

Nibbāna is Close at Hand!

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 2 min read

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As you may know, when the Buddha became enlightened he first thought that there was no point in trying to teach others how to follow in his footsteps. He felt that the enlightened understanding he had achieved was so subtle, so hard to see, that nobody would be able to understand him and teaching would only be frustrating. It was the Dhamma teacher Rob Burbea (now sadly deceased) who pointed out the irony – the Buddha's first thought as an enlightened being was to avoid getting frustrated!

This irony challenges simplistic notions of transcendence. The Buddha's wisdom protects him from suffering because he knows better than to identify with his body or mind. But this does not make him careless of what happens to his body, indifferent to the contents of his mind. Carelessness and indifference don't appear to be options for an enlightened being. Transcendence only manifests in some form of goodwill – friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy or equanimity.

The latter quality, equanimity, comes to our rescue when life disappoints or frustrates us. The Buddha only undertook the hard work of teaching after being persuaded that there were some who would understand and follow in his footsteps. Disappointment at those who rejected his teaching could then be offset by knowing the immense value of his work overall. And so the Buddha could remain equanimous when people disputed, dismissed or scorned his teaching.

The joy of seeing that some people were able to accept, work with, and at times even to understand his teaching would also have been an enormous support to the Buddha's mission. This is a form of *mudita*: appreciating the potential for liberation as he sees it manifesting, taking shape, affecting change, in another being.

Going back to his earlier reluctance to tire himself out by attempting the seemingly hopeless task of teaching: The incident reminds us of the humanity of the Buddha. He never claimed to be anything other than a normal human being and as we see here, took care to minimize distress for himself even after enlightenment. As an old man, close to death, the Buddha describes his body as wracked in pain from morning to night. He says this in response to Ananda's request that he prolong his life for the sake of all those he could help. This story too shows us that the Buddha was not superhuman and was deeply cognizant of his aging body and physical limitations. He was not operating from a lofty blissful plane outside of his feeble and painful body.

These incidents from the life of the Buddha remind us not expect that liberation will deliver us to a state

of bliss where we're oblivious to the problems of the world. Instead we grow ever more sensitive, feel our connection with others more keenly.

It also reminds us not to imagine Nibanna as separate to ordinary daily life. Nibanna is close at hand! Perhaps we could imagine it as a knowing which is in intimate contact with humanity, accompanying us through decisions on how to live and what livelihood to follow and when to relinquish our hold on life.

Ordinary life, in other words. Known for what it is.

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