

Noble Priorities

June 18, 2019

If you've ever been around someone who has a fatal illness, long and drawn out, you notice that there's a stage they reach where you can't reach them, you can't communicate with them anymore. You can see them suffering and you can try to be as gentle as possible, but you don't know exactly what their suffering is. They're not communicating and they don't seem to respond to your communication.

But that area inside where you can't reach in is in each of us. As we communicate—as we're old enough or young enough to communicate—we can send messages back and forth, but even then there's a kind of a gulf. I can't feel your suffering; you can't feel mine. We can see the outside signs and we can try to help, but this area inside where you're relating to your own body, you're relating to your own mind: That's yours, exclusively yours, and this is where suffering is.

When the Buddha established his teachings, he started with the truth of suffering. This is the suffering he was talking about, the suffering in the mind, the suffering that you feel inside and nobody else can feel for you. Nobody else can take it away.

There's that passage where Ven. Ratthapala is talking to the old king, one of those passages we chanted just now: *The world offers no shelter. There's no protection.* The king doesn't understand this. He's been spending all of his life finding shelter and protection, thinking that he's done a pretty good job.

But Ratthapala asks him, he says, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king says, "Yes, I have a wind illness." Which basically meant shooting pains through the body. "Sometimes it gets so strong that as I'm lying there, the courtiers are saying, 'This time he's going to die.'" You wonder what tone of voice they're adopting. And Ratthapala says, "Even though you're king, can you order them, 'Okay, share out this suffering that I'm feeling right now, so I can feel less?'" And the king says, "Well, no. I have to suffer it myself."

That's what the Buddha's talking about when he's talking about the truth of suffering—it's something inside each of us, and something that each of us has to be responsible for. Because it turns out that the causes of suffering are also in this inside area. And the solution comes from developing qualities that are also in this inside area: how you talk to yourself, how the mind relates to itself. You can develop mindfulness, ardency, alertness, concentration, discernment from what you've got inside to put an end to the suffering.

That may seem like a selfish quest: It's your own suffering and not anybody else's. But when you see someone who's approaching death and they're in a torment and you can't help, it's a huge burden on your heart. And it's a huge burden of course on the person who's dying. And then when you're reborn, there's that period again where you can't communicate: Nobody else knows your suffering. You don't even understand your suffering. You're confused by the whole thing. We keep going through this again, and again, and again, and the Buddha's offering us a way out.

It's important that we realize the importance of this, and that we can give it some priority, because the rest of the world is not going to give it priority for us. They have their other demands on us. As the Buddha said, you don't want to treat other people cruelly or harshly, because that's going to turn around and effect the way you relate to yourself, as you start lying about the things you've done. But at the same time you do have to carve out your own space to take care of business inside, because no one else can do it for you. And if you don't take care of it now, when you're well and you can still communicate, it's not going to get easier as time passes, and the problem will just remain unsolved. The issues remain unresolved. The suffering will continue again and again and again.

And as we're suffering, it's not the case that we're the only ones who suffer from our suffering. If we're not skillful, we take it out on others. There's a frustration that comes when you're looking for happiness and can't find anything that's really solid.

I've seen cases even with monks whose practice hasn't gotten all that far after many, many years, and they start saying, "Well, maybe there's nothing there, there's nothing to attain." People who come to the practice, they say are "idealistic and unrealistic." And they're there to tell us that there's nothing to attain. Well, it's because they haven't taken care of business inside properly. They can be very destructive.

So the practice to put an end to suffering is a gift to yourself and a gift to others when you can straighten out this issue inside of why you're causing yourself suffering and what you can do to stop. Realize that the priorities of the world may be one thing but this is *your* priority, and you don't want them to stampede all over it.

So take the Buddha's perspective: Think of the long term and take his priorities. When he set out on his quest, he said he set out in search for what is skillful. It's an interesting statement. He didn't say he was setting out to find his true self, or that he was trying to find the Truth in capital letters. He was trying to find a happiness that didn't change, that didn't cause any harm, and he wanted

to know: Is there a path of action that would lead there? And if so, what was it? It did involve finding the true path, a path, in other words, that really worked. But it was truth for the sake of a true happiness.

And one of his important realizations was that this is not a selfish quest. You have to develop compassion, you have to develop wisdom, you have to develop purity as part of the path. In other words, you have to be pure in your actions, acting, speaking, and thinking in ways that cause no harm to yourself or others.

So it is a noble quest. You look at the world around us and ask yourself: How much nobility is there in the world? The nobles of old in the eighteenth century took the world "nobility" and ruined it. But genuine nobility is a good thing, and should be revived. Life without it is a sad life, empty, hopeless. And here's the Buddha offering us a noble path for a noble goal, to help clean up the suffering inside each of us.

As he said, he can't do the work for us, he can only point the way. The image he gave was of giving instructions to go down a road. He'd say, "Turn right here, go to that tree, turn left." The instructions are clear, but there will be people who will follow the instructions and people who won't. Even in his day there were a lot of who didn't. To say nothing about the lay people or the sectarians who were not interested, even some of the monks were not interested. But the Buddha did what he could.

Because after all it is each person's problem and each person's responsibility. It's simply up to us to take on that responsibility, for our own good and for the good of everybody else around us.

Now this is a perspective and a set of priorities that the world, for the most part, doesn't share. We're fortunate to have a community where people do share them, to at least some extent. And the more we can act on them, the better it's going to be for everybody all around.