

Things that Arise & Pass Away

June 7, 2013

Things arise and pass away, and you might say, “So what else is new? You see it all around you.” Why did the Buddha say that your ability to see arising and passing away in a penetrative way is a sign of your discernment? What’s the penetration there?

It’s in seeing *why* they arise and why they pass away.

One of the really radical premises he has you take on as you practice is that if you sense any change—any arising, passing away or, while something is subsisting, any change in that thing—then it’s a sign of fabrication. Fabrication is another word for intention. There’s an element of your intention in that experience. The Buddha’s concerned with not so much what the world is out there, outside of your experience. He wants you to look directly at your experience to see how much you shape it—and then to realize that if it’s shaped, it’s not going to last, because the intention itself will change. Intentions come and they go; they’re activities. So the results will come and go, too.

The question is: Do you want a happiness that comes and goes? Most of us pay attention to the coming. You get something you like, you meet somebody you like, things just seem to be going in a right way, and you let yourself get excited about it, lifted up by the prospects for the future. Then these things turn around and crash, and your mind crashes. Your happiness crashes. As the Buddha said, if you find something that doesn’t change at all—doesn’t arise, doesn’t pass away—then you’ve found something unfabricated. It hasn’t been shaped by intention. And that can be the basis for genuine happiness. In fact, it in and of itself is a state of well-being, the ultimate well-being.

So that’s the premise: that that kind of happiness is possible, and that you want to orient your practice to that if you’re serious about being happy.

A couple of years back, I was visiting an old professor of mine who had taught comparative religion. After my visit with him, I was going to be giving a talk elsewhere on the Buddhist attitudes toward happiness. He wanted to know in a nutshell what the talk would be about; he wouldn’t be able to attend it that night. So I said, basically, that it is possible to search for happiness in a way that’s not hedonistic. In other words, you’re not just going for pleasure, and it’s not just a selfish gathering up of experiences for yourself without regard for how it’s going to affect other people. And he said, “Oh, I wish I could hear that.” Because for most people, their quest for happiness is exactly that: a hedonist, selfish thing. Very

little thought is given to the consequences. A different kind of happiness is a rare thing.

Several years earlier, I was asked to write a review of a book on positive psychology, to provide a Buddhist take on the topic. I pointed out in the review that the thing the book really lacked from our point of view was there was no discussion of the consequences of how you search for happiness. You look for happiness in a certain way, you try to find pleasure in certain things, and there was no concern about who was going to be affected by this or what kind of effect it was going to have on other people. The author claimed to be very scientific in saying, “Well, even bank robbers can have their happiness, and we have to allow that for them”—that somehow, happiness was morally neutral. I pointed out that this, from a Buddhist point of view, was pretty repugnant because the teaching on karma shows that we have to take into consideration how our quest for happiness affects other people. The editors were surprised. They hadn’t thought I would focus on karma; they thought I’d focus on emptiness or something of that sort. And I was surprised that they were surprised.

The whole point of the Buddha’s teaching is that it is possible, through your actions, to find happiness in a way that develops noble qualities in the mind and actually has a good impact on other people. That’s something really amazing. Think of the qualities of the Buddha that we take refuge in: wisdom, compassion, and purity. The Buddha teaches all three of them as part of the skillful pursuit of happiness.

Wisdom, for instance, begins with a cluster of questions, “What is skillful? What’s blameless? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” You’re looking for happiness in a blameless way. You want long-term. You realize your actions are going to make all the difference, long-term is possible, and it’s and better than short-term.

Then there’s compassion: the realization that if your happiness is built on somebody else’s suffering, it’s not going to last. They’re going to do what they can to put an end to it. And if they can’t do it, their friends will, their relatives will, or their descendants will. If you want a solid happiness, you’ve got to keep other people’s well-being in mind. They love their happiness as much as you love yours. So if you want happiness that lasts, you can’t build it on their suffering. That’s the basis for compassion. Notice, compassion is not an innate quality in the mind, but it is one that we can develop through heedfulness.

And finally, there’s purity, where you really look carefully at what you’re doing and at the consequences of your actions. Before you plan to do something, make sure you don’t do it with the expectation of causing harm. While you’re doing it,

check to see if any unexpected harm is coming up. If it is, stop. If not, you can keep on with the action. When the action is done, you look for any long-term harm. If there's none, you can take joy in the fact that you're training. If you do see that you caused harm, talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path to learn how not to repeat that mistake. This, the Buddha said, is how you purify your thoughts, your words, and your deeds.

All of this is done in the pursuit of happiness in a noble way, trying to become happy in a way that develops wisdom, compassion, and purity. Of course, the wisest pursuit of happiness is one that goes for a happiness that doesn't change.

This is where the Buddha's premises about fabrication come in, and they give focus to your practice. We're here to get the mind as still as possible so that we can see: Is there still some change in that stillness of mind? The stillness of concentration *is* fabricated, but if you don't do it, you're not going to see the subtle things arising and passing away. It's right here that insight can come, and it's focused on just that issue: Can you detect something changing in here? If you can, then the next question is: What did you do to cause the change? Notice that you're looking into your mind for the cause.

There's a Dhamma talk where Ajahn Chah is talking to a group of monks and makes the point that they really have to pay attention to arising and passing away. And he adds, "But that's not the end of the problem." You have to turn around and look into your mind. What's causing it? What's pushing that change? Because that's the thing that's going to destroy your potential for true happiness. Again, the problem isn't coming from outside; it's coming from within.

Some people might call this blaming the victim, but it's not. It's actually giving you the power you need in order to find true happiness. If your happiness depended on other people, you'd have to run around trying to please them. You'd be their slave. But here you're in control. You can look for the causes inside and realize that you don't have to identify with them. You don't have to take them up. You don't have to play along with them.

This is where that image of the mind of as a committee is really useful. We all tend to identify with every voice in the committee. But if you can step back and listen to the different voices, you realize, "Okay, that voice that's speaking there: I can pretty much figure out who I picked up that idea or that attitude from. I'm in a position to ask: Do I want to continue taking on that role, taking on that attitude?" If you see that it's causing unnecessary stress, why?

The important point there is that word "unnecessary." There is some necessary stress in the path: Creating states of concentration, practicing virtue, working on

your discernment, all involve effort. There's going to be some stress there, so you have to be up for that.

But the really amazing part of the path is that it's the one kind of fabrication that leads to the end of fabrication—or as the Buddha says, the karma that leads to the end of karma. It takes you to a place that's totally unfabricated, and it's got this focal point: You look for change and then figure out what causes it. And if you want to see a really subtle change, you have to get the mind really still on a very subtle level.

That's what we're doing here. The good thing is that the happiness found this way is totally harmless. In fact, it takes you out of the cycle of having to feed and feed and feed. Some people say, "I don't want to go just for my own happiness. I want to come back and help other people." But if you come back to help other people, you've got to feed again. It would be a really good gift to everybody else to take one mouth—your mouth—out of the feeding chain entirely. Not only that, you show other people that they can do it, too.

So this business of arising and passing away is not just sitting here and saying, "Oh, here it comes; there it goes. Here it comes; there it goes again," and somehow, that's wisdom. That's just the beginning. You look for that because it's a sign that there's some fabrication going on. You want to turn around and look at the mind to find out what the fabrication is and why it's happening, to the point where you can let it go. You can stop doing it. This is how we sharpen our discernment: by noticing the extent to which we can shape our experience, then using that sensitivity to get things as still as possible so that we can improve our sensitivity even further to see even more subtle forms of fabrication.

You might call this sensitivity training, but it's not just getting in touch with your emotions. It's getting in touch with everything that's going on inside so that you can become sensitive to something that *doesn't* arise and doesn't pass away at all. It's always been there. "Always": Put that word in quotes because it's something outside of time. "Always" is a word that's *in* time; this is outside of time. And that's where we're headed.