Samvega & Pasada

October 10, 2024

There’s a sutta that describes the last year of the Buddha’s life. It doesn’t go a lot into the doctrine, but it does talk about the emotional attitude you should have to the practice. You can think about the people who composed the sutta. They’d been with the Buddha and now he’s gone. The question was how to relate to that fact, that there had been this amazing person who, as I said, had turned upright what had been turned over, put a light into the darkness, made things clear, urged, roused and encouraged people to follow the practice. He himself gave a really good personal example. But now he’s gone. And so they counseled two emotional reactions. One was sanghvega, which literally means terror. The prospect now of having to deal with samsara. That if you don’t do anything, if you just continue in your old ways, it’s an endless round. And it’s going to be a lot of suffering. Then there’s pasada, confidence. Confidence that there is a way out. You reflect on the Buddha and you’re supposed to give rise to both of these emotions at once. If you have just sanghvega, you get depressed. And after a while you get tired of being depressed and say, well, forget about that. I’ll just do what I want. If you have just pasada, without sanghvega, biting at your heels, it’s easy to get lazy. Especially as the practice gets good, your mind begins to settle down. Concentration feels pleasant. The breath is pleasant. Your state of mind is pleasant. The world doesn’t look so bad after all. If you can maintain that state of mind, it would be very easy to live in the world and not suffer too much. So we need the sanghvega, the sense of urgency, the sense of dismay over the prospect of repeated rebirth, to make sure you don’t get lazy and complacent. As John Lee in his Meditation Instructions would often counsel, an attitude of sanghvega is how you contemplate your body. Here’s this body that you’ve been using to find happiness in this life. And how reliable is it? It’s going to turn on you someday. And already it’s giving you pains here, pains there, illnesses here, illnesses there, as little warning signals. We spend so much time looking after the needs of the body. If we didn’t have all these needs of the body, we wouldn’t even have to have that kitchen over there. We wouldn’t even have the bathrooms. We wouldn’t need to have huts. The whole system we have for providing food for the body. You ask yourself, how many people are really happy to be providing food for you? All the people who have to work in the fields, work in the factories. Every time you’re born, you place this big gaping hole into the world. It has to be filled, and it never gets full. Just think about it. No matter how good the relationship is with other people in the world, no matter how giving you are, there’s so much that you need to feed on. Buddha said this is basically what defines us as beings, is that we have to be sustained by food. He wasn’t talking only about physical food. He was also talking about mental food. Without the food that gives a sense of well-being in the mind, we can’t survive. And yet so much of our feeding on other people, other beings, is not voluntary on their part. So thinking in those ways gets you more inclined to want to practice. This is the way out. However difficult it may be, this is where I’m going to focus my efforts. You come into the present moment, what have you got? You’ve got the pains of the body sitting here. Those can be adjusted, though. You can work with the way you breathe, work with the way you conceive of the breath. Think of the breath energy going through the different parts of the body. The legs, coming in the base of the spine, going down through the hips, coming in the back of the neck, going down the shoulders, the arms. There’s a lot you can work with right here. So the path out is not always difficult. And it’s not always a selfish path. There’s so much said about how Theravada is very self-seeking. The path requires that you be generous, that you be virtuous, you give what you can, you avoid harming others, and you try to cleanse your mind. You can be selfish about that. You’re willing to replace this habit we have of feeding with one of giving. Generosity, of course, is giving material gifts. Virtue is said to be the gift of safety. You may not be able to protect everybody from other sources, but you are protecting them from any potential harm coming from you. As you meditate, you give up your defilements. You become a better person to be around. This relates to that second emotion, the pasada. Ajahn Suwat would encourage an attitude of pasada as you begin to meditate. That what you’re doing here is important work. Trying to get the mind in concentration is good for you and for the people around you. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have the sense of pleasure that comes from getting the mind into concentration, no matter how much you may see the drawbacks of sensuality, of being attached to the body, you’re going to go back. Because the mind needs pleasure for its food. To learn how to feed inside. So you’re not taking food from other people’s fields. Unfortunately we can’t see the goal. We hear all these exclamations throughout the Pali Canon about what a wonderful goal it is. Because even that image the Buddha gives, he says, we could make a deal. That for a hundred years, every day in the morning, they would stab you with a hundred spears. Then midday, another hundred spears. Evening, another hundred spears. Altogether, three hundred spears a day for a hundred years. But at the very end, you would be guaranteed your first taste of awakening. He said that would be a good deal. You’d be well advised to take it. And the happiness that would come from the realization at the end would be so great that it would obliterate any thoughts of how much pain was involved in the path going there. It’s that amazing. Whereas the Jhammahabhava said, if you take Nibbana out and show it to everybody, that would be the number one thing that people would desire throughout the world. Unfortunately we can’t see it. Even the Buddha couldn’t take it out to show us. But he does give us an inclination. He says you practice concentration and you find that as you go from basic levels of concentration, the ones that are higher and higher, that you begin to shed things that weigh the mind down. Then as you go further and further, you finally get to total shedding. You learn how to appreciate the stillness, the well-being that comes from the stillness of the mind, when it’s not picking up burdens all the time. That’s the irony. We think that by feeding on the world, we make ourselves stronger. And we do. But at the same time, we’re adding burdens on ourselves. And the trade-off we begin to realize is that it’s really not worth it. So as you sit here and meditate, think about these two attitudes, the Sanghvega on the one hand, the Pasada on the other. There’s a huge load of suffering that we can leave behind by following this path. Think of that other image the Buddha gave you. He had some dirt under his fingernail one time. He asked the monks, “Which is greater, the dirt under the fingernail or the dirt in the whole earth?” The monks said, “Well, of course, the dirt in the whole earth is greater, much greater.” The Buddha said in the same way, “For those who attain the first level of awakening, the suffering that remains for them is like the dirt under their fingernail. For those who happen, it’s like the dirt in the whole earth.” The difference is that radical. So ask yourself, which of these two emotions is going to weaken you as you practice? Learn how to contemplate in ways that would strengthen it. It may seem artificial, but remember, all of our thinking is artificial. It’s all put together. What seems natural is simply habitual. Ways you’ve been thinking again and again and again. But there are better ways to think, better ways to talk to yourself. And you can make them habitual as well. That’s what creates the right frame of mind to practice, the right frame of mind to adopt as you read about the Buddha in his life. Try to think about what it was like for people back in those days who actually had met him. The impact it had on them. And then he was gone. But in leaving, he didn’t just disappear without a trace. He left a huge body of teachings. He left an example. He left the organization of the Sangha as a community of people who could continue the practice. So in his search for happiness, it wasn’t just him who benefited. He benefited lots of people. The fact that he searched for happiness in a wise way is probably one of the most important events in world history. So think about how you relate to that. And use it to put some fire into your practice. So that your search for happiness will be a gift, not only to yourself, but for everybody around you.

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