

## *A Good Narrative*

*July 31, 2005*

We like to think that our lives have a narrative line. But when you think about what makes a good narrative, and compare that with the actual narrative lines in most people's lives, you see that they're worlds apart. In a good narrative, there's an aim, something you want to accomplish. And when you think about your life, you'd rather not have any obstacles. But when you actually read a novel or short story, if there's an aim with no obstacles, it's not satisfying. We like to read about other people overcoming obstacles, maybe having setbacks but finally reaching a satisfying goal. And then the story has a nice neat ending.

But when you look at people's lives, how many lives are like that? A lot of people have pretty aimless lives. The main aim is just to survive. And of course that's a pretty hopeless aim. It's just a question of how long you're going to be able to survive before you finally die. Other people have higher aims than that. But just look at the human condition. A lot of people never reach their aims. They start straying off someplace else. Or they die or get crippled before they can actually get anywhere. Some people reach their aims and then have a feeling of, "Well, so what? What's really been accomplished?"

Sometimes you live to see your aim totally demolished. Or you achieve your aim, and it's not all that satisfying. Then you start growing ill, you get old. And all the things that you accomplished in life start to unravel. Think of sportsmen or sportswomen, all the time they spend in mastering a game, and then, well, so what? They start getting old, the younger generation comes up and beats them, and what do they have left? All that effort for what?

When you start thinking in this way, it induces a strong sense of *samvega*. It's like the Prince Siddhartha's vision of the sick man, the old man, and the corpse. You start thinking: What is this life for? What is the meaning of all this? Where does it go? It doesn't seem to go much of anywhere. Yet think of all the effort that goes into getting and maintaining a human life. When Prince Siddhartha thought about this, he realized that as long as he was pursuing aims that with themselves age, grow ill, and die, he wasn't accomplishing anything at all. Beauty, fame, power: All these things are going to change and unravel. They aren't worthwhile ways of finding a meaning in life. The only thing that really is meaningful is deathless, something it doesn't change, doesn't grow old, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. That's the one aim that's really worth focusing on.

Of course, the young prince had the question, “Is this possible?” Then the fourth vision he had was of a forest ascetic, a wilderness ascetic. “If there’s any lifestyle,” he said to himself, “that could accomplish the deathless, this would be it.” And the feeling he felt when he saw that ascetic was a sense of pasada, which means a sense of clarity, like the clear water of a lake.

Prior to that, he felt samvega, a feeling of the meaninglessness of life as ordinarily lived. The image there is something that stirs you up, like a lake that get stirred up. It’s muddy. This feeling gives rise to a sense of urgency, but it can become a sense of hopelessness if it’s not balanced by the sense that there is a way out. Once you sense there is a way out and it’s something that you can actually do, that calms the lake, and once the lake is calm, it grows clear. There’s a sense of pasada: clarity, confidence.

This is reflected in those five reflections that we chant so often. The first four induce samvega. We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. Not only are you subject to those things, everybody is subject to them. And we’re all subject to being separated from the things we find dear and appealing. Now, if you stopped right there, it’d be pretty depressing. But the reflections don’t stop there. There’s the principle of karma: “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions. Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” Again, this applies to everybody.

So our actions really do accomplish something. They’re not meaningless. It’s not like taking a stick and writing in the water. You do something and it has an effect, and actions can be skillful or unskillful in their effects. As the Buddha said, this is the beginning of right view: When you’re generous, it really does accomplish something. When you train the mind, it really does accomplish something.

But often we find it hard to keep up the effort. This is why pasada needs samvega, and samvega needs pasada. Without pasada, the samvega gets depressing. Without samvega, pasada starts getting Pollyanna-ish, and you start getting complacent.

This is why the Buddha said that the way to the deathless is to contemplate death frequently. In one passage, he said you should do it with every in-and-out breath, realizing that life is something precious. Why is it precious? Because it gives you the opportunity to accomplish something of real worth. Even if you die before you get the first taste of the deathless, still, what you’ve done is not erased. In the next lifetime, you can pick up where you left off.

Now, there can be setbacks. Imagine: Think about all you went through before you found the Dhamma in this lifetime, and having to go through that all over

again. Just the prospect of having to go through grade school and high school is enough to induce huge bouts of somvega.

But still there comes a point where we start picking things up again. There's another passage where the Buddha says to reflect every evening at sunset: Instead of just basking in how pretty the sunset is, remind yourself: This could be your last night. Are you ready to go? The same with every sunrise: When the sun rises, you can think, "This could be your last day. Are you ready to go? If you're not, there's work to be done." That gives you the incentive to practice. This is how contemplating death leads to the deathless. It's a spur to keep you going.

As for the setbacks that inevitably come, we can chalk them up to past karma. But they don't mean the end of anything. We've got the news this morning that a young monk I knew had die of a freak accident over in Thailand. He'd been ordained only five years and showed a lot of promise. He'd encountered a lot of obstacles in his life as a monk—bad health, difficulties with the language—but still he kept at it. He didn't know, the night before, that that sunset was going to be his last sunset. It turned out that he didn't die from his bad health. Instead, it was a freak accident.

There's a lesson there for all of us. Death can come at any time. But that doesn't mean that the effort you put into the practice is meaningless or it gets wiped out. The story continues.

For most people, the continuation of the story is just an aimless wandering around. The Buddha gives the image of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on one end; sometimes it falls on the other end; sometimes it falls splat in the middle. It doesn't really seem to go anywhere. But if you decide to make it go someplace, it starts having a purpose. It starts having a narrative shape. The most satisfying of all narratives are the narrative of the Buddha's life and the narratives of the monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, who actually went through all the various obstacles that lay in their way and finally attained the deathless. That's the accomplishment that no amount of aging, illness, or death is going to wipe out.

So look at the human condition. Look at *your* condition. What kind of narratives do you want in your life? Look at the aims you have. If you're working toward a particular aim, is the aim worthwhile? Is it the kind of aim that gets wiped out by aging, illness, or death? Or is it something that lies beyond their reach? When you start finding yourself getting complacent, think about the things that can induce a sense of samvega. When you start getting depressed, think about the things that will induce a sense of pasada: confidence, clarity. You want to keep those two in balance so that they'll help you attain a really worthwhile aim.