

The Politics of Arising & Passing Away

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One of the reasons we develop concentration is to see things clearly as they happen. In particular, we do it to gain discernment which, in one of the passages, is defined as right discernment into arising and passing away. As the mind gets more and more centered, you begin to see things just coming up. If you don't run with them, they dissolve. Then more come up and, again, if you don't run with them, they dissolve away. If you do run with them, though, it's like running with scissors. In other words, you turn them into worlds with which you then stab yourself.

So one of the things you have to learn is that whenever a thought comes up or whenever any kind of potential for a thought world comes up, you just want to let it burst like a bubble without your getting involved in it and without your trying to make anything more out of it than that. I remember hearing someone once talking about how, as the mind got really quiet, you could see mental events and physical events on a very subtle level where they all seemed very light and very ephemeral—the idea being that once you saw how insubstantial everything was, you'd automatically lose interest.

But there's actually more going on. Just seeing things arising and passing away is not all that the Buddha talked about. When he described the act of watching arising and passing away, it was not simply a matter of things coming and going away. He said you have to see origination as well.

Now *origination* here means seeing how these things are caused. What is it in the mind that gives rise to these things to begin with? You're not simply a passive observer watching a TV show, faced with only one choice: the choice of getting involved in the show or not. You're actually the producer of the show. There's something going on in the mind that keeps churning these things out. You want to be able to see that, because if you don't see that, then no matter how much you let go or relax or let go of your grasp, the potentials are always there for you to grab on to things again, to create more problems for yourself.

Once you really come to understand this process of origination, you realize how it's potentially never ending. It's a self-sustaining process. You have

consciousness that feeds off of craving, and the craving feeds off of consciousness, and these processes just go around and around and around. They keep each other going, along with all the other factors of dependent co-arising. You see that even little tiny things in your mind—which, as you simply watch them arising and passing away in the present moment, seem so innocent and so light—are actually tiny hooks that can pull you into monster narratives that can go for a long, long time.

This is why one of the basic emotions or attitudes motivating the practice and then actually get strengthened by the practice is *samvega*. This is a word we sometimes translate as dismay, sometimes as a sense of being chastened, but it goes deeper than that. It's actually related to the word for terror: seeing how these little tiny things could pull you into very long, long narratives that would not end very easily, and could mangle you badly in the meantime. Until you see that, until you really appreciate that, you're not going to be able to dig deep enough or even be motivated to dig deep enough to figure out what the ultimate cause of all this is. It's all too easy to think, "Well, they just arise and pass away on their own, and it's my choice of whether I want to hold on to them or not."

I was once talking to someone who said that the natural position of your hand is not to grasp, it's to let go. Therefore, awakening is a very natural process. You let things simply relax, loosen your grasp, and you relax your way into nirvana. It's a very strange image for the practice, for a hand that lets go permanently is a dead hand. And I have yet to see the Buddha describe the practice in that way. The practice he described is one of effort. There's that Thai idiom for meditation: "doing an effort." And it's not just a Thai idiom, it's actually there in the Pali canon. You make an effort, you're resolute, you're ardent, heedful, because you see the dangers all around. The sense of terror is what gives you your motivation. You combine it with a sense of confidence that there is a way out and that this is it.

There's a science fiction story I read years back in which there was a planet to which all criminals were sent when sentenced for life. Before you were sent, you underwent certain operations. They gave you stainless steel nails and stainless steel teeth to live on this planet. When you got there, it was just a very weird location. People had nothing really to do. They would just lie around.

There were little hump-like animals that would move around, looking just like part of the earth, and they would move on to you and give you a kind of food but they would also leave behind these seeds on your skin, and then the seeds would grow into body parts. This is what the criminals were used for: to grow body parts. The little hump-like animals would come around after a while and harvest the body parts, which would be sent off to other parts of the universe.

So the criminals were there to make little heads, arms, livers, whatever. It was a really boring existence for them and not all that pleasant. To the extent that they would get together and talk about things, the newly-sentenced criminals would comfort one another by saying, “Well at least we won’t live like this forever. Someday this is going to end.”

The big shocker at the end of the story was that they had actually been sent to a planet where they were going to be immortal. They would live like this forever. That was what drove them crazy. Then they understood why they’d noticed when they first arrived there, that the older criminals seemed totally depleted in terms of any kind of life energy. It was from the horror and the terror of living forever in a place in which there was no real prospect of any kind of satisfaction.

If you can develop that attitude toward samsara, that it’s a long process and there are a few baits that lead you to keep coming back and coming back and coming back, but then the pay-off is pretty miserable: If you can develop that attitude, if you really do have that sense of terror, you realize that these little movements in the mind are not so innocent.

There’s another story. A friend of mine who is a novelist once wrote about a group of Chinese gods who had split into two factions—the male gods versus the female gods—and they had a story-telling contest. It seemed as if the gods were determined to make the characters in the story as miserable as possible. The chapters in novel alternated between the story of the gods and the goddesses as they were getting engaged in the story-telling contest, and the actual story they were telling. In the story itself, there was just one disaster after another. At the very end, Kuan Yin shows up and she says, “Well, now that you’ve invented this story, you’re going to have to live it.” The final scene is of the gods in terror actually falling down from heaven down to earth as they were going to be reborn into the various roles they’d invented.

When you think about the various possibilities of how you can be reborn, it can foster a strong sense of samvega. This is why the assumption of rebirth is such an essential part of the practice, for it helps you see that these little innocent movements of the mind, these very natural-seeming arisings and passings away that look pretty innocuous in the present moment, have a long-term potential for suffering.

And it's not natural that you let go. I don't know anybody who was born because their parents let go. The process of craving and grasping just keeps going on and on and on. Only when you gain sense of how serious this is can you keep yourself motivated, keep yourself heedful. It motivates you to look deeper and deeper into what are the causes of these little arisings, arisings, arisings in the mind. There's a complex web that has the potential for going on forever.

It's not that consciousness has to depend on this body. The process of interaction between craving, clinging, and consciousness keeps creating all the conditions it needs in order to keep going. In fact, this is the process that gives rise to another body and another one and another one.

Someone asked me the other day if I were to be reborn, which nationality I would choose. I tried to think and think, and I just couldn't find any that didn't have a lot of severe drawbacks. In the East or the West, Europe, America, wherever, Asia, there are drawbacks everywhere you could be born. You go to the deva world, and the devas get generally pretty heedless. Not all of them. In fact, Ajaan Suwat said that if you really do have to be reborn, don't try to come back to the human world for a while because it's going to be pretty bad. The best that you can do, if you find that you can't finish the work in this lifetime, is to make the dedication that you want to come back to a place where you will meet with the Dhamma and be motivated to practice it. Let the other chips fall where they may. But make sure you've got these ones—the desire to meet with the Dhamma and practice it—firmly in place. Because these ones provide the only way out.

So remember: Samvega is not a pleasant emotion. There's a very late part of the Canon called the Apadanas, which are essentially poems written by monks in order to please lay people, to get them to give money for the various monasteries and monuments that they'd been building and were trying to

maintain. The Apadanas present the path as a very pleasant one. You give a gift, you dedicate it to awakening, and then you're guaranteed awakening. You'll have a pleasant ride through samsara—sometimes as a deva, sometimes as a human being. When you're a human being, you'll be an emperor or a king or a queen. When you're a deva, you'll be a king of the devas, a queen of the devas. Finally, there comes a point where you decide you've had enough of all that pleasure, and you experience samvega as joy, a sense that you've had a sufficiency. Then everything just naturally falls from your grasp. These stories present samvega so it would be attractive. And the authors had an ulterior motive.

Even now, you can look around and find many ways of presenting the Dhamma that are very attractive, and there's the same motive. They've got the institutions they want to keep going. You might call this the politics of arising and passing away. Everything comes and goes in a way that's all very light, very nice. It's all so easy, out of a sense of satisfaction and lightness, to just let go. If there's any samvega, it's joyful, it's pleasant.

Well, the practice doesn't work that way because that leads to complacency. It leads to not really seeing the dangers all around you and the dangers inside. You have to be very alive to the fact that these little arisings and passings away in the mind are not as innocent as they seem. When you're alive to that fact, you're watchful, you're on your guard so that you can find a way of digging down and getting to an awareness that's not involved in these things, one that takes you out of time and space entirely. That's the only thing that's really satisfying.

But because we're so used to the process of going for the arisings and passings away, it takes a huge change of mind and a huge change of heart. As we all know, one of the few things that gives us a change of heart is a sense of how foolish we've been and the dangers that face us. That's one way of motivating yourself. The other, of course, is realizing that if you're willing to go through the difficulties of the path, there is a genuine escape, there is genuine happiness that doesn't depend on language or culture or anything like that. It's standard all around. It requires some difficulties. It's like being lost in the forest. You don't like being in the brambles, you don't like being obscured by the trees, but you have to go through some brambles and trees in order to get

out. In other words, you're trapped in the forest, and the only way out of the forest is to go through the forest. But once you escape, once you're free, then you realize that it's more than worth the effort and the difficulty that went into getting out. Knowing that ahead of time provides the confidence that keeps you going.

So it's a combination of terror and confidence that gets us on the path, keeps us on the path, and prevents us from losing our way.