

Deep Time

March 22, 2022

There's a poem in Thailand. It's a translation from a Sanskrit poem about two devas, husband and wife. To make a very long story short, a curse is placed on them. They have to fall down from heaven and become human beings for a while. They'll be in love as human beings as they were when they were devas, but they'll have to be separated three times. Then, after the third separation, they can come back to heaven.

The body of the poem—and it's a long narrative poem—is a very sad story of how they meet again in the human realm. They go out on an ocean voyage. The ship wrecks and they get separated. The man lands on an island where he sees his wife's dead body, but then discovers it's not really her body. The devas are playing tricks on him. He finally meets up with her. They have other adventures. They finally get lost in a jungle at some point. He sees her being devoured by lions, and he's so upset that he commits suicide. Then she comes along. It turns out what he saw wasn't her after all. It was just another deva trick. She comes across him, and she commits suicide. Next thing you know, they're up in heaven, laughing about the whole thing.

Compare that with *Romeo and Juliet*, and you get an idea of the difference between the perspective that's provided by thinking about the many times we've been reborn and the belief that we have only one birth. When there's only one birth, we can get very worked up about things. Things are tragic, things are horrible, great injustices have been done. But from the Buddha's point of view, a lot of those ideas and feelings come from the fact that we don't see the whole story.

Think about it. He says there hasn't been just one universe. There've been many universes, one after another. Scientists tell us how many billions of years the stars in our universe have been around, and we haven't even gone through the whole cycle of this particular universe. And there've been many before us. As the Buddha said, those who can remember past lives back forty eons—in other words, forty universes—have a short memory. His memory extended far beyond that, to the point where he said that trying to find a beginning point for all this, even the whole idea of a beginning point, is inconceivable. Not just unknowable, inconceivable. And we've been around that long, which means we're way older than the stars, even all those galaxies that the new telescope is getting pictures of.

We've been around doing this—taking birth, eating this, eating that, finding pleasure here, finding pleasure there, and then dying, and then coming back and taking birth—again, and again, and again. When you think about

this, it's hard to have a tragic view of things. There's more a sense of a lot of the suffering accomplishing nothing. So the proper response is not a tragic view of the world. It's more *samvega*, followed by dispassion: in other words, realizing that you simply don't want to keep on continuing with all these cycles. They go nowhere. They go up and come down, up and down, around and around. People work really hard to develop good qualities of mind, and then they get rewarded. As they enjoy the rewards, the good qualities of the mind get worn away until they fall back down again.

The proper response is the desire to get out, and not to get worked up about the individual stories in the meantime: the particulars of our stories, like the story of a tragedy. With the story of an injustice, there has to be a beginning point and a very strong sense of an end point, when the injustice is taken care of. You finally arrive at justice. That's the end point. In a tragedy, someone has great potential, but then it's nipped in the bud, and that's it. End. But in the Buddha's view of universe, there are no beginnings, and no end except nibbana. So in cases of injustice, you can't say who did what first, or whose response was appropriate or inappropriate to what the other person had done. Things just go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. As for tragedies, there's no end to the story. You come back and try again.

It's good to adopt this perspective because it makes it a lot easier to live in the world without a lot of nostalgia, without a lot of attachment. Most of the issues that seem so big when you take the view of just one lifetime become very small when you think about eons and eons of lifetimes.

Think about the Buddha as he finally got to the town of Kusinara, where he was going to pass away for his last time and go into total nibbana. Ven. Ananda was upset because it was just a little tiny town—he called it a little daub and wattle town, which means basically that the houses were made of nothing but bamboo and mud. It'd be better for the Buddha to go to a great city for his unbinding. There the people would give him a proper send-off.

The Buddha said, "No. This little town here used to be a great city as well." Then he went into a long description of how great it was. In fact, there's another sutta that goes into an even longer description of how great it was. He happened to be king that time. And in the story, there comes a point where he's about to die. His wife, the queen, comes to him with tears on her face. She says, "Please, try to live, try to live." He said, "If you really loved me, then you wouldn't say that." So she said, "If I really loved you, then what should I say?" He said "All fabrications are inconstant. They should be let go." And so, with tears running down her cheeks, that's what she tells them. The king lets go and dies.

The fact that the Buddha was coming back to what was now just a little tiny town underlined the fact that all that greatness was destined to fall away, fall away. The best course of action is to figure out: How do I get out?

So, when you find that your thoughts are taking over, when you find them especially interesting or especially gripping, use this perspective as a solvent to make you see that the tragedy, the injustice, whatever, is not such a big issue. There are other more important issues. Do you want to keep on coming back to this sort of thing? Because that's an area where you really have a choice.

You suffer sometimes from your past bad karma. You want to ask yourself how much longer you want to be open to the possibility that there's more bad karma, or of coming back and forgetting about the Dhamma and doing stupid things all over again. We've done that who knows how many times. We learn some Dhamma and then we forget. Then we learn it again, forget it again. They say that in some universes, there never is a Buddha. Think how long a period of time that is: a whole universe, with no Buddha to teach the Dhamma. It's a pretty risky business, coming back.

So it's good that you adopt this perspective of deep, deep, deep time. It's a shame that so many modern Dhamma teachers are abandoning it, because without this perspective, it's very hard to let go of your thoughts, your ideas of right and wrong, what's important, what's tragic, what injustices need to be taken care of before you're willing to rest. With the Buddha's perspective, though, you realize the best course of action is to get out.

This is why the Buddha's course of action was so compassionate: to show us that there is a way out. Otherwise, you stay on in this cycle back and forth, back and forth. X does something to Y, Y does something back to X, and pulls in Z. Everybody gangs up on everyone else. Over what? Things that just slip away, slip away. You have to remember: This is not a world to live in. This is a world to pass through on your way out. That's the best use of your mental energies, the best use of your time.