Don’t Lose Your Goodness

July 8, 2014

Those five reflections we do very often are actually reflections that the Buddha recommends we do every day, remembering that we’re subject to aging, illness, and death. And the things that we love, the people we love, are going to be separated from them. It’s all about loss, or the potential for loss. And then the fifth reflection is a reflection on our actions and the power of our actions and how these really do make a difference. If we act skillfully in a normal way, at the very least we won’t suffer too much. But there’s always the possibility for heedlessness, which is why we have to keep reflecting again and again. As the Buddha said, we tend to be intoxicated with our youth, our health, our life, forgetting that we can lose these things so easily. We end up acting in all kinds of unskillful ways. Just as an intoxicated person intoxicated with alcohol or other mind-altering drugs tends to behave in a very careless way. But even then, we’re still open to the fact that we’ll come back for more aging, illness, and death unless we get out. The reflection actually goes further than what we normally chant. We’re supposed to reflect on the fact that everybody who’s born is going to be subject to these things. And when you think about that, that gives rise to a different feeling. It’s not so much heedfulness, it’s more sanguega. Think about the pointlessness of the whole thing. You do good and you get good results. And as the results get better and better, then you start getting more and more careless. And we see this on all levels of life, even in our meditation. There are days when things are going really, really well, and you start getting careless about it. And you suddenly find yourself back where you started, or worse than where you started. All of these reflections are meant to give us a sense of the importance of really training the mind, being serious about it. Not grim, but serious, realizing that our true happiness depends on this. It’s interesting that we think about losing our loved ones, suffering from aging, and illness. There was a time when I was young, I thought, “When you get old, it’s nice, you don’t have to work, you get to retire.” I mentioned that to an old person one time and he said, “You don’t know what it’s like. Aging creeps up on you and does all kinds of things you didn’t expect.” And we think about how really bad the loss that can come from aging, illness, death, separation from our loved ones is. But as the Buddha pointed out, there are losses that are more serious than that. There’s a sutra where he talks about five kinds of loss. Loss of wealth, loss of your relatives, loss through disease. He says those aren’t serious. They don’t take you to hell. If there’s a loss in terms of your views and a loss in terms of your virtue, that, he says, can take you to hell. So this is why we work on the practice of getting our views straight, getting our virtue clean. Because these are our genuine possessions. The Buddha talks about consummation. At the end of his life, he said, “Achieve consummation through hatefulness.” These are the first things he was talking about. Make sure you’re clear about the importance of your actions and the importance of your intentions. Make sure that your intentions are in line with the precepts. That way, even though you may lose your health, lose your wealth, lose your relatives, you haven’t lost what’s really important, which is your motivation to keep on doing the skillful thing, saying the skillful thing, training your mind in a skillful way. That’s your real treasure. That’s your real consummation. So always keep that in mind. It helps keep the perspective on all the other things that are going to happen in life. I was reading recently that someone was saying that that first precept against killing, there are times when it really is justified to go ahead and kill someone if they’re really evil, because they can do all sorts of damage to your wealth, they can do damage to your health, they can do damage to your relatives. This is supposedly a Buddhist teacher. But these are the kind of things that people are afraid of, which is why they lose their virtue. And it’s important to remember that your virtue is much more important. Because we’ve lost our health many times in the past. We’ve lost our wealth many times in the past. It’s happened over and over and over again. That’s not all that serious. What is serious is when people get the wrong view and start thinking that their actions don’t really matter, that they can do whatever they want, act on whatever impulse comes in their mind, whatever intuition tells them to do, without concern for the precepts. That causes a lot of damage, long-term damage. And of course, when people develop a wrong view like that, they don’t sit on their wrong views and not mention them. They tell them to other people, get other people to believe the same sort of things. This is how a lot of unnecessary suffering comes into the world. So you have to strengthen your views, strengthen your mind, so there is no temptation to lose your virtue over a fear of loss of health, loss of wealth, loss of relatives. That takes a lot of strength. This is one of the reasons why we have to meditate, to make sure that our views are reinforced with the right concentration, right mindfulness, and all the other good qualities of the path. It’s only when the path really comes together in the mind and takes you to another level, that’s when your views and your virtue are secure. So as we’re meditating here, it’s not just to have a nice place to relax or a place to chill out a bit. We’re trying to find a real foundation for the mind, a real foundation for our goodness. There’s a lot, and I remember finding it difficult to translate in a way that was idiomatic in English. Looking after our goodness doesn’t fit in with a lot of modern values. It’s not a term that people talk about much. But it would be a good thing if that became a more and more common term. Looking after your goodness, because it really is your most valuable possession. And you need the strength of mind to secure it, regardless of what happens. There’s going to be loss of all kinds in this life. We’re talking today about the sad side of reading a biography, because it always ends badly. Not always. Death does come, but it doesn’t have to make inroads in the mind and the mind doesn’t have to suffer from it. That’s the possibility that the meditation provides. Think about the great Ajahns when they passed away. There was no sense of grief, no sense of sorrow for them, for their sake at least. And we feel a loss. But as far as they’re concerned, their minds are perfectly fine. I remember going to Gusinara in India, the place where the Buddha passed away. And a lot of the people were getting kind of teary, thinking about the Buddha passing away there. And I didn’t feel that way at all. I felt this great sense of liberation in that spot. This is where the Buddha was finally able to put down his burden. He had accomplished something great. He had taught the Dhamma to the world. And he found freedom. He had found freedom in a way that he was able to explain it to other people so they could find it, too. That’s the greatest gift you can give. He’d accomplished that, and now he could put down the burden. There was a huge sense of lightness, I felt, in that spot. It’d be great if we could all train our minds so that we can have that sense of lightness, too. So when aging comes, you’re still in a good mood. When illness comes, you’re still in a good mood. The mind can maintain its goodness. Even when you die, the mind can maintain its goodness. That’s what we want. That’s the skill that the meditation offers.

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