

Recollection of the Buddha

June 5, 2021

As the Buddha said, everywhere we go, we go with craving as our companion. We think it's our friend, but it's a non-friend, as in the chant we chanted just now. It cheats us, it flatters and cajoles, it's good only in word, and it's our companion in ruinous fun. The question is, how much longer do we want to associate with that kind of friend?

The Buddha offers himself as an alternative friend, an admirable friend, a person of conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. That's the kind of friend we want to develop outside, and that's the kind of friend we want to develop inside, too, so that we can be our own best friend.

As we sit here and meditate, we can make it a pleasant pastime—doing it every now and then—or we can be more serious about it, realizing that it's not just a relaxation technique or a quiet way to spend an hour. It's a way to understand what's going on deep down inside the mind, and why the mind is so often fooled by its cravings.

After all, we all want happiness, and yet cravings get us to do a lot of things that are going to make us suffer. Why are we so bamboozled? What in us likes the craving? Why do we listen to it?

Meditation allows you to find this out, but you have to stick with it. And to stick with it, you have to go against the craving. It'll tell you all kinds of reasons why you can delay the practice to some later time. One of its favorite arguments, of course, is the middle way: "Don't put too much effort in. Don't push yourself too much." But as Ajaan Maha Boowa said, "The middle way of craving is right in the middle of a pillow." And it keeps just taking us back to the same old places we've been to before—whereas, if we take the Buddha as our admirable friend, he's going to take us someplace new. But to take him as our friend requires dedication; it requires commitment, equanimity, patience, endurance: all those tough virtues. So we have to find some way to generate desire inside, so that the tough virtues don't seem quite so tough and so forbidding.

It's here that the guardian meditations are useful. This is a list of meditation topics that doesn't come in the Canon. It developed sometime later. I don't know exactly when or where. King Rama IV wrote a Pali poem based on the four guardian meditations, and that may be based on an earlier tradition. The topics are all found in the Canon, though, and it's a useful set of topics to master.

The first guardian meditation is recollection of the Buddha. You really take seriously the fact that the Buddha is not just a mythic figure or an archetype. He was a real human being who decided that he wasn't going to be satisfied until he could find something deathless. What would it be like to meet somebody like that, or at the very least, to take that as an option—that this is what human beings can do. Human beings can be this dedicated, and they come out happy.

Our society tends to think of people who take on a very serious religious vocation as warped or as miserable, but here the Buddha's given the example of someone who was so dedicated that he was willing to torture himself to see if that was one of the options for finding true happiness. Fortunately, it was not.

You can imagine how would he keep himself going: A lot of it had to do with how he talked to himself—how he kept the goal in mind—and with developing a great deal of truthfulness. He tried different paths and, as he said, he wasn't really going to rest satisfied until he knew that he had tried that path in a genuine way, so that he could say yes or no, that it really did or did not lead to the goal.

So he offered himself up as an experimental subject: his body and his mind. They were the things that were going to be experimented on. And he had to feel his way.

We have the advantage of having his example, so we should think about how fortunate we are that we have that example, and that it does say something about us, that this is a potential that we have: We can be that true. We can be that dedicated.

You say, "I look at myself, and all that seems to be very far away." But if you dedicate yourself to the next step and the next step and the next step in the path, you will find that you'll change as a person. The person you are right now is not the same person who's going to be finding awakening. You'll develop new qualities in the meantime.

And how you develop them? Gradually. This is why the path is gradual. It takes a while to develop these qualities. That's why the path requires endurance as you stick with it. The ajaans in Thailand found that Westerners coming to study with them tended to lack two qualities: endurance on one hand, and equanimity on the other. But these are qualities in which we can train ourselves.

I remember when I was there, some people would say, "Westerners can do a good impersonation of a practitioner, but they don't have the stick-to-it-tiveness that's really needed." I took that as a challenge.

So find whatever way you can to challenge yourself, and to see it as a challenge you're up for. The practice is not going to leave you strung-out. After all, it is a middle way. It's just that your idea of the middle way—what's just right—is going to change as you practice.

It's like exercising the body. The amount of exercise you do at the very beginning won't be adequate for the exercise regime as a whole, but as you work on it, work on it, work on it, whether it's in the number of miles you run, the weights you lift, whatever, your idea of what's just right is going to grow as the exercise makes you stronger.

Think about the Buddha: He started out as a prince, living a very luxurious and easeful lifestyle. Then he decided to go out and live in the wilderness, to live on alms. There's one version of his story—it's not in the Canon, it's one of the later versions—that talks about how his reaction to his very first alms meal was disgust. He asked himself, "Am I going to have to live off this?" But he stopped to reflect: "This is food that's been offered freely," so he learned to look at the food in a positive way. Food that's offered freely comes with no strings attached. There's nothing unskillful in the way it's obtained.

So bit by bit by bit, he was able to get his mind around a totally different style of living, until ultimately he was able even to torture himself. When, after six years, he realized that that was not the way, he was able to give up the pride that went along with that self-torture.

Just think about it: What keeps a person going, when you're giving things up, giving things up? There's going to be a lot of pride. But when he realized that this was not the path, he was willing to swallow his pride and allow the five brethren

to look down on him, to withdraw their respect, and he didn't let that deter him. He was still looking for an alternative way. He kept at it to that extent.

One of the lessons he learned was that you're not practicing to make yourself better than other people, or to exalt oneself or disparage others. As he said when he reflected on the six years of torture, he realized, when he compared himself to all the others in the past who had followed that route, that nobody else had ever gone this far. There was a comparing mind there. Which is why, in the customs of the noble ones, he says to be very careful about your practice of contentment. Make sure you're not disparaging other people or exalting yourself over the fact that you're more content than they are. So he learned from his own mistakes.

That, too, should be part of our motivation: He was willing to recognize a mistake and learn from it. He didn't try to cover it up. So when we make our own mistakes, we shouldn't try to cover them up, either. He didn't let the fact that he'd spent six years on a blind alley deter him. As he said, there must be another way. That, too, is a good example. When you find yourself up against a brick wall, remind yourself there's got to be a way around this.

Years back when I was in Thailand, I was translating Ajaan Maha Boowa, and I had just translated his talk on how the radiant mind is ignorance. Just at that point we had a monk from another tradition come to stay with us. We tended to have this pattern: When Western monks from other monasteries came to our monastery usually when they were about to disrobe. This was their last straw: to try out one last place they had never been to before.

This particular monk read the piece and got very disheartened. He said, "I've been trying to get to the radiant mind, thinking that that was the goal. Now, I'm being told that even that is ignorance."

Well, that attitude is the mind-set that gets defeated, saying, "I've tried so hard, so hard, so hard and I'm still not there. I'm going to give up." That mind-set is not one of your friends. The inner friend who has compassion for you—as the chant says, "the one *sympathetic* to friends"—is the one that reminds you, "Okay, what's past is past, but there's still energy. There's still the possibility of something new." So when you come to an impasse, remind yourself: There has to be a way around this.

If there were no way around this, then the Buddha wouldn't have gained awakening. We already have his example. We have the example of the noble Sangha. There's got to be a way around it. It may take time, and this is where patience and endurance come in.

Not that you just sit there and endure, but you watch. And you try to watch from a firm foundation, so that what you'll see is likely to be a lot more accurate. Think of the Buddha teaching Rāhula to make his mind like earth: not so that he would just sit there like a clod of dirt, but so that his mind would be solid, so that he could observe.

When you do at any scientific experiment, you want to make sure that the equipment is based on a solid table, and the solid table is based on a solid floor. Then the equipment can measure things with a lot of precision and a lot of accuracy, and you can trust the results. In the same way, if you want to learn things in the mind, you've got to make your mind as solid as possible.

That way, when the mind has its subtle movements, you can detect them. Otherwise, they're just there in the background. They seem to be part of the wake of your own movements. Or if everything in life seems to be unstable, you can't see anything at all. You're not sure which part is moving, which is staying still, because everything seems to be fluid and uncertain. So you've got to make your mind certain—so that you'll have something that's certain to measure everything else by.

This is one of the things we admire in the Buddha, probably the most solid person who ever lived. And as he kept saying, his qualities of ardency, resolution, and heedfulness were not his alone. As he put it, when he gained this or that level of jhana, this or that level of knowledge, it was “as happens in one who is ardent, heedful, and resolute.”

In other words, *anybody* who develops these qualities is going to see these things—which opens the way for everybody. That should be *the big message* of trying to recollect the Buddha: that he showed what's possible, what potentials we have as human beings.

Ajaan Lee made the comment one time that we human beings have lots of potentials within us that we don't take advantage of—potentials in the body in

terms of the breath and the other elements, potentials in the mind in terms of the skills we can learn. We've got all these potentials, but what do we use them for? To make money, to gain fame, to get status, to get pleasures—things that just wash away, wash away.

Whereas there's the example of the Buddha: It is possible to develop our potentials so that we can find something deathless inside—something that's outside space and time. That's a potential within you.

So when we think of the Buddha as our admirable friend, this is the lesson he gives: that we have a lot more potential than we think we do, and we shouldn't sell ourselves short.

The part of the mind that will take this seriously is your friend, not the craving that wants to take things easy. And of course, the easy path is the one that leads to endless suffering. Whereas, the path that the Buddha laid out, even though it's hard at times, is not always hard. After all, a major part of the path, a central factor of the path, is right concentration: rapture, pleasure. And it leads to an end: a happiness that more than repays the effort that's put into the path.

So when you think of the Buddha, make sure your thoughts then come back to your practice, and have them energize your practice. That's the whole purpose of his teaching, which is to help us see that we have these potentials within us, and that we can develop them.

If you have any gratitude to the Buddha at all—which is the proper response—then you should want to develop those potentials as far as you can.