

A Slave to Craving

July 27, 2007

The passage we chanted just now, about the world being swept away, comes from a discourse in which a king is planning to go to his pleasure park. He learns that there's a young monk meditating in the park. The monk comes from a wealthy family in that city, and the king had known him before he was ordained. So he decides to go and ask the young monk why he ordained. He believed that when most people ordained it was because they'd lost their relatives, they'd lost their wealth, lost their health, "but," he says, "none of that applies to you. Why would you ordain?"

The monk answers with the set of passage we chanted. It starts out: *The world is swept away. It does not endure.* The king says, "What does that mean?" It's one of the things I like about the Pali Canon: The kings come off kind of dumb. They've got all the power and pleasure you can imagine, yet most of them are pretty naive when it comes to matters of the mind. And the young monk asks the king, "Back when you were young, were you strong?" The king says, "Oh yes. In fact, I was so strong sometimes I thought I had the strength of two men." And the monk says, "How about now?" The king says, "Oh, no, I'm eighty years old now. Sometimes I think to put my foot in one place, and it goes someplace else." That's what's meant by *the world is swept away*: It's inconstant. You can't depend on it to stay the same. Your strength gets swept away, your mind sometimes get swept away, too.

That leads to the next summary: *The world offers no shelter, there's no one in charge.* There's no guarantee that we couldn't have a virus suddenly infecting us, wiping us out. I read recently about a comet that had exploded over Ontario 12,000 years ago, wiped out a lot of people, the mastodons, the sabertooth tigers. And it could happen again. Earthquakes, fires, disasters happen very easily in this world. There's no real protection from them. In the case of the king, he asked the monk, "What do you mean, the world has no one in charge. After all, you're talking to a king here."

The monk says, "Do you have a recurring illness?" The king says, "Yes, I have these recurring pains in my body. Sometimes they get so bad that I'm lying there in pain and everyone is standing around, wondering if I'm going to die." And the young monk says, "Being king, can you order the different people standing around to take a share of your pains so you don't have to feel so much pain?" The king says, "Oh, no I have to feel all the pain myself." The truth of suffering, stress.

And it goes on. *The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind.* Again, the monk asks the king, “Do you have any wealth?” The king says, “Of course I do, storerooms filled with wealth.” And the monk says, “Can you take that with you when you go?” The king says, “Of course not.” That’s the teaching on not-self, that these things we claim to be ours are not really ours. They’re like things we’ve borrowed for a while, then we have to give them back. If you don’t give them back nicely, they get wrenched from your grasp.

And finally the fourth reflection: *The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.* The monk asks the king, “Do you now rule over this prosperous country?” The king says, “Yes.” “What if someone were to come from the east and say, ‘There’s another prosperous country to the east, with lots of wealth, and with your army, you could conquer that kingdom.’ What would you do?” And the king says, “Oh, I’d conquer it.” “And suppose someone were to come from the west, saying that there’s another country to the west. And then another kingdom to the north, another one to the south?” The king says, “I’d take those, too.” “Suppose someone were to come from the other side of the ocean?” “I’d take that country, too.

It’s unending. In another passage the Buddha said that even if it were to rain gold coins, it wouldn’t be enough for our desires. We’ve seen this many times over. Someone becomes a millionaire, you’d think they’d be happy because they’ve got all that money, enough to satisfy their desires, but once you get one million, you want two. Once you get two, you want five. Once you get five, you want ten. It just keeps growing, growing, growing. So the question is, what are you going to do? Where are you going to find happiness in the midst of all this?

The key there is in that line: a slave to craving. As long as you’re craving happiness in things that can’t provide it, you’re going to suffer. And look at the world: If everyone in the whole world lived like Americans do, it would be the end of the world. We’ve burnt up all the oil, polluted all the atmosphere, making it totally unlivable. So looking outside for happiness is endless. The desires of the mind are insatiable, and the world is insufficient. But there is this other dimension, the dimension inside.

This is what we’re focused on as we meditate. After all, not only is the world insufficient, but look at the way we find our happiness: It depends on the suffering of other beings. This is what those reflections on the requisite are for. The food we eat, the clothing we wear, the shelter we live in, the medicine we use: We gain it through suffering, sometimes our own suffering, and a lot of times the suffering of other beings. Even if you’re vegetarian, think of all the farmers who have to work so hard to get that food produced, especially now with these huge factory farms,

with workers from other countries working at slave wages, and then the people who have to transport it—all the stuff that goes to getting the food from the ground and into your stomach. There's a huge karmic debt there.

You hear about the sweat shops that make your clothes, the work that goes into building shelter, and the medicines that get tested on animals: There's a lot of suffering involved just to keep this body alive. So not only is there not enough out there, but when you think about the stuff that we do depend on for happiness out there: The more you think about it, the more miserable the whole situation seems. We all live by feeding off one another. So is there a happiness that doesn't have to feed? That's what we are looking for as we're looking inside.

One of the purposes of those passages on the requisites is to gain a sense of contentment, to realize that you should take just enough to keep the body going, to keep your body protected from the elements, and just enough medicine to keep the body healthy enough so that you can practice, so that you can really look inside the mind and see what potential you have there.

That's an area where the Buddha doesn't recommend contentment. He says to try to develop as much virtue, as much concentration, as much discernment as possible. In other words, this is one area where effort does pay off, and the desire for more isn't greedy. In the outside world, you can spend whole lifetimes working, working, working, and seeing the results of the work just slipping through your fingers. But inside, the results of the effort stay with you, especially if you take the practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment to its total end.

The passage a preceptor teaches a young monk says, "Concentration, when fostered by virtue, or infused with virtue, is of great fruit, great benefit." And concentration really does lead to a sense of well-being. You focus here on the breath, you become acquainted with the breath to the point where you realize that you can breathe in all kinds of ways, and some of the ways are really gratifying, physically and mentally. It feels good to breathe in, feels good to breathe out. The more intense the pleasure that comes from this, the more the mind is willing to settle down and focus totally on the process of breathing in the body. Then you think of all the other pleasures you could be indulging in now, and you realize that this is much better. It's a harmless pleasure, for one thing, and you can tap into it whenever you want.

Then discernment fostered with concentration is a great fruit, great benefit. In other words, you can really see into the areas where craving has you enslaved, and you realize you don't have to be enslaved. You realize a lot of it is based on ignorance and delusion. When you see clearly, you don't fall for the things that you are used to fall for, the things that you work so hard to develop and then saw

them being washed away. You realize it's just not worth the effort. It can't compare with results that come from learning how to develop the mind in concentration and discernment. You see through your attachments, your misguided ideas, realizing that you can't base true happiness on things that are inconstant, stressful, and not self.

Then finally: The mind, when fostered with discernment, is released from all its effluents, in other words, all the things that come bubbling up out of the mind that make us go flowing out looking for happiness outside. When discernment is fully developed, it frees the mind. It's no longer a slave to craving.

There is a dimension that can be touched at the mind that's not dependent on any kind of condition at all, any kind of effort at all, any kind of feeding at all. And it's available if you work at training the mind in virtue, concentration, and discernment, or as the texts say, heightened virtue, heightened mind, heightened discernment.

These qualities start out as pretty ordinary sorts of things. Virtue is basically refraining from doing harm, and it's something we already do off and on throughout the day.

Concentration, staying focused on one thing: Again there are many levels of concentration. There's a level of concentration where you can focus on reading something or listening to something, working through a problem. It's called momentary concentration because it stays with things for a certain period of time and drops them. But again, concentration is something we already have.

Discernment as well: a lot of ways in which we see that there are inefficient or harmful or stressful ways of doing things, and there are easier, more efficient ways of doing, and we go for the easier and more efficient way, the less harmful way. That kind of discernment we also have.

What you want to do is take these three qualities and develop them to a heightened level. In other words, make your virtue all-around, so that you cause no intentional harm at all. Take concentration, so that you can stay focused on one thing, even when there's pain, even when there's distraction, and you can stay with that one thing, stick with it all the way through all the other things that are happening, so that concentration becomes all-around. When discernment becomes all-around, you find a way in which you don't have to cause any stress and suffering at all. That's when you've taken these qualities to a heightened level.

That's when they show their stuff, what they're capable of. There's a deathless happiness that can be touched at the mind, and can be attained through human effort. That's the kind of effort that's well spent. The mind isn't just running after its cravings. There is something that really does reach an end. That's why we focus

inside, because the possibilities inside are much greater than the possibilities outside. A happiness totally free from harm, totally free from disappointment.

So that's what the Buddha says. That's what his noble disciples all say. It's up to us to see if we can prove it for ourselves whether what they say is true or not. But you have to be true, too, in following the path if you want to test its truth.

So we've got this hour. Try to be really true to your meditation object and see what the result of truth is. Because the truth we're talking about is not just the truth of propositions or ideas, i.e., whether they can correspond to something else. Truth here is the truth of really giving yourself to the practice, being truly sincere in doing it, truly focused in doing it. That's the kind of truth that's called for. And that's the kind of truth that leads to something truly special.