

Intoxication

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When we hear the word “intoxication,” we usually think of what happens to the body and the mind when you put alcohol or drugs in the body. But as the Buddha said, intoxication goes deeper than that. Actually, we’re already intoxicated. This is the normal nature of human beings, the normal nature of all beings, basically. We’re intoxicated with youth, intoxicated with health, and intoxicated with life.

When the Buddha was still a prince, he started reflecting on this, a reflection that more people should engage in. He was still young, he was still healthy, and he was alive. He began to realize that the happiness he was searching for was subject to aging, illness, and death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. And if you’re searching for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die like that, it’s not a noble search. Even if you’re searching for the most beautiful things, the most artistic things, the most refined things on the human plane, still it’s no different from anybody else, searching for gratification in things that age, grow ill, and die.

He realized that as a young person, it wasn’t proper for him to look down on old people, because there would come the day when he would grow old, too. As a healthy person, it wasn’t proper for him to look down on people who were weak and sick, disabled, because there would come a time when he would be in that situation as well. And as a living person, there was nothing proper about looking down on dead people, or thinking there was something horrible in dead bodies. Death lies in your body. All the possibilities for death are right here. And as he said, as he reflected on this, his intoxication with youth, his intoxication with health, his intoxication of life disappeared. Being unintoxicated, what was there left? He realized the only thing that would be worth searching for would be an undying happiness, a happiness wouldn’t age, wouldn’t grow ill, and wouldn’t die.

But where was he going to find that? He realized that staying at home wouldn’t allow him to continue the search. He would have to leave home, leave his wife, leave his child, leave everything he had known. That would take a lot of courage. But he made up his mind that if he didn’t make that leap, his life would have been wasted. He wanted to test the possibility: Is there a happiness that doesn’t die? And he was willing to give his life to that question.

Think nowadays: Who, in his position, would make that kind of choice? Someone who is powerful, wealthy, famous: How many of those people do you

see giving it all away and going off into the forest, disappearing for six years? It's all pretty amazing what he did, because he didn't have the example we have. When he set the example, he made an important discovery for the human race, because the discovery didn't end with him. He was able to teach this path to other people once he had found it.

Word of that path has spread over the centuries to us. It's up to us to decide exactly how much of that challenge we're going to accept, because the story of the Buddha's life *is* a challenge: Are you going to continue in your intoxication with youth, with health, with life, or you are going to sober up and give your life to something really worthwhile?

What does it mean to be intoxicated? You forget. You act as if there's no tomorrow, there's no sense that you should devote yourself fully to the practice today because you don't know if there's going to be a tomorrow or no tomorrow. Usually there's just the question: "Who cares what happens? I'm going to do what I want right now." That's how intoxicated people think. That's how they act. They act on impulse and do all sorts of destructive stuff, harming not only themselves but also the people around them, with no thought for the past, no thought for the future.

Mindfulness is what helps sober us up, the ability to remember. Even when you get infatuated with something that looks pretty, you remember: How long is that going to last? What would I have to do to get that pretty thing, that pretty person?

When you remember that, the appeal of the surface attraction fades away. Because basically you remember: Where is that attraction going to lead you? Mindfulness is what allows us to see connections. Mindfulness is not simply being in the present moment. It also means remembering what you're supposed to be doing in the present moment, remembering where different kind of actions lead, remembering where skillful actions lead, remembering where unskillful actions lead, remembering when you look at something attractive, someone attractive, that you have to ask: Where is the person's body going to go? It's going to go toward aging, illness, and death. Do you want to get attached to that person? Because that's where it's all going to go.

When you look at material things, they go to aging, illness, and death as well. Think of all the unskillful things that people do just for material things—killing, stealing, cheating—and what do they get? They end up with just the dregs of the things, and in the meantime they develop a lot of bad karma.

So mindfulness is this ability to remember: Where do things go, where do different actions go, when do relationships go, where does your happiness go?

Now, if it's the happiness that you can develop through the path, that's something that goes in a direction really worth going to. It's a noble search, as the Buddha said. This noble eightfold path that we're following leads to the deathless. It leads to the end of karma, the end of action, the end of the results of actions. That's where it can take you. No other path of action can take you there. It's a path for sober people.

The Buddha has us reflect on aging, illness, and death, one, reminding ourselves that we're subject to these things, so that we can get our act together, to start acting in more skillful ways, given the time and opportunity we have. He also has us reflect on the universality of all this: that everybody is subject to aging, illness, and death, all the relationships you might want to develop are subject to aging, illness, and death, all the things that you might want to gain are subject to aging, illness, and death. Thinking about these things is for the purpose of getting you on the path. It develops a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dismay over the way life is everywhere for everybody who's still intoxicated.

It also gives you sense of confidence in the path, that this *is* the way out. The people who have followed this path seem trustworthy. The happiness that it offers seems special. It's really something worth giving your life to. It requires sacrifice, it requires doing without a lot of things, but you keep reminding yourself: What are those things you're doing without? Things subject to aging, illness, and death. If you let yourself get waylaid, if you let yourself get distracted on the path, you go back to your old intoxication.

When people leave this path, it requires a massive act of forgetting, forgetting the possibilities that the example of the Buddha's life holds out for us, and forgetting that you're contenting yourself with things that really don't lead to where you want to go. Staying on the path, however, enables you to remember, because it's a path that's good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. It starts out with a good intention, the practice itself is good, and the place where it leads is good. There's nothing in there you have to forget, nothing there you have to deny.

I've noticed people as they approached death, if they've done things in their lives that they really regret, their memory deteriorates a lot faster than people who don't have anything regrets like that. It's because they've been spending their whole lives deliberately forgetting, deliberately denying, putting up walls in the mind. As death comes, that particular habit of forgetting just takes over.

So we're following a path that keeps our minds alert, doesn't require that we deny what we've done, doesn't require that we deny where we're going. We can be mindful from the beginning to the end. We can be sober, and being mindful is

what it means to be sober. It doesn't mean that you're not having fun, that you're not enjoying life, it's just that your enjoyment sees clearly right from the past on into the present and then on into the future, so that you're careful about where you look for joy.

It's a noble search, and it's a search that gives nobility to our lives. So always remember this. As they say, keep your eyes on the prize, because there's no other prize that can compare with it.