

Four Mountains Moving In

March 27, 2020

There's a passage where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks him, "What have you been doing?" The king in a remarkable display of frankness says, "Oh, the typical things that obsess a person who's obsessed with power." And the Buddha asks him, "Suppose a trustworthy person were to come from the east, saying that there's a huge mountain as tall as the clouds coming in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. Suppose another trustworthy person were to come from the south, saying that there's a huge mountain moving in from the south, crushing all living beings in its path. Another person from the west, another from the north: altogether, four mountains moving in. Given this horrible destruction of human life, and realizing how valuable and how rare the human state is, what would you do?" The king responds, "What else can I do but good conduct, Dhamma conduct, meritorious deeds, skillful deeds?"

Then the Buddha goes on to say, "In that case, great king, I inform you: aging, illness, and death are rolling in, crushing all living beings in their path. Given this horrible destruction of human life and realizing how rare the human state is, what should you do?" And the king says again, "What else can I do but good conduct, Dhamma conduct, meritorious deeds, skillful deeds?"

The message being that we're always in a state of danger. There are times when you're in danger and fear, but even though the fear isn't always there, the danger. It's part of being in samsara: As soon as people are born, they're going to grow old, they're going to grow ill, they're going to die. And it's in the midst of all this destruction of human life that we have to practice, that we've always practiced. We have to keep that in mind: Danger is normal. When we accept it as normal and make our minds normal, then we can keep on practicing.

It's at times like this when you realize how interconnectedness is not the good thing it's always portrayed as being. It has its dangerous side. And the problem in an interconnected system is that in trying to stamp out one danger, we can easily create others. Like right now with the quarantine and the shutdown: To prevent one danger, we're creating others, which means that the proper response to interconnectedness and the dangers of interconnectedness is not celebration. It's heedfulness, reminding ourselves that we do have our actions, and our actions are important, they're *always* important. They're especially important now, but they're *always* important. We can't let outside events distract us from doing what's good.

Because otherwise we have nothing. Our good deeds are our support. And we have to make sure they really are good, that we keep on creating a good support for ourselves.

This is why Ajaan Lee, in his discussions of heedfulness, emphasizes another quality, which is circumspection: looking all around, so that in your efforts to prevent one danger, you don't create others—the dangers here, of course, being the dangers in the mind. The world may be a dangerous place, but we're even more dangerous people, and we can be dangerous to ourselves. If we let our greed, aversion, delusion, or fear take over, these four qualities—liking, hating, being deluded, being fearful—lead us astray. In Pali, they're called *agati*, the wrong course. They can skew our perceptions, and our perceptions can skew our actions, distorting things so that even when we think we're acting rightly, we're actually following the wrong course and creating more trouble for ourselves, more trouble for others.

So we have to watch out for these dangers. The dangers that can come from outside are real, but we can't let them distract us from the even greater dangers inside. As death comes, it's normal. But if death comes while we're acting in unskillful ways, thinking in unskillful ways, allowing unskillful feelings and concerns to take over, then we've added a lot of unnecessary pain for ourselves—and for the people around us.

This is why we meditate; this is why we look inside, realizing that there are good things inside, good potentials inside, waiting for us to develop them.

There's that passage where Venerable Ananda comes to see the Buddha. Venerable Sariputta has passed away, and Ananda confesses to the Buddha that he felt totally lost on hearing of Sariputta's death. His sense of north, south, east, and west got all confused. So the Buddha asked him, "When Sariputta died, did he take virtue with him?" "No." "Did he take concentration?" "No." "Discernment?" "No." "Release?" "No." All the good things in life are there. The good potentials in life are always here.

So even where there's loss and danger, there are still good things we can do. And it's important that we stay focused *there*. The media will divert our focus other places, but we have to hold firm in our conviction that what *we do* is important, what *we do* is going to make the difference between danger and lack of danger. Because it is possible to get to the end of danger, this interconnectedness of ours. Sometimes we call it inner-being, but it's basically inter-acting: the kamma we do, the decisions we make, right or wrong, skillful or unskillful. Those are the things that connect us. A lot of our connections are pretty bad. But even good connections are impermanent. They don't last forever.

This is why the path we follow is the kamma to put an end to kamma, to cut all the connections. As the Buddha said, discernment is when you see things as separate. In other words, you separate yourself *out* from the connections. It's only there that you're safe.

Now, some people may accuse you're being selfish, looking out for your own good. But it so happens that the path leading to this state of unconnectedness requires generosity, requires virtue. We leave good things for other people as we go, but always keeping in mind that the only true safety there is, is when we go. In the meantime, there are going to be dangers all around. And some of the worst dangers are the ones we create for ourselves as we run away from one or try to totally prevent one danger and we end up doing a lot of unskillful things in the course of seeing this one danger as all consuming.

When I first arrived in Brazil recently, there was a big campaign against dengue fever—posters everywhere, all over the city. A few weeks later, as word of the virus spread, everyone forgot about dengue. Well, dengue was still there. All the mosquito-borne diseases were still there, just that nobody was now paying attention. And sure enough, some of the people in the community where I was staying got dengue.

So we have to look all around, be circumspect in our heedfulness and watch out particularly for the dangers we create that come from trying to prevent or put an end to one danger. Some of the worst things in the world have been done by trying to prevent what a person or a group of people have seen as an overriding danger. They'll do anything they can think of to put an end to it. Well, the "anything" can include a lot of unskillful thoughts, words, and deeds. In that way, they unwittingly create a lot more danger for themselves and the people around them.

So remember the proper response to interconnectedness—realizing that we're connected through our actions and those connections can be good or bad: The proper response is heedfulness, circumspection, uncomplacency, based on keeping the mind calm, at a state of normalcy. Barry Lopez talks about living with Intuit and noticing how they had this quality of constantly being alert to danger, but at the same time being at ease around danger—in other words, accepting it as normal. That way, when the time came to respond, the response was appropriate. It's when we live in a bubble of complacency and suddenly have that bubble burst: That's when we do unskillful things. So keep the mind at normalcy and make sure you look all around. That's how we stay on the path to safety.