

## *Turning Points*

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There are two moments in the story of the Buddha's life that are particularly inspiring. One was the point where he realized he had to leave home. He had lived a life of luxury, of pleasure. The account we often hear—of his seeing an old person, a sick person, a dead person for the first time—is the one we're most familiar with. The actual account when he tells the story in the Pali Canon—is different. There are two places where he puts in his own words. One was when he realized he was intoxicated, not intoxicated on alcohol or drugs, but intoxicated with his youth, with his health, and with his life—so much so that he looked down on people who were old, sick, or dead, and dismissed them. But when he realized that he himself one day was going to be old, sick, and dead, he knew that that intoxication, that pride, was unbecoming, was inappropriate

Worse than that, he looked around and he said he saw the world was totally filled with competition, conflict. There wasn't a single spot that somebody hadn't already laid claim to. That's why he reflected that the world was like fish in a pond that was drying up, flopping around, fighting one another over what little water was remaining. It gave rise to a strong sense of despair and dismay.

In both cases, he realized the problem was not outside, it was inside. He called it the arrow in the heart. As a result, he had to find some way to pull out that arrow. So his reaction, after having lived a life of luxury, was to go into the forest, leaving behind all his responsibilities, all his comforts, so that he could really devote himself full-time to see if he could find a happiness that wasn't subject to age, illness, and death.

It wasn't too long after that that he fell into the opposite extreme. He decided that it was the search for pleasure that made people struggle, that made people compete, feed off each other, and that kept them intoxicated. So he resolved to go the other direction and not allow himself to fall for any pleasure at all. He denied himself every kind of pleasure, even the pleasure of breathing, the pleasure of eating. He kept that up for six years, which is where we come to the second really inspiring part of the story.

You might ask what keeps someone going for six years like that. Most likely the answer is pride: the pride that you're not going to let yourself dismayed by any kind of pain. So the pleasure was there in the pleasure of pride, that you're better than anyone else who has even done that. In fact, he reports that there was one

point where he reflected that nobody had ever excelled the austerities that he had done, but still those austerities hadn't led to the peace he had been searching for.

So he reflected: Maybe there's another way. That's really inspiring. He was able to drop that pride. He reflected back on his childhood. Once, when his father was plowing, he was sitting under a tree, and his mind entered the first jhāna: pleasure and rapture born of seclusion. He asked himself: Could this be the way to awakening? And something inside him said Yes, it could. Then the next question he asked himself was: "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? What's blameworthy about it?" The more he thought about it, the more he realized that that kind of pleasure had nothing blameworthy.

That's how he got started on the path. He had to start eating again so that he would have enough physical strength to get the mind to that level of concentration, that level of clarity. He realized that this pleasure is not blameworthy in either way, in the sense that, one, it wasn't feeding off of other people, it wasn't taking anything away from them. And two, it wasn't the kind of pleasure that would lead to intoxication, intoxication of youth, health, and life. On the contrary, it was a pleasure that allow the mind to see things clearly. In fact, he discovered as he pursued that path that it led to a state of concentration with total purity of mindfulness and equanimity. The mind was clear, malleable, and bright.

This is how right concentration became the first factor of the path the Buddha discovered. The other seven factors clustered around that as he developed right concentration and then tried using it in various ways, first to see what he could learn about question of whether he had had previous lifetimes or not. He discovered that he could remember them, many eons of them, going up and down through many different levels of being. Then the question was, why do people go so erratically through so many levels of being? He had a vision of the whole cosmos where people are dying and being reborn in line with their karma, in line with the intentions that they acted on, skillful or unskillful.

That led him finally to his third knowledge, which was looking at his intentions in the present moment, to see which intentions caused stress and suffering: "Can you see them in action right now? Can you see their effects right now? How about if you stop them?" This is where he arrived at the four noble truths. He realized not only what the truths were, but also the tasks that he had to complete with regard to them. So he completed them. That was when he gained awakening.

Central to this story is his discovery of right concentration, a form of happiness that could be a path to a higher form of happiness. He didn't have to

put himself through ultimate pain in order to get the happiness that's supposed to lie on the other side. There would be pain, there would be struggle in the path, but he kept going on, not through a sense of pride, but through the actual pleasure that comes from focusing the mind, getting it centered, totally secluded from all its other preoccupations. And he discovered that this was a blameless happiness.

This is really important, because his understanding of the mind focused all around that. The path he set up starts with right view, which contains all the "shoulds" of the Buddha's teaching. It centers on the question of why we suffer, and how we can put an end to suffering. That's a very humane question. It's not a question imposed on us from the outside or some higher force. It's a question that springs up basically every time we choose to act: What can we do to find some pleasure?

It's interesting that the Pali word for happiness—*sukha*—also means pleasure, bliss, well-being, ease. It contains all of these things. So the Buddha discovered that our search for happiness is not something we should be scolded for or should feel ashamed of. But we should learn to do it in clear-sighted way, because for most of us, our pleasures do blind us, they do get us intoxicated, and they often do cause suffering for us or for other people. But there is a way to look for a happiness that's not going to harm anybody at all. Our desire for true happiness doesn't have to conflict with other people's desire for true happiness. The "shoulds" in our mind don't have to conflict with our desire for happiness.

So this is the kind of doctor that the Buddha is in terms of diagnosing our problem of suffering. He doesn't say that there's an irrevocable struggle between our ideas of what's morally right and wrong on the one hand, and our desire for happiness on the other, like some people do. And he doesn't say that our happiness has to conflict with the happiness of other people. In other words, there may be conflicts but they are resolvable—if you look for happiness in the right way.

So as you meditate, you'll find that there's a struggle inside the mind, a struggle that says on one side, "I'd like to get some immediate pleasure and why isn't it happening fast enough?" While the other side says, "You really want to train the mind so that it comes under your control. Be willing to take the time." There is going to be a struggle there but it's not irreconcilable. You have to realize that both sides are basically looking for pleasure, looking for happiness. It's simply a matter of learning how to teach them to work together, rather than at cross purposes.

So when you find conflicts in the path, when you seem to be up against a wall, step back and say, "Okay, everybody in here is looking for happiness, it's just that

we have a different understanding.” It’s not that our desires are blind or thoughtless. Each desire has its rationale, its reasons. So when you find yourself up against a wall like that, sit down and try to sort things out, with the idea we’re all here working together. We don’t have to be at cross purposes.

This applies both inside and outside. Everybody wants happiness. It’s simply a matter of training our head and our heart to be more in the line with each other. In Pali, they use the same word for the mind and the heart: *citta*. There’s no necessary conflict between the two. Our heart teaches the head that the important issue in life is suffering. The head teaches the heart that you have to work within the laws of causality. You can’t just wish for something and *poof* have it happen right away. It takes work, it takes time, it takes strategy. So learn how to get both sides working together.

It’s in this way that the path comes together. This is how the mind achieves unity, not by pushing out the evil insiders or outsiders, but by realizing that our ignorant desires are just that: ignorant. They contain a desire for happiness but they’ve got it wrong. So you’ve got to listen to them. This is one of the things you have to do when the mind gets still, once you’ve got it so that you can sit and watch your thoughts without getting carried away by them, or following along the flow with them. You can ask the question: Why do they think this way? Why do they feel they should take over? What do they want? What are their assumptions based on? You thwart them and see what they have to say in response. You may not learn anything at first, but after a while there will come an insight into: Oh, they think this way. This desire comes from this idea, which, when you look at it objectively, makes no sense at all. When you see that it makes no sense, it loses a lot of its power.

This is how insight defuses a lot of our unskillful emotions, with the assumption that every emotion in the mind is based on the desire for happiness, but it’s based on a misunderstanding. This is why right view is so important. It’s also why you can’t expect your defilements to go away simply by watching them, thinking that when they go away, they’re gone for good. If that same misunderstanding is still buried in the mind, it’s going to come up again.

This is why discernment is needed to cut through all these things. It’s discernment based on the strategy of learning how to give the mind some pleasure right here right now so that you’re not so hungry that you go along with your angry desires. When the mind is well fed with a good sense of ease, pleasure, and rapture, it can look at its unskillful notions with a lot less sense of compulsion. You can create the atmosphere in which they start talking and you can start

hearing what they say, what they're really thinking. And you can defuse them that way.

All of the Buddha's teachings are based on an assumption that we all want happiness. He doesn't assume that we have Buddha nature. He doesn't assume that we have original sin. He doesn't talk about our basic nature in any way at all. But he does base all his teachings on the fact that everything we do is based on the desire for happiness. So his tack is to take that desire for happiness, not to try to snuff it out the way he did when he was practicing his austerities, but to train it so that it becomes a noble desire for happiness, part of the path called the noble path. As the Buddha said, it leads to unbinding, which in his day was a common word for the ultimate happiness.

So both the path is noble and the goal is noble as well. This is what makes it such a good path to follow.