

The Buddha's Narratives & Yours

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In the Buddhist context, conviction is defined as conviction in the Buddha's awakening: not only that it happened, but also that we take it as our reference point. When issues come up in the mind, you try to think of the issue in light of what the Buddha experienced, what he found on the night of his awakening.

For example, narratives come up. You're sitting here meditating, and all of a sudden a story from yesterday or earlier today or last week or last year or early on in your life comes up in the mind. You can look at it in all kinds of different frameworks: your relationship to your family, your relationship to the people here in the community. But the best framework is to think of it in terms of the framework of the Buddha's remembrance of his previous lifetimes—many, many, many eons of rebirths.

Think of what it would be like if you could take that incident, that issue, and place it in the Buddha's larger context. How much meaning would it still have in the mind? Not much. The question of who was guilty, who was innocent would begin to become meaningless, especially if you looked at it in terms of not only the first knowledge that the Buddha gained, but also the second: that the long process of rebirth and death and rebirth and re-death is driven by action. The ways in which you're reborn are determined by things you've done based on your views.

As the Buddha said, when you see someone who's really poor, you have to remind yourself: You've been there. You see someone who's really rich: You've been there. Almost any type of person: You've been there. And not just people, animals of all kinds, devas of all kinds, brahmas: You've been there. So how does your current issue stack up against that knowledge, or looking at things in that way?

This is a great way of stepping back from your issues, especially the ones that suddenly loom large in the mind. It allows you to ask yourself, "Do I really want to go into that?"—especially if there are a lot of hard feelings around who's innocent, who's guilty. In the larger frame of things, everybody's been innocent, everybody's been guilty. It gets so that you can't trace how far a particular incident goes back. The long-term karmic ancestry: The Buddha said that if you tried to trace it back, you'd go crazy.

There's another thing that he recommends that you not think about in his discussion on appropriate attention in Majjhima 2. He talks about questions that are not worth following, not worth paying attention to. And some of them are,

“What was I in the past? Was I in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? How will I be in the future? What will I be in the future?” Some people say, “Well, didn’t the Buddha ask these questions of himself when he first gained awakening?” The answer is that perhaps that was his first motivation to gain those first two knowledges. But then those are precisely the questions he dropped, because he realized that the question of who he was, was not a useful question—because, after all, the whole process was driven by action.

He asked himself: Why not look directly at actions? Actions that are skillful, actions that are unskillful—in ways that you can get past those categories of skillful and unskillful—in other words, to get to the kind of kamma that leads to the end of kamma. You do that not by thinking about who you were or who was guilty or who was innocent or who was good or who was bad, but simply by looking at actions: good actions, bad actions, skillful actions, unskillful, informed by right view, informed by wrong view. That takes the people out of the equation. It leaves the actions.

Then with regard to action, remember the Buddha discovered that your actions right now are not totally determined by the past. You do have the freedom to choose. So why not choose to do something skillful right now? And right now, and right now. Keep at it. That’s what the Buddha did, and in doing so he was showing by example that you should put aside questions of your identity—who you were, who you are, who you might be—and focus just on the question of actions. What are the actions that were done in the past that are yielding their results right now? If it’s a result you don’t like, knowing the general principle of action, what could you change?

You also realize that your identity is an action: Your sense of who you are, the way you identify yourself as a being, is determined by the things you cling to. You keep on clinging from one thing to the next to the next to the next, like the cat out there. It’s clinging to its cat issues right now. And it’s in a position where we can’t tell it, “Hey, stop it. Just look at the action as an action.”

Remind yourself you’ve been there too, and if you’re not careful, that’s where you might go back to. But it’s also possible to get out. You’re a human being and you can hear this message and act on it. That’s the whole message of the awakening.

After the Buddha gained those knowledges of all those rebirths, and thinking about how whatever identity he had just kept changing and changing and changing, he realized that the process never led to anything of really real solid value. It’s like those early explorers who tried to go to the poles. They’d get up to a certain latitude, but then they’d realize if they went any further, they wouldn’t

survive, so they turned back. We have these many stories of people getting closer and closer to the poles, but never quite getting there, and then coming back down again. That's what our trajectory has been in the past. We go to really good places, but then we fall. Then we work our way back again, and then we fall. But this doesn't mean that we're always going to have to fail. After all, there were people who finally attained the poles, both the North Pole and the South Pole. It can be done.

In the same way, when the Buddha attained awakening, he showed us that it can be done. He didn't attribute it to who he was as a special being. In fact, after his awakening, someone asked him who he was, and he simply said, "Awake." He attributed his awakening to his actions, particularly actions of the mind. Just like us, he had been many things in the past. Remember that reflection on how you wouldn't meet anyone who hadn't been your mother, your brother, your sister, your son or daughter? He'd been all those things. He'd been very poor, very wealthy. So his ability to find awakening didn't depend on the fact that he had been something special. It simply depended on willingness to do what needed to be done, to figure out what was going on in the mind. So he took that to heart.

It's also something you want to take to heart as you think about the Buddha's awakening. He showed that human beings can do this. It is possible through your actions to attain something unconditioned. He has you think, "Other people have been able to do this. They're human beings. I'm a human being. They can do it. Why can't I?"

That's where your narratives should lead. They should get dissolved into actions in that large framework, and then from the perspective of actions, you can ask yourself, "What action do I want to do it now that will bring the greatest happiness?" You're free to choose, so try to take advantage of that freedom.

We have good opportunities for practice right now. We don't know how much longer they're going to be this good, so take advantage of them while you've got them. Even when the opportunities are not good, take advantage of what opportunities you do have. There's always the opportunity to do something skillful. You want to make that a habit, because the more you make it a habit, then the easier it becomes. If you tell yourself, "Well, I'm not the sort of person who can do that," remind yourself that you will change as you change your actions. And again, it's not an issue of what sort of person you are. It's what sort of actions you do. Don't let your identity get in the way. Think of the possibility of freedom of choice as opening the way and make whatever choice seems best.