Samvegic Ironies

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When Ajaan Leed gives his beginning instructions and meditation in the book “Frames of Reference,” Siddhipatthin, he starts by having you develop the right attitude, one of samvega, as you think of the body, and all the struggles that we have to to keep the body going. But what do we have in a body? Take out the parts, take out the elements. It’s not much, and yet it runs our lives. But sometimes to develop samvega you have to take the bigger picture. Think about the Buddha in the night of his awakening. He gained his first knowledge about rebirth, so that he went up and down, up and down, up and down. The question was why. The second knowledge he saw why. It was because of karma. He took the bigger picture. He saw that beings were dying and being reborn in line with their karma. It was all very complex. But it went nowhere. People would develop, get better, and better, get to a comfortable place, and then get lazy and complacent, and then fall. Up and down, up and down. And his instinctive reaction was, “You’ve got to get out.” And then the question was, “How do you get out?” Because you look at the world, and you see people being oppressed, and you want to help them. But all too often, when people who have been oppressed get in a position of power, they start becoming oppressors. People who have been abused start abusing. You see it again, and again, and again. The only people that are really trustworthy are those who are on the way out. The noble ones. The only people whose virtue is firm. Those who have had their first glimpse of the deathless. And they’re going to be around for only seven more lifetimes at most. Otherwise everybody’s unreliable. They can be very good, but all too often their goodness depends on conditions. They listen to the wise ones, they listen to the noble ones. They try to act in line with the right view. But then they fall from that, for one reason or another. Start acting on wrong view. It’s scary, because that’s the way we’ve been all along. Doing good, getting results, and not appreciating the connection between the good we’ve done and the results we get. Or the bad we’ve done and the bad results we get. It’s like we never learn. So it’s good to think about the Buddha’s vision of the universe to see what you can learn from that. One is that even though people are not true necessarily to the principles of morality, and you haven’t been true to the principles of morality, still that doesn’t mean that the principles are not objective. I was reading an article recently by someone saying that they’ve discovered that monkeys have moral behavior in their tribes, but it’s all very self-centered. It’s all in self-interest. As if self-interest made morality unreal. The principle of karma, the principle of rebirth, shows that morality has its objective standards. No killing, no stealing, no lying, no illicit sex, no taking of intoxicants. No harsh speech, no idle chatter, no divisive speech, no lying. These are principles that govern how people die and are reborn. Whether you believe in them or not, that’s how things happen. So there’s an objective basis. The irony is that this vision of the world which gives morality an objective basis also shows that people tend to be unreliable in how they follow through with their good intentions. Of course, the scary thing is that as long as you’re not on your way out, you can’t be reliant on yourself. If you haven’t had a view of the deathless, your sense of right and wrong depends very much on conditions being a certain way. And when those conditions are not met, your idea of right and wrong can change very easily. When life is going relatively well, it’s a lot easier to be moral. It’s a lot easier to do good for yourself and for other people. But when things get very iffy, and they can’t do that, very easily, you suddenly find yourself starving or deprived of shelter. What are you going to do? Can you trust yourself? That’s the scary part of samsara. Think about what the Buddha said about samsara. How many times you’ve been up and down, up and down, up and down. You lose count. And the other irony, of course, is that the vision that shows that morality is objective also shows why people are unreliable. It also shows that the only people who are reliable are the ones who are on their way out. So you think about this. Wherever your thoughts could go that would pull you away from your object of concentration, you realize they’re taking you to a place that’s unreliable. The only way to make yourself reliable is through the practice. That’s what your breath offers. It may not seem like much. It’s in and out, in and out. But the way you develop your mind as you stay with that in and out, explore it, experiment with it, use it as a mirror for seeing what’s going on in the mind. That can take you to freedom. And it can make you reliable. When you can depend on yourself, that’s when you have a true refuge. As the Buddha said, “The self has its own refuge.” And who else could be your refuge? So look at yourself. How good a refuge are you? You have to take responsibility for this. Since you can be one of those people who is unreliable, it leaves a good example for the world even as you leave. Because leaving doesn’t mean you don’t care about the world. You do care. You leave behind this good example. And to get out you don’t just run away. You have to be generous. You have to be virtuous. You have to have compassion, goodwill, empathetic joy. All good social virtues. But you have to remember again and again that they’re not reliable until you’ve trained the mind. Learn to understand its process of how intentions happen, how good intentions happen, how bad intentions happen. What’s the allure of good intentions? What’s the allure of bad intentions? What are their drawbacks? So you develop dispassion. Another irony. Dispassion is what makes you reliable. It’s what makes you free. The prospect of dispassion doesn’t seem all that attractive. And as the Buddha pointed out, you have to be passionate about the path in order to do it. But there comes a point where it requires that you become dispassionate for other things. So you really can be reliable. Ultimately you reach a point where total freedom comes from having dispassion for the path itself. So there are many ironies in the path. You have to care about goodness. And really caring about it, really wanting to be reliable, has to take you to a point where you get dispassionate. You have to learn to see dispassion as a good thing. You’re growing up. In becoming reliable, you become free. Those are the lessons the Buddha learned from his second knowledge and that led through to his third, the knowledge where he realized that what kept all that round and round and round every birth going was circling around in his own heart. He was going to have to take care of that if he was going to solve the problem outside and actually be a reliable help to the world in his quest for true happiness. Look at what he left behind. That is compassion he taught so that other people could find the same happiness as well. And his quest for happiness has meant more for the human race than anything else that has ever happened. So learn to think in those terms. These are not the terms that most of us grew up with. But that doesn’t mean we can’t learn how to adapt ourselves. So they provide the framework for our sense of what’s worth doing in life. And what’s sitting here training your mind right now is the best thing you can be doing.

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