

The Art of Living

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From ancient times to the present, every human being has to go through four stages: Birth, Old Age, Sickness, and Death. There are also people who are just born and die immediately, without experiencing old age or illness. And there are also many people who have lived or will live up to 100 years or more to witness the world changes. Sometimes people want to die but they can't. Even though we know that life or death are natural processes for humans and all living beings, even for sentient beings whose lives are higher and longer than ours, such as those born in the Form or Formless realms; they all must die one day and will later be reborn. They only differ from us by having a happier life and a longer lifespan. Because when they were human, they knew how to do many good deeds, so that in this life they can obtain many benefits.

But how is life? This is a very big question that has already had many answers. As for me, from the perspective of a Buddhist monk, practicing according to the Buddha's teachings in addition to the teachings of liberation and enlightenment taught by the Buddha, we have to come into contact with everyday life. Therefore, Buddhism needs to know clearly about cause and effect and how to be mindful in all our actions, such as walking, standing, lying, sitting, eating, communicating, money, debt, good and bad, criticizing, etc. Obviously, there are loads of jobs that we all have to deal with, whether we are intellectuals, businessmen, housewives, or elementary school students. We have to deal with all those facts in every breath, every second, every minute, every gesture, every action, etc., and this is real.

Regarding walking, every one of us surely is familiar with this basic action, but not all of us are mindful about how we walk, from home to school, to the office, to the hospital, to the market. We are used to thinking about how to get from one place to another the

quickest, so that we have more time to do other things. Meanwhile, there are people who cannot walk, maybe because they are missing one of their limbs. But they also live and have to do everything similarly to us in their daily lives. How hard must it be for them not to be able to walk easily like we do? We have a healthy body but we only think about ourselves, hardly about others who are less fortunate than us.

Standing is also one of the four basic actions, but perhaps we tend to stand less than what we walk or lay. In meditation school, to stand is to halt and it is necessary to remind yourself to stop and be mindful. Our mind is like a wild horse without reins, running freely with no self-control. So, it would be optimal if we could keep the mind in one place even for a few seconds, minutes, or, even better, hours. But it is rare to find people who can keep it that long, except for the Arahats, the Bodhisattva, and the Buddhas. However, this does not mean that we will never be able to do it. Buddha has taught us that everyone has a Buddha nature. If we learn how to halt all the mess in our minds, we can be able to become like Buddha.

While laying down to sleep, we get lost in our thoughts. We don't fall asleep right away and think about tomorrow. What will I buy for dinner? What about the work at the office? If I am not at home, will my son and daughter neglect their studies and play video games? And just like that, our thoughts run wild. How can we then sleep? Waking up the next morning, we would be exhausted and have to put on make-up to cover it up. But we only betray ourselves. Good health cannot be bought with money; a wise person knows how to take care of his or her health through work, sleep, and interactions with others. Throughout the day we worry about life's disputes, to win benefits for ourselves, no matter what happens to others. If we think about it, we would know that it is not right, but still we keep insisting to protect our ego. If we could learn to let go, even a small part of our ego in life, surely, we would be able to sleep peacefully. How can we achieve this? By gradually letting go. Because if work follows us home from the office, to the coffee shop, at the dinner table, how can we sleep? Let go of the unnecessary things in our body and mind. We were born into this world with nothing and will leave with nothing anyway.

From the moment we are born, we try so hard to achieve money, power. But in the end, the only things that follow us are our deeds in life and we will have to live with their karma in the next life. Not many people think that far ahead because nobody thinks that we will die. We think that everything we have is ours. Is that really so? Even our body; when we are still healthy we can control it. But when we become sick, it will control us. Therefore, we should know what makes us worried and let go of things. Then we will have a good sleep when we lay down on our backs.

While we sit, the body is sitting here; but the mind wanders to another place without getting tired. When we sit and play cards or watch opera for hours, we never complain of being tired or having back pains. However, when we sit in the main hall and listen to the Dharma teacher, we fall asleep. Or when we chant sutras, we will not sit very long but instead stand up and leave, arguing that we do not understand anything. Perhaps the competitions or the power of money are stronger than the Buddha's thousand-year-old teachings? If so, then money is a corrupted power. But how can we get rid of that corrupted power? If we do not have the courage to give up bad habits such as gambling and drinking, we will continue to fall asleep while listening to the sutras. Because the Dharma content is sometimes very dry and difficult; how can it be more attractive than having competitions with others?

Children love games, elderly people love cell phones, gambling, smoking, etc. Children do not listen to their parents because they do not see the adults setting an example for them. How can they believe what is told and follow? Many parents shout at their children asking why they keep staring at the computer screen and playing games. But, what about them? Many parents also get stuck on their mobile phones, even when they are together with the family or sitting in the living room. The father, the mother, the child, everyone has his or her own computer or cell phone to play with. Even though they live in the same house but do not have the same direction. Is this freedom? Or rather is it the destruction of freedom? Why are both children and adults so affected by these things? The reason is very simple. If we cannot control ourselves, how can we teach our children not to play video games and instead focus on learning at school? If you have a choice between a fascinating novel and a sutra book, for many people, even though they like chanting, will still choose to read the novel. Why? Because we like easy things, like eating instant

noodles or hot dogs, which are faster and more convenient. When the iPhone 12 comes out on the market, iPhone 13, 14,15, then 16, 17 will follow. The producers who make them just trick us into making them richer. So, the production of new iPhones keeps continuing. The fact is, we will find a way to have money to buy it, use it only for a short time, then look for a newer iPhone or iPad, to satisfy our curiosity, but nothing other than that.

Usually we are very greedy and egoistic. We only want to be rich ourselves. When other people get rich we are jealous of them. Why is that so? It is the matter of individualism. We want to prove to everyone that it is myself that is worth mentioning, and your presence here is nothing. This is only for the purpose of satisfying selfishness and personal ambition, trying to prove that one is always right and others are wrong. I'm the only one who is educated. Others who do not have education, how can they be better than me? I am the master, and the other is just a servant, a job applicant. I am grateful to him and even his parents. Why should I be humble to myself and apologize to such people? I will not do that because my ego must be bigger than those of those illiterate people.

But what is "I" or "Ego"? Once the Buddha taught Ananda:

"Please clap your hands together." Ananda did so. Then the Buddha asked:

"Did you hear anything?"

"Dear Lord Buddha. The sound of clapping", Ananda answered to Buddha.

"But where did that clapping come from?"

"Most Honored One! It comes when two hands touch each other", Ananda replied.

"So before and after the clapping of two hands, where is that sound?"

"Honored One, it is not from nowhere, but because of the two hands touching each other", Ananda replied.

According to the above story, there is no such thing as a subject, nor a self. Everything is due to causes and conditions. So, if the two hands come together, they will make a clapping sound. And if the conditions are not there, then there will also be no clapping

sound. It does not exist, does not disappear, does not go, does not come. If conditions are met, then it will appear; if not, it will not. It's as simple as that.

The next story is about the ego's procession, meaning things that belong to us or what are ours. For example, we say: "This is my house, my wife, my son, my daughter, and my property". To prove that it is not mine and it does not belong to me, Buddha told Anan the following story:

The Buddha told Ananda:

"Please take that bundle of wood and burn it".

Ananda obeyed and after burning the wood, the Buddha asked Ananda: "Where is that bundle of firewood now?"

"Honored One, it has burned to ashes", Ananda replied.

Buddha then taught Ananda: "As you can see, previously the wood was ours, it had a form. But now after it was burned it is no longer ours. Likewise, everything that you think belongs to you, it is yours; but in reality, it is not. You should know that everything in this world is subject to change by impermanence, suffering, emptiness and non-self. Nothing is independent and nothing is sovereign. Just like everything we say that is mine. There is nothing independent and no ownership".

What do we learn from these two stories which were taught by Buddha? We learn that before we have studied the Dharma, we don't know the true meaning of life. We think it is all mine. But in the end, nothing is mine. We only borrow some air from heaven and Earth to breathe; we borrow vegetables and beans to feed ourselves; we borrow water to drink; we borrow land to build a house for us to have a place to live, for a period of maybe 3 years, 5 years or 10 years, but what is borrowed must be returned in the end. Air goes back to the air, the water and food we have borrowed for decades also go back to nature. When our bodies are dead they are buried deep in the soil and become fertilizer to grow plants and trees. And so, the cycle of borrowing keeps repeating from one life to another, called reincarnation. We come and go, sometimes as husband, father, wife, son, or daughter. In the Bodhisattva Precepts Sutra, the Buddha taught that "all men are my father and all women are my mother". As we live in this world we should see that everyone is our relative and that we come here just to borrow a little bit of each for a

certain length of time. One day we have to leave and everything must be returned to heaven and Earth. Hence, war, hatred, and competition for fame will not take place every day like on the battlefields because people deeply understand the law of cause and effect.

If we want true peace in this world, each of us must love this Earth more and more. We must protect the Earth so that our future children will have enough food to eat and air to breathe. We must respect the environment by trying to become more vegetarian, in order to minimize the killing of other beings, who in principle have the same right to live as we do on this planet. Humans have education, morals, and respect for each other, unlike animals that have to eat each other to survive. We must respect ourselves and see others as ourselves; their suffering is also our suffering. Only then can this world be peaceful and happy.

To conclude my speech, I would like to tell two more stories. One of Tang Tu and one of Nagajuna:

Tang Tu said: "People do something good, although good deeds have not yet come; but the evil, bad deeds are far away. In contrast, people who do evil, even though the bad results have not yet returned, but for sure, evil, the bad deeds are already very close". If we think carefully about this teaching of Tang Tu, we will try to stop evil deeds and do good deeds. We will make our lives more meaningful on this planet.

And Nagarjuna has taught in the Great Wisdom Treatise: "Let us not wait for someone to wrap the entire globe with silk so that we can walk on both feet for comfort, but each of us should wrap our own with silk to walk smoothly on this Earth." This is the art of living.

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