

## *Defilements at the Door*

*June 9, 2023*

There's that paradox that we so often encounter when we chant before the meditation: First are the contemplations of aging, illness and death, inconstancy, stress, not-self; thinking about how the things that we tend to identify with as us or ours, really aren't us or ours, and ultimately, lie beyond our control. And we live in a world that's swept away, with no protection. Whatever we have we will have to leave behind, and yet we're still a slave to craving: All of that on the one hand. Then on the other hand, the chant: May I be happy." It sounds so wistful in face of all those other contemplations of how things are. It sounds pretty hopeless, but the Buddha didn't teach us to be hopeless.

When he pointed out the negative side of the world, it wasn't just to say, "Okay, give up hope all ye who have been born here." It was to help us realize that the things we've been contenting ourselves with for so long are not really worth contentment, but there is something better—and that "something better" can be found through our actions.

There's that other contemplation that we have: We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, to being separated from what is dear and appealing to me. Those are contemplations to give rise to a sense of *samvega*. But then they're followed by the contemplation for *pasada*, which is a sense of confidence: "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, whatever I do for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." So we do have the power of our actions.

This was so important in the Buddha's teachings that even though he wasn't the sort of person who would go out and start arguments with people, there were times when he *would* go to argue with people who were teaching that what you're doing right now didn't have an impact right now. Three different groups of people stand out:

- those who taught that whatever you experience right now is the result of past actions; it's your *vipāka*, so you've got to put up with it;
- those who taught that whatever you experience right now is the result of

some creator god having created the world, so you've got to put up with it; and

- those who taught that whatever you experience right now is totally random, there's no pattern of cause and effect that you can understand or master to make a change in things. So put up with it.

As the Buddha said, all these people are basically teaching a doctrine of non-action, even the ones who taught about the power of your past actions. He said that if everything you experience right now were dependent on your past actions, people would be killers right now because of past actions. They would steal right now, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants because of past actions. In other words, they wouldn't be responsible for the choices they're making right now and the way they're shaping their experience right now. There would be no path that you could follow.

So he was making the point that you *can* make a difference right now. Of course, given the power of past actions, sometimes you're stuck with certain things because of what you did in the past, but you don't have to suffer from them. They don't have to invade the mind and remain. That's the phrase that the Buddha uses: "invade the mind and remain." They may present themselves to your awareness, but they don't have to come inside.

It's like the difference between the third establishing of mindfulness and the fourth. The third talks about different states of mind, those imbued with passion, those not imbued with passion, those with anger, those without anger, those that are restricted, those that are scattered. Then he starts going up the ladder of how your mind improves as it gets into concentration, but basically he's talking about the state of the mind as mind, *as a whole*. xx

Then with dhammas, the fourth frame of reference, he talks about seeing the events in the mind as events, coming and going. You begin to see that there's a pattern, so that you can understand why they come, why they go. If they're unskillful, you can figure out how to use that understanding of cause and effect to make sure they don't come back again. If they're skillful, you can use your understanding of cause and effect to make sure that they stay, grow, and develop.

So basically the third frame of reference deals with your mind when things have invaded and are remaining—especially the qualities that have to do with

unskillful states of mind.

But in the fourth, it's as if they're at the door waiting to come in. Think of the image of the gatekeeper at the frontier fortress. You're being mindful so that when these things come up to the gate, you say, "Nope, you don't come in. I know you're there, you're present, but you don't have to invade the fortress. You don't have to remain in the fortress. You can stay outside."

This is why the Buddha said that mindfulness is the dam that holds these streams of emotion in check—it's the restraint. It's as if they're offering themselves at the doorway, and you see that these states of mind are unskillful. You say, "Nope, you're here, but you can't come in."

That's the difference between the mind as it normally relates to its emotions, and the mind as it's beginning to get a sense of mindfulness that knows that it's best to hold these things in check to make sure you don't act on them, that they don't move in and take over. But they're still going to keep coming, coming, coming again, hoping that the mindfulness will be absentminded or distracted so that they can slip in.

Discernment, though, is what understands them: how they come and how you can undercut them by figuring out what the causes are. Those have to do with what you're doing in the present moment. The fact that they're coming to the door comes from the past karma you've committed, either in this lifetime or previous lifetimes, but your question in the present moment is: Are you going to let them in?

Then you examine them, "Why do they keep coming? Where are they coming from?" It's when you hold them in check like this that you can examine them. If you let them in, they just take over. You don't really see them clearly because they seem to just flow naturally. It's only when you go against the flow that you know how strong the flow can be, where it is, and what it's coming from.

Here again, think of the image of the dam. If you build a dam across a river, you're going to learn an awful lot about the river by the time you're done. It's going to show where its really deep and strong currents are, and then you can trace them back. Why are they so strong? What's their appeal? When you act on them, what actually happens? What are the results? And how can you undercut the causes by

figuring out why the allure isn't worth it?

So, simply the fact that you can note an emotion and hold it back for a while, and then it disappears doesn't mean you've gained insight into the emotion at all. It means you've been able to restrain it. Now, restraining it *does* put you in a position where you can study it. Because one of the first things it'll do is that it'll complain, "Why can't you let me act out when I've acted out so many times before?"

It's amazing how our defilements have such a strong sense of entitlement, on the one hand—but on the other hand it's not all that amazing at all. After all, they've been able to move in and order you around for a long, long time. As that reflection said, we've been slaves to craving for who knows how long. And you know what slave masters are like: The idea that the slaves might plan a revolt, that slaves might want freedom: Slave masters don't want that.

So your defilements will whine. And you want to listen to them carefully: how they whine, how they argue, what their reasons are. You read all those tracts by slave owners back before the Civil War, and they had all kinds of reasons based on their religion, based on whatever, saying that slavery was a good thing.

That's like the defilements: They'll tell you they're a good thing, and they enforce that idea with their power. But the Buddha's saying you don't have to submit. You can push back. And when you push back at them, you begin to see how weak their cases are.

So, we want to practice restraint, as we can, so that we can *see* these things. Then, when we see them, we can figure them out in line with the four noble truths: Where's the craving here? What's the craving based on? What feelings? What intentions? What acts of attention?

When you look at dependent co-arising, you see that the really interesting factors are the ones that come before sensory contact: name and form, or fabrication. What perceptions fuel your greed, anger, and delusion? What intentions fuel it? What ways of paying attention to things fuel these things? Look into those, because that's where you can make a difference here in the present moment.

You may not be able to choose who's going to appear at your door or who

wants to get into the fortress. But you do have the choice of saying No, and then tracing them back: Where do these enemies come from? Where do they get their food so that they can keep coming back again and again and again? It's not that somebody else is feeding them. You've been feeding them, but why? How? That's what you want to figure out. That's how you use this element of freedom that you have in the present moment to shape things.

The Buddha's analysis is that we have the potential for the different aggregates coming from past actions. Then, through our acts of fabrication, we turn them into actual experiences of the aggregates. We do it for the sake of something: We do it for the sake of pleasure. We think we're going to get something out of it.

So you want to look into the intentional element in everything that comes up. That's something you do in the present moment, and what you're trying to do as you practice is to *change* those intentions.

For a long time, your intention has been to let whoever comes to the door into the fortress, but now you're changing your intention. You don't want these things to invade; you don't want them to remain.

Build on that intention, because that intention is what gives rise to discernment, and the discernment is what gives rise to freedom and the happiness we want. In spite of the aggregates' being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, there is something else that lies beyond those characteristics, beyond those attributes, and that's where we really can be happy.