themselves because they can’t imagine themselves doing anything special, anything out of the ordinary? They can’t imagine themselves getting past the obstacles, or even wanting to get past the obstacles. So their imagination cuts them off right there. Other people have a good imagination, but then they can’t carry through with it. They don’t have the staying power. Or it turns out that they’re conflicted in their ideas about what true happiness could be. Or they have a negative view of the world. They have a very clear idea of what kind of happiness they want, but they neglect to look at the downside. As if they were signing a contract and all they could think about was all the positive things that were going to come from the contract, they don’t look at the fine print. In the past few months, I’ve been meeting up with some people I haven’t seen for years. Some people, thirty years, forty years, I haven’t seen them. I’ve been struck by the number of people whose lives are going in a direction they never would have wanted, largely because they signed on to one version of happiness without really looking at the consequences, or thinking about the consequences ahead of time. So as meditators, we should be clear about what kind of narrative we can imagine and what kind of narratives we’re actually writing with our day-to-day thoughts and words and deeds. We know that ultimately the purpose of the practice is to get you to a state of mind that’s not dealing in narratives and is simply looking at events as they’re experienced arising and passing away. But to get to that state of mind, you’ve got to have a certain narrative. You have to be clear about it, where it’s going, and clear about what steps are entailed. You have to learn how to keep the desire for that noble narrative alive, in terms of right effort, the Buddha calls this generating desire. It’s up to you to keep remembering what you really want out of life and why it’s important, and why your choices from moment to moment are important in that narrative as well. Society writes other narratives for us, and in many cases, we’ve already gotten started on other narratives. We learn skills that we don’t think would be appropriate for other narratives, and now we find ourselves in this narrative, which asks more of us. It asks for a larger imagination and also more effort. With society pulling us into those other narratives, it’s very much up to each of us to maintain the enthusiasm that God is here to begin with and stick with it. This is why generating desire is the first part of right effort. Remind yourself of the dangers that come with aiming lower and the advantages that come from aiming higher. In those autobiographies, the autobiography of the Buddha, his noble disciples, the reason they were told, the reason they’ve been passed down, is to help us keep in mind the fact that there are these other possibilities to keep our imagination open. And as you read the narratives, in the Buddha’s case, it may sometimes be difficult to identify with them because it’s hard to see any moment of weakness at all. You see that he gets off on the wrong course several times, but he’s able to right himself. And he never lacks for energy and dedication. And it’s often hard to identify with that because we can see ourselves lacking in energy and dedication. So in that case, you read some of the verses the elder monks versus the elder nuns, and some of the more frank of the autobiographies, to let you know that the noble disciples weren’t born as arahants. They had obstacles. They had discouragement. They found themselves wandering off on other paths. But they did have the ability to check themselves and get themselves back on path. And as they write the story of their lives, they let you know very strongly that they’re glad they did. So that’s one way of generating desires, to keep those narratives in mind and to remind yourself that you’re writing your life story, day by day by day, developing habits, developing tendencies. The word bhavana, which means to develop, can apply to bad habits. We may not like to think that we’re actively cultivating bad habits, but that can happen. In fact, most people are spending most of their lives cultivating bad habits, often without realizing it. So keep in mind that every time you make a choice, every time you decide on what to do or say or think, you’re writing the story of your life. And it would seem to go without saying that you want to write a story that, when you look at the story, it comes out the way you’d like it. But for most of us, we don’t seem to think in those terms. We very rarely think about where a particular action is going. We simply think about what we want to do right now, say right now, or think right now, and block out the idea of whatever the consequences are going to be. That kind of story doesn’t come out well. So think about what kind of story you would like to write, and set about writing it right now.

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