

Where Have You Come From?



by
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Association for Insight Meditation

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The Weaver's Daughter

The Buddha's daily routine was extraordinary, he slept for only a few hours in the early hours of the morning. We divide the night into three watches: from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., and from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. In the first watch, after bathing, the Buddha taught the community of monks. At the end of the first watch, the monks would return to their quarters. Then celestial beings approached the Buddha to ask questions. The Buddha spent the middle watch answering their questions.

During the first part of the last watch the Buddha practised walking meditation to relieve the stiffness caused by sitting since the morning. In the second part, the Buddha lay down mindfully and slept. In the third part, he enjoyed the bliss of nibbāna. After abiding in the absorption of great compassion in the fourth part, at dawn he considered who was ready to be taught the Dhamma.

One morning he perceived in his divine eye the daughter of a poor weaver whose wife had just died. Realising that the young girl needed to hear his teaching, the Buddha went on foot to the village where she was staying. Seeing the Buddha arrive, the villagers invited him for the meal, and the Buddha gave a discourse after the meal to all the villagers, including the young girl. The essence of his teaching was as follows: "Death is certain, life is uncertain. Contemplate death constantly to overcome the fear of death. As one who enters the jungle armed with a stick is not afraid on seeing a snake, one who contemplates death constantly is not afraid if death comes suddenly." The villagers all appreciated the Buddha's discourse, and for several days meditated seriously on death. However, after a week or so every one of them had forgotten the Buddha's advice, and was carrying on just as heedlessly as before — except, that is, for the young girl. Because her mother had recently died, she could not forget the Buddha's words. She meditated constantly on death, for months and years afterwards.

Three years later the Buddha reconsidered the weaver's daughter situation and, seeing that she now had mature

insight, he went to her village to teach her again. She was now sixteen, and had to work hard to help her father, who had no other children. On the day that the Buddha arrived, the weaver had been working all night to finish an urgent job, and his daughter was busy spinning more thread for her father. Hearing that the Buddha had arrived she considered what she should do. She decided to go to see the Buddha as soon as she had finished her spinning, then she would take the newly spun thread to her father.

The villagers offered the meal to the Buddha, but as the girl was not present, the Buddha sat in silence after the meal waiting for her to arrive. The villagers were obliged to wait in silence too, out of respect for the Buddha. Finally, the young girl arrived, and the Buddha asked her the following four questions:-

“Young girl, where have you come from?”

“I do not know, Lord” she replied.

“Young girl, to where are you going?”

“I do not know, Lord” she replied.

“Do you not know?”

“I know, Lord” she replied.

“Do you know?”

“I do not know, Lord” she replied.

The villagers were baffled by her answers. Some thought she was being cheeky, and started scolding her, “Why don’t you tell the Buddha that you came from the spinning-shed, and are going to your father’s house?”

The Buddha silenced them and asked the girl to explain her answers. The girl replied:

“When you asked, ‘Where have you come from?’ you didn’t want to know that I came from the spinning-shed; you meant to ask from which existence I came to this one. So I replied that I do not know.”

“When you asked, ‘To where are you going?’ you meant to ask to which existence I am going after this one, so I again replied that I do not know.”

“When you asked, ‘Do you not know?’ you meant to ask, ‘Do you not know that you will die?’ so I replied that I know I will die.”

“When you asked, ‘Do you know?’ you meant to ask, ‘Do you know when you will die?’ so I replied that I do not know when I will die.”

The Buddha praised the girl for her intelligent answers, and the villagers were amazed. The Buddha then spoke the following verse:–

“Blind is this world,
only a few can see clearly.
Like birds that escape from a net,
only a few go to a blissful state.” (Dhp.v.174)

The girl realised nibbāna and became a Stream-winner on hearing this verse.

The young girl then went to her father’s house and put the newly spun skein of thread down by the loom. After working the whole night, her father had fallen asleep at the loom. When his daughter came in, he woke up with a start, and accidentally swung a heavy beam on the loom. The beam struck the girl hard, and she died on the spot. The father was totally distraught, and hurried to the Buddha to seek consolation. The Buddha explained the truth of suffering to him, and the weaver asked for ordination, later attaining Arahantship.

The Buddha’s love and compassion was unlimited. For the benefit of one poor girl and her father, he twice went on a long journey to teach the Dhamma, and he did not forget about the girl after the first visit, but returned as soon as he knew that she needed his help. Though he had many thousands of disciples including kings and ministers, and also taught celestial beings, the Buddha always had time for anyone who would benefit from his teaching, even including beggars and slaves.

This story is very interesting for the Buddhist because it shows that although we do believe in rebirth we do not need to remember our previous lives to gain nibbāna, the goal of

Buddhism. The weaver's daughter could not tell the Buddha from which existence she had come to be reborn as a weaver's daughter, but the Buddha was pleased with her answers. She had understood about the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death after three years of meditation. That understanding enabled her to attain nibbāna while listening to the verse.

Who Am I?

One who has attained nibbāna no longer has any doubts such as "Am I?" "Am I not?" "What am I?" "How am I?" since the egocentric way of thinking has been removed by insight. It is not unlike the case of someone who has grown up and lost interest in football. He is no longer disappointed when his football team loses, or elated when they win. Even if he hears that his former football team has been relegated to the second division, it no longer matters since he doesn't follow the team avidly any more.

Self-view is hard to remove entirely. We identify with our family, our school, our neighbourhood, our local football team, our country, or our racial group. If we hear any good or bad news about anything that we regard as ours then we feel elated or depressed. If we hear someone say something critical about us personally, then we may feel terrible. However, we should not take it too much to heart. There is a saying in the Dhammapada:—

"This, Atula, is an old saying; it is not one of today only:
 They blame those who remain silent.
 They blame those who speak too much,
 They blame those who speak too little,
 No one escapes blame in this world." (Dhp v 227)

Similarly, if someone praises us we should not become conceited because of that. If we work hard we will get a good result, that is only natural, but there is always someone who can do better than us, at least in other ways. It is hard to remove pride and conceit, but we must do it if we want to gain the

highest happiness. The Buddha described how his pride and intoxication vanished, when he was still an unenlightened Bodhisatta. "On seeing an old man, all pride and intoxication in youth vanished. On seeing a sick man, all pride and intoxication in health vanished. On seeing a dead man, all pride and intoxication in life vanished."

How Can We Remove Egoism?

How can we remove self-view, pride, and conceit? We must develop mindfulness or awareness. Whatever thoughts or feelings arise within us should be observed as they occur from moment to moment. We should not allow ourselves to be heedless even for an instant. Heedlessness allows defilements like self-view, pride, and conceit to enter the mind and dominate it.

Perhaps you have enjoyed watching a cartoon like Tom and Jerry. How did the ideas "Tom" and "Jerry" arise? When one watches a cartoon, one become absorbed in the story and soon begins to believe and feel what one imagines Tom and Jerry are feeling. Actually, Tom and Jerry exist only in our imaginations. A cartoon is only drawings that are displayed on the screen in rapid succession. However, the mind arises and passes away much more rapidly than the cartoon pictures, so it can put together the dialogue, sound effects, and pictures to create the illusion that Tom really is bashing Jerry over the head with a frying-pan, so we are emotionally affected by what we see.

Real life is like this too. We see and hear things so rapidly that our mind constructs a mental picture, which we regard as real. If someone abuses us, we may feel like they are bashing us over the head, they are making bad kamma, but we suffer. Why is this? It is due to the mental formations that we create. We cannot easily stop this natural process because it is the result of previous kamma. Having abused others in the past, we have to suffer abuse in the present. However, we can sharpen our awareness of the process to the point where we can separate the mental impressions from the experience of

hearing. Eventually, we will realise that all these impressions do not happen to anyone, they just happen. Then we will realise that the idea of a self, a person, a 'me', or a 'you', is just an illusion.

Self-view is deeply rooted and cannot be removed by the unmindful person. The average, unmindful person dwells with self-view dominating his or her mind for the entire life. The mindful meditator can disrupt it temporarily while engaged in meditation, but after stopping meditation it will gradually reassert itself unless the meditator has gained deep insight. If a meditator gains deep insight and attains the first path of a Stream-winner, self-view is completely destroyed, and will never arise again. Such a person may be heedless to some extent, but can never be careless enough to break any of the five precepts. He or she is absolutely free from rebirth in the four lower realms of hell, hungry ghosts, demons, and animals, and will attain final nibbāna (Arahantship) within seven lives at the most. Having seen nibbāna personally, he or she has unshakeable confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, and is truly worthy of offerings and homage. The weaver's daughter was a Stream-winner.

After attaining nibbāna, the Dhamma becomes central to the life of a Stream-winner. They are not yet free from sensual desire and anger, so they can lead a fairly normal family life. Whenever they wish to enjoy the peace of nibbāna they can meditate again, developing concentration, and attaining the fruition of the first path. If their concentration is strong, they may remain in the attainment of fruition for quite long periods, say, an hour or two. If they wish to attain the higher path, they should go into retreat for meditation and resolve not to attain the fruition of the first path during that period, and strive to attain the higher path. If they are successful and attain the second path of a Once-returner, they will be reborn on this earth only once more at the most before attaining the final liberation of Arahantship.

The second path destroys strong forms of lust and anger, but some of these deep-rooted defilements remain, so they still have some sensual attachment and ill-will. If the Once-returned strives again in meditation and attains the third path of a Non-returned, all traces of lust and anger are uprooted. Since they have no sensual attachment at all they will not be born in the womb again, and will take rebirth only in the Suddhāvāsa Brahmā realms. These realms are the Theravāda 'Pure Land' because only Non-returned are reborn there. The Bodhisattas are not reborn there either, because they are still worldlings who have not yet gained even the first path of a Stream-winner.

Non-returned seem to be extremely rare these days. Saya Thetgyi, a Burmese lay meditation teacher, who taught U Ba Khin (Goenkaji's teacher), was reputed to be a Non-returned. The Venerable Ledi Sayādaw praised him and asked him to teach meditation to his own monk disciples. A Non-returned will be naturally inclined to lead a monastic life, having no sexual desire at all, but may be obliged to remain as a lay person to support relatives. The potter honoured by Buddha Kassapa in the [Ghaṭikāra Sutta](#) (Majjhimanikāya, Sutta 81) was a Non-returned. Though he was a humble potter, he was the chief supporter of Buddha Kassapa, and looked after his own blind and aged parents. He did not use money, but let people take his pots, leaving whatever goods they wished to in exchange. Knowing that he was a good supporter of the Buddha, they donated generously so he didn't need any other source of income. Refusing to dig the earth himself, he gathered clay from river banks or that had been dug up by animals. Thus, though a layman, he lived on ten precepts like one gone forth.

The Non-returned has to strive again in meditation to attain the final goal of Arahantship. Only then is all rebirth and suffering finally destroyed. Not even the subtlest defilements remain, so the Arahant is worthy of the highest honour. The word '*Arahaṃ*' means 'worthy.' There have been a few monks in Burma and Thailand in recent years who are reputed to

have attained the final path. Venerable Ledi Sayādaw was thought to be one, but it is hard to be sure, since Arahants are extremely modest about their attainments.

A certain monk was living in dependence on an elder who was an Arahant. Living in dependence meant in those days that the pupil shared a cell with his teacher, looked after his robes, studied at his feet, and accompanied him on the daily almsround. Teacher and pupil lived liked a good father and devoted son. One day, while walking for alms, the pupil asked his teacher, “Venerable Sir, how can one know an Arahant?” The elder, who was an Arahant, replied, “It is not easy friend, to know an Arahant. Even if one were to live in dependence on an Arahant, doing all the duties for him, and accompany him on his daily almsround, one might not know that he was an Arahant.” Yet even when given such a broad hint by his teacher, the pupil did not realise that the elder was an Arahant.

Due to excessive devotion, pious people are inclined to elevate their revered teacher to the status of an Arahant, though he may still be a worldling or a Stream-winner at best. To eradicate all lust, anger, conceit, and attachment to life is no easy task. First one should aim to attain the stage of Stream-winning in this very life. If one succeeds in doing that, one may perhaps then be able to distinguish between a worldly person and a saint, since one will be free from doubt and superstition.

Who Can Attain Nibbāna?

It is my belief that most intelligent people could attain Stream-winning in this very life if they really tried hard. However, very few really strive hard in meditation. Since confidence and effort are lacking, the goal cannot be attained. Though she was only thirteen years old, the weaver’s daughter practised meditation relentlessly for three years to attain the path. These days, people think that a ten-day intensive *vipassanā* course is really a bit over the top, but striving in meditation throughout the whole day and late into the night

is not self-mortification. It is the *minimum* amount of effort required to attain deep insight or nibbāna. If we want to sleep at least six or seven hours, the goal is still far away.

To motivate oneself, one should meditate seriously on death. There is no guarantee that one will not die today. Perhaps one can avoid paying taxes if one lives like a monk, but no one can avoid death. Each breath brings death nearer. Please think seriously about this — do not imagine for one minute that it will never happen to you. If you postpone meditation until you are old — assuming that you live to old age — your attachment will have grown stronger, and your health and vitality will have grown weaker. It is best to meditate in the prime of youth, before the clutter of household life traps one in its vice-like grip.

In Burmese, the expression for getting married means, literally, “To fall into house prison.” The Burmese have the right attitude. Married life is a comfortable prison from which it is hard to escape. Even if one partner freely permits the other to go to meditate for a few weeks, or to ordain permanently, most will not want to go.

When the Bodhisatta heard that his son had been born he murmured “A fetter has arisen” so his father Suddhodana named his new grandson ‘Rāhula’ meaning fetter, hoping that the baby would prove an impediment to the Bodhisatta’s renunciation of household life. Fortunately for us, the Bodhisatta’s mind was already made up, and the news of Rāhula’s birth was the final spur to make him decide, “It must be done at once, before I get attached.” So he left the palace on the same night without even setting eyes on his newborn son.

Attachment is very sticky stuff. Many monks who fall back to household life do so because of sexual desire. To get free from sensual attachment, one must meditate either on death or on the repulsive aspects of the body. One should consider what all human bodies contain. If we opened one up and took a look inside, it would be hard to become lustful. It is just a foul smelling carcase of meat, blood, and bones that we have

to carry around the whole day and night. If there was no skin or clothes to cover it up, what a horrible sight it would be. One would need to carry a stick to drive off the dogs and crows that would come sniffing around looking for something to eat. Yet people think very highly of their own bodies, and those of others. What folly it is to lust after another person's body, but delusion fools us completely when we are heedless.

At one time a certain nun fell in love with the Venerable Ānanda and, pretending to be ill, she arranged for him to visit her in her quarters. Venerable Ānanda was then still only a Stream-winner, so he was not yet free from lust, but he was wise enough not to allow desire to arise. He did not get angry with her either, but admonished her, "Sister, sexual intercourse is the cause of birth. From birth, old age, disease, and death arise." Realising that Venerable Ānanda knew about her ulterior motives, she confessed her offence to him, and regained her sense of shame.

To gain liberation from suffering, there has to be renunciation at some point. Desire and attachment will not just disappear of their own accord. We have to pluck them out as we remove a splinter or thorn stuck under the skin. It is painful, but when it is done we can dwell at ease again. The most effective way to remove desire is to practise mindfulness meditation relentlessly throughout the whole day without a break until insight knowledge arises. On seeing things as they really are, desire and attachment will vanish.

To Where Are You Going?

Most of us will not attain final liberation in this very life and become an Arahant — we have to be realistic. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask, "To where are we going after death?" We do not know, and there is no point in idle speculation. However, the Buddha advised all of his followers, both lay and monastic disciples, to contemplate constantly on five things. This discourse is called: "Facts for Constant Recollection" (*Abhiṇhapaccavekkhitabbaṭṭhāna Suttaṃ*).

“These five facts, monks, should be constantly recollected upon by a man or a woman, by a householder or by one gone forth. What five? I am subject to aging, I have not gone beyond aging. I am subject to disease, I have not gone beyond disease. I am subject to death, I have not gone beyond death. All that is mine, beloved and pleasing to me, will perish and be destroyed. I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, I have my kamma as my seed or womb, I am related to my kamma, and have kamma as my true refuge. Whatever kamma I shall do, whether good or evil, I will inherit its results (*vipāka*). These five facts, monks, should be reflected upon constantly by a man or a woman, by a householder or by one gone forth.”

Such teachings are unpopular these days. People are intoxicated by sensual pleasures and do not like to reflect at all on aging, disease, death, and impermanence. Many do not believe in kamma and rebirth.

However, the Buddha gave clear instructions that his followers should reflect on these things, not just occasionally, for example when attending a funeral or embarking on a hazardous journey, nor even daily before lying down to sleep, but constantly (*abhiñham*).

Living beings are heedless. While intoxicated by thoughts and perceptions of sensual pleasures they are liable to do misdeeds by body, speech, or thought, which will result in suffering in the future, either in this very life, in the next life, or in future existences.

This story of the Weaver’s Daughter clearly shows that the majority of the villagers who heard the Buddha’s initial instructions to contemplate on death did not pay heed. Only the weaver’s daughter was heedful because her mother had recently passed away. Therefore she was strongly motivated and full of zeal (*samvega*). Arousing a sense of urgency is vital, otherwise no one will be inclined to strive hard this very day.

