

Buddhist renewal day

25th December is Buddhist renewal day. Notice the small initial letters: it is not “Renewal Day,” not a national or religious festival filled with abandon and rituals. “Buddhist renewal day” is a time to take stock of our lives: How have we been living? How are we practising Buddhism? How are we bringing Buddhism to others? Above all, it is a day of quiet and meaningful reflection, or simply spending some quiet time with oneself or with loved ones in the Dharma.

Why is renewal so necessary and vital? The answer is clear: we are Buddhist; we need to grow into true individuals. What is preventing us from being true Buddhists and really growing? One useful way to answer this is: the four biases, that is, greed, hate, delusion and fear.

Greed here refers to habitually measuring things: How much is this worth? How useful are you to me? How much am I worth? As children, we often see things as being immeasurably beautiful. As we “grow” (or rather age), we tend to compare ourselves with others, and we are taught to measure people and things. We are conditioned to think that it is better to “have” than to be. (We don’t even know what “to be” really means.)

This comparing, rooted in greed, is one real source of our suffering. Whenever we compare with others, we will never be happy, mainly because there are always others who seem “better” than we are right now. And what are we comparing? Most often this would be what we can “have”: money, houses, cars, status, and things.

No wonder measurers are never really happy: because all these things are viewed as status symbols and tools for upmanship. Money is what money buys. A house is meant to be a home. Cars are useful in bringing us around places purposeful to us. All things are impermanent. If we understand and accept these simple truths, we will be truly happy; immeasurably happy.

Hatred as a growth retardant takes many forms, but it is mostly expressed as anger. Hatred and anger tend to be more common in a crowded society. Hatred is essentially our inability or unwillingness to put ourselves in the other person’s place. While greed is an “I”-first mentality,¹ hatred can be said to be a “me”-first mentality.

The difference is subtle but profound. When driven by greed, we (“I”) become the prime mover: we are in an acquisitive mode; we become collectors. We keep on wanting something, not knowing when to let go of it. We can’t let go because we have never really enjoyed it anyway. We have never been satisfied with it: so we become asura-like “cling-ons.”

We are unable to enjoy what we “have” because we never really live in the present. Whatever we have before us – whether they are people or things or situations – we tend to measure them in terms of “future pleasures.” But the person before us is a thinking and feeling being. Whatever things that are before us, all have their shelf-lives. Whatever the

¹ See I: **The nature of identity** = SD 19.1.

situation we are in, will pass on. And yet, we can learn a lot from each of these, and so truly enrich our lives.

When we measure these people, things and situations, we are looking at them and seeing only our past. The past is but fleeting shadows of the dead and gone. Our past is forever out of our reach. We also have the habit of editing our past as we age. So our past is merely a construction, often built on false memories.

The point is that when we view people and things before us in the light of the past, we can never really know them. It is like looking at the some twinkling star in the dark night sky, but the light we see has come from a star that is dead ages ago.

As such, we hate what we cannot have. We hate being frustrated from getting what we want. We hate because we are always wanting “things.” Our minds seem to work on a predictably computerized on-off reactivity. “Either I have it or I don’t. If I can have it I will be happy; if not I will hate it.” So both greed and hate, like and dislike, go together – like the in and out breath.

Our breath, however, is a useful reminder of our happiness here and now. That is, if we know how to breathe and be truly happy as a result. First and foremost, we must let go of each in-breath and each out-breath – this breath is life itself.

To truly live is to let go of the past. This means that we take a more open perspective of our lives: we can best learn about ourselves by examining how we think or feel about our past. To let go of the past also means we have to let go of the present. The reason is simple: if we try to hold on to the present, it has already become the past.

In a sense, right now, we can never really know the present. It takes a fraction of a second for us to know the present. In other words, what we know of the present is purely subjective; the event is already over! However, as we become more mindful (especially through meditation), this window between the event and the knowing keeps narrowing down. As we see more directly into this **delusion** of a rapid procession of the past, our wisdom of the present grows.

Fear is a negative emotion that is spawned by all the three unwholesome roots – greed, hate, delusion – for they lie at the root of our being, clicking away at our remote control, as if it were controlling our every action. We fear not knowing; we fear knowing. Put another way, more insightfully, we should say that “what we really fear is fear itself.”

This means that fear is a mental construction, a learned or conditioned reaction. It is an unthinking reaction, an unfeeling response. It makes us feel that we have no control over things. Since we think in terms of “control,” we are also caught up in the idea of losing what we think we “have,” that is, control.

To get rid of fear, we must first see it as it really is: a mental construct. Then we apply its antidote, courage. This is an interesting word that comes from the Anglo-French *coer*, which

in turn comes from Latin *cor*; both words mean “heart.” Courage is a matter of the heart, the seat of our will to action, as it were.

Here, let us focus on spiritual courage, that is “true-heartedness,” or lovingkindness: let us call this love, for short. Love begins in our own hearts, with our fully accepting ourselves: “I’m all right. I accept myself just as I am.” Just as we feel this way, so do others. So we accept others as we would accept ourselves. This can be done by treating those we meet, even (especially) our partners and old friends, as if we are meeting them for the first time (remember how happy we were then?).

This is the best “present” we can give anyone: to see them in the present, and to be present to them.

25 December is Buddhist renewal day! Happy renewing!

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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