

The Blood You've Shed

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Ajaan Fuang once said that it's a good thing most of us can't remember our past lives because we could very easily get fixated on all the wrong that was done to us, all the issues that never got settled. And we might want to go back and settle some old scores. Of course, there'd be no end to that. After all, the people whose scores got settled would probably want to settle some scores with us, because the other part of potentially remembering your past lives is remembering all the wrongs *you* did, the ways you harmed people, that you'd be ashamed to think about now.

But just the thought of that possibility leaves us with an important lesson. No scores are fully settled. Things don't come to closure. This is the nature of samsara: It just keeps wandering on and on and on. No story comes to an end. We watch plays, read books, where events come to a satisfying closure, and part of us would like to see that in our own lives as well. But one of the facts you have to accept when you come to the practice is that there is no closure. And the more the mind insists on trying to find closure, the more it weighs itself down and keeps itself entangled in that ongoing wandering on.

So when we think about the whole issue of past lives, it's good to think of it as a general principle, without getting into the details. It's useful because it's one way of getting out of our own individual stories right now, the narratives we bring from this lifetime, concerning our parents, our relationship to them, our relationship to friends, people who've done us wrong, people who've mistreated us, how we're going to respond to that. Look at the Buddha's own night of awakening as a good paradigm for how to deal with these things. Remember: The first knowledge dealt with his knowledge of his past lives, remembering what he had done here, what he had done there, who he had been, what had he eaten. What pleasures and pains he experienced, how he had died—going back many, many eons.

But he didn't stop there with just the narratives, trying to figure out, "How can I settle that issue, how can I settle that score?" The sheer multitude of all those stories, all those narratives, was enough to induce a huge feeling of dismay and dispassion. From there, he went on to the question: Was this true only of him, or was it true of other beings, too? Is there any pattern to all of this? Because when you just see the line of narratives, it's not really clear what the pattern is.

So in his next knowledge, he inclined his mind to knowledge of how beings in general die and are reborn, and he saw that this happens to everybody, and that the way you're reborn depends on your karma.

Karma turns out to be very complex. Sometimes you do something really bad in this

lifetime, but you have a nice lifetime in the next, because you have other good karma from the past as well. There is the general pattern, though, that actions based on unskillful intentions, under the influence of wrong views, showing no respect for the noble ones, lead to suffering. Actions based on skillful intentions, under the influence of right views, showing respect for the noble ones, lead to happiness. That's the basic principle. That's what we want to focus on right here, right now.

And that's exactly what the Buddha did. From his second knowledge, he focused in on the present moment, looking to see what his mind was doing at that moment that was causing stress and suffering, and what intentions and views he could develop to put an end to that stress and suffering. He saw that the suffering came from craving and clinging, so he focused his intentions on doing everything he could do to induce a feeling of dispassion for whatever it was he craved and clung to—and for the craving and clinging itself. He did this without any concern for tying up loose ends or bringing things to closure, but simply realizing that he had to focus on what he was doing at that moment to put an end to this whole cycle.

But it was important that he was able to look at the big picture before he settled in on the present moment. If we don't do that ourselves, we just have our own personal issues and we bring them right into the breath, right into the body right now. Then all the questions of “Why did this happen to me?” or “Why did he or she do that to me, how could I allow this to happen?”—those overwhelm the meditation. But if you see them as part of a larger pattern, then you can develop a sense of dispassion for them, without having to tease them out and go back to your childhood to sort out what happened. Just look at the universality of it all.

There is that series of suttas where the Buddha first asks the question, “Which is more? The water in the oceans, or the tears you've shed through your many lifetimes?” And you've shed more tears. Then he talks about how hard it is to find anyone who hasn't been your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your son, or your daughter in previous lifetimes. When you think of all the issues you have with your parents and siblings and children in this lifetime, and multiply that by a huge number of lifetimes, it's an enormous number of unsettled issues that you've got with everybody in this room, everybody you've ever met.

Then there's the image that rarely gets quoted: the sutta where he asks the monks, “Which is greater? The amount of blood you've shed from having had your throat slit in previous lifetimes, or the water in all the oceans?” That's one to think about, because he said you've shed more blood, just from your throat, than there is water in the oceans. Imagine the blood you've shed from other parts of your body.

So potentially there's a huge number of unsettled issues in the past. But as the Buddha said, just thinking about that is enough to develop dispassion for everything, to want to find release from all this, because there is no closure. But there is release.

So when you find yourself bringing issues from your family, issues from your work, issues from your daily life or childhood, into the meditation and you find that they overwhelm the

meditation, remember what the Buddha did. He didn't stop at just his own narratives. He thought first about the large picture: how universal it was, and how it's impossible to bring these things to closure. And the only answer is to develop dispassion, together with a sense of compassion for all the other beings in the world who've also shed all those many tears, who've lost all that blood as well. Because as we often know, when a parent has harmed a child, you can look at the parent's background and find that the parent was harmed by his or her parents. And it goes on and on, way, way back. There's no one who hasn't suffered a lot. And the sad thing is that we just keep inflicting our sufferings on one another. Parents inflict it on the children, children turn around and inflict it on the parents.

There's that sad story in the book *Into the Wild*, about the young man who felt betrayed by his father. His father was a stern disciplinarian, always demanding a very moral conduct from his son, but then the son finds out later the father was a bigamist. He loses respect for the father and just leaves the family right after school, goes off without telling them where he went. The parents have no idea what happened to him. That was his revenge.

Finally they get word that someone has found a dead body up in Alaska, it may be their son, and sure enough, it is their son. And so in the last scene of the book, the parents fly in a helicopter out to the spot where the boy passed away, a school bus, just outside the boundaries of Denali National Park. They leave a suitcase of canned food there, with a little note: "To whoever might find this suitcase of canned food, if you haven't contacted your parents and let them know where you are, please let them know. They miss you."

So who knows? You can place blame on the father, you can place blame on the son, but it doesn't erase the fact that there was a lot of suffering inflicted on both sides by both sides. And if you don't decide to pull out of the suffering we've been inflicting on one another through our desires to close the issue, or to bring a particular issue to closure, there's never going to be any end.

There's a story in the Commentary of a major wife who's barren, and so the husband, a king, gets a minor wife. The minor wife has a child and the major wife is afraid that the minor wife is going to take over because she has given her husband an heir. And so she kills the child. Then both of them die and they get reborn, one as a fox and the other as a chicken. The fox comes in and steals the chicken's eggs. Then they get reborn as other kinds of animals and back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, until you lose track of who's who, until finally at the time of the Buddha, they are both born as human beings, both born as women. One of them has a child, and for some reason the other woman is after her because she wants to kill the child. So the first woman gets chased into the monastery where the Buddha's staying. Both of them are right there in front of the Buddha, so he tells them the story of their many, many, many past lives.

So the question is, where are you going to place the blame? It goes back-and-forth, back-and-forth like this, and the only way to release is to make up your mind that you're going to just

stop it right here, enough of this. And that's what the women do.

When you look at the larger picture, it's a lot easier to let go of the particulars of your own suffering, of your own narratives, the old game of place the blame, and say, "Enough."

This contemplation of the universality of suffering, the universality of this wandering on, the Buddha said, is enough to induce a strong sense of samvega, the dismay over the whole process. And the best response to that is to develop pasada, a sense of conviction that this is the way out, by practicing what the Buddha called the karma that leads to an end of karma—in other words, the noble eightfold path—developing these qualities of mind so that don't have to continue the stories. You just drop them with thoughts of goodwill for everyone involved, and then focus on what you're doing right now to cause suffering for yourself, right now. That's the only way these stories can be brought to an end—by letting go of the whole thing.