

The 3 D's and beyond

Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is the perfect Greek tragedy. The play was written when Sophocles was at the height of his creative powers. King Oedipus seeks advice from the Delphi oracle regarding the plague. Although everyone sees the truth, he alone fails to do so. Everyone warns him not to continue seeking.¹ But he persists. Finally, when he knows everything, he tears out his eyes in despair.² The play ends with him as a broken, blind old man, led off the stage by his faithful daughters, who must share his exile.

Even after more than 2000 years, *Oedipus Rex* still holds our imagination and sends shivers down our spine. In ancient Athens, we are told, some play about the Oedipus myth is performed every two or three years. The audience knew what will happen to the king – it is Ἀνάγκη, *ananke*, “necessity” – like karmic fruition, a fate entirely of the king's own making although he doesn't know that. This terrifies us, but watching it gives a sense of control, perhaps knowing that we would not make the same mistake.

To Aristotle, the play was the most tragic of all because it effectively rids us of the two emotions of pity and fear – emotions, according to him, that stand in the way of self-knowledge and understanding. This may well be true today, too: we might *pity* Oedipus or some tragic figure in a movie or story, but we think that it would never happen to us. However, we do *fear* that it might, so we avoid thinking or talking about it -- but we don't mind watching it happening to others. Inevitably, it happens to us, too.

It happens to the young Siddhattha when he sees the first 3 of the 4 sights: an old man, a sick man and a dead man. As he has been living a most luxurious and protected life, getting and enjoying whatever he wants, he is simply shocked to realize that disease, decay and death (the 3 D's) must come to him. Unlike many of us, however, he does not reactively rationalize that we should then “eat, drink and be merry.” He somehow knows that this would make the situation even more painful in due course.

In Buddhist psychology, we say that the Bodhisattva Siddhattha is moved by *samvega*, a sense of urgency, like someone who is told that his house is ablaze, and he has to flee from it immediately. For Siddhattha, it is not a flight away from the problem (or his family), but he is urgently moved to give all his energies to find out the cause of suffering and how to remove it.

Siddhattha is neither resigned nor content merely to watch in pity at the old man, the sick man and the dead man. He is moved with *samvega*. He realizes that if we all must grow old, then there's no fun in being young. Those who think being young is fun obviously have not grown old yet. Imagine this “fun” youth period lasts only a decade or two, and then we have to deal with decay for the rest of our lives. We could say that Siddhattha is much more mature for his age.

¹ On a deeper meaning of “seeking,” see **Paṭilīna Sutta** (A 4.58), SD 43.10:

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/43.10-Patilina-S-a4.38-piya.pdf>

² Another similar famous scene in literature is that of Gloucester's eye being gouged out by Cornwall (*King Lear* 3.7). On a happier note, we have the healing story of **Subhā Therī**, who gouges out her own eye for a youth who is infatuated with them (Thī 366-399), SD 20.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/20.7-Subha-Thi-366-399-piya1.pdf>

No matter how healthy we are, he reflects, we will still fall sick somehow. Even if we are rarely physically ill, we would be mentally ill somehow: we are mentally ill with greed, with hate, and certainly with delusion. Finally, we all must die, and it's something we do not usually want to talk about, so we busy ourselves with things (which is better than worrying about dying, anyway).

Siddhattha, however, also sees a fourth sight – that of a pleasant and radiant holy man, a renunciant, who shows none of the 3 D's. He seems to be the antithesis, the opposite, of the first 3 sights. Siddhattha wonders how we can be free from the 3 D's and be happy like the renunciant.

As we all know, Siddhattha then goes to the best gurus of his day (it's like looking for life's answer by going to the best universities or experts we have). He even tortures his own body to purge it of all impurities so that perhaps some essence of wisdom could be discovered (this is like taking up all kinds of arcane arts or expensive modern life-coaching courses).

Finally, Siddhattha finds his answer right at "home," that is, in his own heart. He looks within himself, truly seeing into his breath (which is life itself), and finds the answers and solutions to all his questions: the true meaning of life (the first 2 truths) and true purpose of life (the last 2 truths).³ He awakens from the sleep of ignorance and nightmare of craving into the joyful light of nirvana.

Why, then, is it so difficult for us to know that the answers to life's most important questions lie within ourselves? Why do we resist knowing ourselves? We simply are unwilling to admit that we are really no more healthy, no more beautiful, no more successful, no more rich, no more wise than we actually are. That's why we want to be more healthy, more beautiful, more successful, more rich, more wise than we think we are. We are simply self-deluded and don't even know it (perhaps until now).

We are simply afraid to really have a good look at ourselves. We are afraid that this would mean accepting that we are not what we would really like to be. Those of us who dare to rise above this fear are like lotuses, with roots in the mud, their stalks firmly standing in the murky waters, but the lotuses blossom beautifully in the bright sunny space well above the waters.

The Buddha is the wisest of humans, the highest of beings, because he looks at himself right in the mind's eye. He looks deep into the very breath of life. He has no fear of the truths that arise before him. What could be worse than disease, decay and death, anyway? In this way, he finds total spiritual liberation. In simple practical terms, we can speak of his liberating discovery as follows: respect our body; uncloud our mind; love ourself; accept others.

Keeping our body in shape alone does not bring full happiness. It might even be a distraction from a real problem, say, if we do this merely for the sake of admiration and pleasure of others. We have thingified ourselves. Physical health, in other words, is for a greater purpose: as the basis for mental health.

³ See **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), SD 1.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.1-Dhammacakka-Pavattana-S-s56.11.pdf>

As humans, we are both animals as well as spiritual beings. Our bodies may look a little different from those of animals, but they both function in just the same way. In that sense, our bodies are still animal, or at least animal-like. If we are enslaved by what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch, then we are stuck in the animal realm. Our minds are not well developed enough.

In **the parable of the 6 animals**, the Buddha compares our body (comprising the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body) respectively to a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, and a jackal. And the mind is like a monkey. They are each on a strong leash whose other ends are then tied together. The animals try to move in six different directions each heading for their favourite haunts, but they are dragged away by the strongest animal.

Then, continues the parable, a man sinks a strong stake into the ground and firmly ties the ends of all these leashes to it. The six animals keep on struggling, trying to head for their own haunts, tire themselves, and then quietly rest near the stake. The stake is our mindfulness of the true nature of the body. Once we understand the true nature of our body, it is easier to master our own minds.⁴

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⁴ See **Cha Pāṇā Sutta** (S 35.247), SD 19.15: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/19.15-Chapana-S-s35.247-piya.pdf>