Confidence

May 29, 2022

The chant we do so often, the five reflections, helps us to relive the state of mind of the young prince, the Buddha, when he was still living at home. The first four reflections relive his state of sanghvega, looking at his life. Here he was, young, healthy, alive. But he saw that he was subject to aging, illness, and death, and that he was unaffordable. Someday he was going to have to get old. Someday he was going to get sick. Someday he would have to die. And that meant that he would be separated from all that was dear and appealing. If the reflections had stopped there, and if his reflections had stopped there, it would be pretty depressing. But there’s that fifth reflection, “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions,” and so forth. That’s a different emotion. There’s hope there. In Pali, it’s called pasada, hope, confidence, that there is a way out. And it depends on your actions. You’re not going to be waiting for some god to come down and pull you out of all this, or for just random things to happen. You’re going to depend on your choices. This is why we meditate. Because where do our choices come from? They come from the mind. And you want to make sure your choices are well made. So you want to train the mind so it’s likely to do things that are skillful. But the Buddha’s pointing out something really important here, that the way out is through your actions. Years back, someone told me how people think about good fortune. They’re divided into three classes. Upper class people think that good fortune comes because they simply deserve it. It’s going to just come their way because of their innate goodness, innate value. Of course, the judgment there is that those who don’t have good fortune have lower value. Then there’s the middle class attitude, which is that if you want to be happy in life, if you want to gain good fortune in life, you have to work for it. Then there’s a lower class attitude, which is that good fortune is a matter of luck. Sometimes it comes, sometimes it doesn’t. It doesn’t have anything to do with whether you deserve it or not. It’s pretty random. So what you’ve got there are three different attitudes towards karma, the upper class and the lower class attitudes. Basically, depending on your past karma, they differ only in the sense that the lower class attitude is that what kind of person you are right now doesn’t determine whether good fortune is going to come your way. It has to do with simply your luck in the past, or your luck now that you happen to have good actions in your past. Whereas the upper class attitude is that some of the goodness of your past actions still adheres to you as a person. In which case, the lower class attitude is a little bit more close to the Buddhist attitude. It’s towards your past actions and your present state. Just because good things happen to you now doesn’t mean that you’re a good person right now. You may have good actions in the past, but you may have all kinds of other things as well. It’s the middle class attitude that’s focused on your current actions. You don’t try to depend on how good you’ve been in the past. You try to depend on what you are doing right now. So in that way, the Buddhist teaching is kind of a middle class teaching. But as we all know, people who work hard don’t all stay in the middle class. They do their work well. Their status rises. That’s the Buddhist point. If you focus on your current actions, what you’re doing right now, the choices you’re making, you can change the level of your mind. You can take a mind that’s fascinated with sensuality and the level of sensual becoming and move it up to what’s called the level of form. That’s when we meditate. You come here to inhabit the internal form of your body as you feel it from within. And you’re not thinking about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. You’re finding your pleasure right here. And this is a higher form of pleasure because it doesn’t take anything from anyone else. It doesn’t depend on the outside world being a certain way. When you get really good at a concentration, you can get the mind focused wherever you are. But you’re not resting on your laurels. You realize there’s more work to be done. Some of us read that it is possible to gain awakening in the first jhana. We like to think, “Well, maybe all I have to do is just hang out in the first jhana long enough and it’s going to happen.” That’s not the case. The people who gained enlightenment in the first jhana, or awakening in the first jhana, had lots of discernment. It was the ripe fruit that the Buddha picked. We’re the ones who have to work more. How much more, we don’t know. You can’t put in an order saying, “When I hit the second jhana, that’s when I gain awakening.” You just keep working on making your stillness of mind more and more secure. What it comes down to is that you get the mind still. And whether it’s jhana or not, if you find some measure of stillness in the mind, you hold on to it. You protect it. See it as something of value. And as you stay with it long enough, you begin to see there’s a bit of stress here and there in that state. It comes and it goes. You want to look for the coming and going, the rise and the fall of the level of stress. And you want to be able to see when the level of stress in the mind, or the level of disturbance in the mind, rises. What else did you do? When it fell, what did you do? If you can pinpoint what you did, okay, then stop doing the things that raise the level of stress. And you’ll find that you go into deeper concentration. Here again, you spend some time inhabiting that level of concentration until you feel really secure there. And then you ask those questions again. Is there any rise and fall in the level of stress? And when there’s a rise, what did you do? What happens when you stop doing that? In this way we get the mind deeper and deeper and deeper. And because we’re learning how to observe things that we missed on the lower level of concentration, this means we’re increasing our sensitivity, which is precisely what we need to develop discernment. And at the same time, you’re beginning to see different types of fabrication. By fabrication, we don’t mean lies in the mind. We mean fabrication of putting things together in the mind, putting sights together with their perceptions and feelings and things. You can see how concentration itself is a type of fabrication. It becomes your test case for how you approach an object, how you relate to an object, how you can find a sense of pleasure, ease, fullness, refreshment around an object, to the point where the refreshment itself, the sense of rapture maybe, becomes part of the disturbance. You learn to let go of that as you hold onto the breath. Then there’s a sense of pleasure. And even that becomes a disturbance. The fact that the breath is coming in and going out is a disturbance. Your mind is getting that sensitive. So you do the work. You rest and then you do the work. You rest and then you do the work. That’s the way out. You can’t sit here hoping, “Well, maybe my good karma from the past is going to kick in and things will all fall together.” It occasionally happens. We have those moments of serendipity where everything just seems to fall into place. That’s the result of your past actions. But if you don’t take advantage of it properly with your present actions, it just comes and goes and that’s it. If you want something to be really reliable inside, you have to have the attitude, “I can do this through my own actions right now. I can observe my own actions right now.” That’s how the meditation gets better and better. So you commit yourself to doing this and you reflect. Learn from what you observe and then you commit yourself some more. Keep at it. Keep at it. And that level of your sensitivity gets heightened. You see that your confidence is well-placed. That’s not going to be confirmed until you have your first experience of the Deathless. But even along the way it seems promising. After all, think about the state of mind that the young Bodhisattva went through. He looked around at the whole world. He was aging, illness, and death all around. Everybody he loved was going to age, grow ill, and die. He was going to age, grow ill, and die. Whatever things he was trying to find as treasures and possessions in life were all going to be taken away from him at some point. You can imagine how trapped he felt, that sense of dismay, and then thinking, “There must be some way out.” It’s not in the Canon, but one of the texts says that after he saw an old person, a sick person, and a dead person, he saw a forest mendicant. He thought, “Ah, this must be the way out. There’s a way out. It’s going to be there.” That’s the moment of passada, or confidence, that showed the way, that there’s a way out. And it’s interesting that the young Bodhisattva and the young prince, when he went off into the wilderness, there were lots of different theories about karma that were being taught at that time. And the ones that said there’s nothing you can do, everything is already predetermined, or everything is all random. He never tried to put those ideas to the test, because they’re not something you can put to the test. But he did decide to put to the test the idea that maybe it’s possible, through human action, to put an end to suffering. As long as you’re the owner of your actions, make use of that ownership. And don’t get waylaid by the good results or bad results of your past actions. Keep focused on what you’re doing right now, because that’s the way out. I received a letter recently from someone complaining about how the idea of Mara has been brought to America, even though it plays a big role in the Pali Canon. But in the Pali Canon, it’s largely the Mara or the Buddha. Sometimes he’ll visit some other monks and nuns. And even the Pali Canon makes clear that Mara’s minions, the ones who really do all his dirty work, are your own defilements. And it’s not just modern Western teachers who downplay the role of Mara in the forest tradition. You can also say, if you try to blame everything that goes on in your mind, everything bad that goes on in your mind, every difficulty you have on Mara, you’re not going to be inclined to want to look at what you’re doing that’s creating the problem. Take responsibility for your actions. That way you have a chance to see. That way you have a chance to get out. This may be a middle-class attitude, but it’s not the sort of attitude that will keep you in the middle class. It’s an attitude that raises your level, the level of the mind, the level of your behavior, and opens the way. So instead of hoping that your innate goodness is going to take you, or that pure luck is going to take you, focus on the fact that there’s something I can do right now. There’s a step I can take right now. It may be a long journey, but here’s a step I can take in the right direction. And that’s pasada, that’s confidence. When we look at the world around us, we see so much death, death, death. So many things going to waste. People with good fortune squandering their opportunities to do good. It’s very easy to develop a sense of sanghvega, a sense of feeling trapped, a sense of dismay, even terror that can come if you felt that there was no way out, or that the Buddha offers a way out. In fact, his teachings on sanghvega and pasada go so closely together, it’s almost as if he turns sanghvega into a good thing. He talks about seeing the places where he gained awakening, the places where he was born, the places where he gave his first sermon, the places where he died. He gives rise to a sense of sanghvega. And then you come away from that with pasada, a sense of confidence. It’s like he was in a closed room and he found an open door, and he left the door open. So from now on, every time you get hit by a strong sense of sanghvega, you can remind yourself that there is pasada, a confidence that there is a way out. So cultivate that confidence as much as you can. As the Buddha said, he taught the teachings because human beings can do it and because they’ll benefit from it. He’s placing that much confidence in you. So try to have some confidence in yourself. But again, the confidence is focused not on you as a person who deserves to have this happen, or someone who hopes for a lucky stroke. The confidence is focused on your actions. This is the way out. This is what you’re doing right now, so do it well. Don’t close the door on yourself. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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