

Mountains Moving In

December 29, 2006

The passage we chanted just now on the mountains comes from a discourse in which King Pasenadi goes to visit the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him, “Where are you coming from here in the middle of the day?” And the king is remarkably frank. He says, “Oh, I’ve been spending my time doing the typical sorts of things of someone obsessed by his power, ruling over a great country.”

The Buddha says, “Suppose a trustworthy messenger were to come from the East, saying, ‘Your majesty, may it please you to know that there’s a huge mountain coming in from the East, crushing all living beings in its way.’ And another messenger were to come from the South, another one from the West, and another one from the North, each with a similar message: altogether four mountains moving in from the four main directions, crushing all living beings in their path. “And,” the Buddha says, “in a situation like that, with such a great loss of human life, what would you do?”

The king says, “What else could be done but to practice the Dhamma?”

And the Buddha says, “Now I inform you: Aging and death are rolling in, crushing all living beings in their path. Given that aging and death are rolling in, what should you do?” And of course the answer is the same: Practice the Dhamma, train the mind, so that when aging and death come, you don’t have to suffer.

This is a constant theme in the Buddha’s teachings. In the very beginning, when the young prince reflected on aging, illness, and death, realizing that these things were going to destroy whatever happiness he found—his family, his wealth, and his power—he wanted to find something that would go beyond them. He wanted to find something that was free from aging, free from illness, free from death. If he didn’t make the effort to find that, his life would have been lived in vain.

There’s a story in the *Buddhacarita*, which is a biography of the Buddha written around the turn of the millennium, that the Buddha’s father and his friends tried to dissuade the young prince from his path, saying, “Look at all the great people in the past who contented themselves with the sensual pleasures of everyday life.” And the prince’s response was, “Then they weren’t really great people.” In other words, the normal search for happiness is something that goes nowhere. You get results for a little while, and then they get crushed.

So the prince left his home and went out into the forest. After he had found that the teachings available at that time didn't satisfy him, he decided that maybe the search for happiness was the problem. So he tried to eradicate all attachment to pleasure in his mind by tormenting himself, but that didn't work. Then he had the great insight that it wasn't so much the search for pleasure that was wrong, it was simply that he was looking in the wrong places for happiness. He was looking in the wrong way, in a very shortsighted way.

His discovery was that you still search for happiness, simply that you do it by the middle way. In fact, the two extremes that he said the middle way avoids were criticized because they created suffering. The search for happiness among sensual pleasures creates suffering. Self-torment creates suffering. The only path to true happiness is the middle way: the noble eightfold path.

That was one of his first teachings. You look at the qualities you develop as part of that path, and they're very different from the normal qualities we think about when we think of the search for happiness. For most of us, happiness is found by buying this or that, snaring a good partner, getting a good job, creating something that we'll leave behind. But still, the things we leave behind get blown away by time. And often the things you have to do in order to create those forms of happiness are not things you're really proud of. But if you look at the qualities that the Buddha asks you to develop as you practice the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment, or wisdom, purity, and compassion: These are all qualities you *can* be proud of.

Ajaan Suwat used to make the point that sometimes you hear it said in Thailand that the essence of the Buddha's teachings is that you shouldn't be selfish. You shouldn't look at yourself. As he pointed out, you really *should* look after yourself, but you should look after yourself in a wise way. Look for your happiness in a wise way, realizing that it's going to depend on your actions. It's not anything anybody else can do for you.

When I was a kid, we lived for a while in Charlottesville, Virginia, Thomas Jefferson's home. I remember visiting Jefferson's grave one time. It was interesting: His epitaph was something he had requested, and there wasn't any mention of the fact that he had been the President of the United States. Instead, there was a list of things he had done: author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Bill of Rights, and founder of the University of Virginia. Things he had done. Those were the things he was proud of. As for the presidency, he said, that was something somebody else gave him. It didn't mean that much to him.

And that's really the right attitude. The things that are going to bring us happiness are the things we *do*. Once you realize that, then you realize that the only kind of happiness that's worth putting in the effort for is a happiness that's long-term. That's the beginning of wisdom. It takes your desire for happiness and pursues it in a way that leads to wisdom.

The same for compassion: You realize that just as you desire happiness, other people desire happiness, too. If your happiness depends on their suffering, it's not going to last. This may sound calculating, but this calculation really is the basis for compassion. You start think about other people's desire for happiness and you begin to sympathize with their desire for happiness. Otherwise, you can't understand them. Once you sympathize with their desire for happiness, you realize you have to adjust your ideas about what happiness consists of, where you're going to find it. You want a happiness that doesn't cause anyone any harm. So you want something that's long-term and harmless.

Then you have to look at your actual actions. The things you do: Do they cause any harm to anyone else? If they do, you've got to learn how to stop doing those things. If you find yourself acting in a way that doesn't cause harm, rejoice in that.

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Western psychology has taught us to be suspicious of our altruistic actions, our good actions. But that's not the Buddha's attitude. All actions are fabrications. All motivations are fabrications. So learn how to encourage the ones that are skillful. Even though you may have unskillful attitudes in the mind, you don't have to regard them as your true nature. They're no more true than your good motives, and they certainly don't take you in a good direction. So encourage the good ones, discourage the unskillful ones. Keep careful watch over your actual actions to make sure they do fall in line with the principles of wisdom, compassion, purity, integrity. These are all really important virtues. They're considered to be the basic qualities of the Buddha, yet they're all based on that skillful search for happiness.

This is the kind of search that leads to a happiness that doesn't die. And this is the kind of search that makes your life worth living. Even if you don't get all the way to the end of the path in this lifetime, you can look back on your life and see that at least it was well lived. After all, Prince Siddhartha didn't know for sure that he was going to find this way, but he felt that a life that didn't take the noble search into account, that wasn't devoted to the noble search, wasn't a life to be proud of. But the fact you are following this path: That *is* something to be proud of. The fact that you've been able to give up all the things that snared everybody else, that kept them from coming here, kept them from giving themselves to this practice: That's something to be proud of.

There's that question posed in one of the suttas: Days and nights fly past, fly past, what are you doing right now? It's the basically same question the Buddha was asking Pasenadi: Aging and death are rolling in, what should you do? And your answer should be that you should practice the Dhamma. As for the answer to the other question: "What you doing right now?" The answer is: "I *am* practicing the Dhamma." That's an answer you can be proud of. But it requires that you stick with the practice all the time, because you never know when one of those mountains is going to land on you. So you always want to be prepared.