

The Absurd and the Sublime: A Mid-summer Contemplation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

In the end there is an absurdity to it all. By absurdity, I am suggesting a meaninglessness with a twinge of the ridiculous. That life, consciousness and all we have experienced, have understood and come to love should come to end, makes for uselessness. Life as a pastime. To say, 'Well at least I enjoyed most of it. And I achieved this and that.' is to hide the absurdity beneath a pathetic self-indulgence and self-importance. To say, 'My life is dedicated to the happiness of others.' knowing their lives also lack the same meaning, is a sorry attempt to make our lives meaningful. Because of this all human endeavours: science, politics, heroism, philanthropy and so on are all useless. And art too! What point to try to express anything when everything in itself has no intrinsic meaning? A piece of art is glued to its time and place, of interest to art lovers and art historians, but in the long run is veneer. It treats with beauty and subjects personal, social and even cosmic, but rarely treats with the real problem. The sheer absurdity of creating anything about something that is inherently meaningless. Yet paradoxically this is the game we must play. A game is a useless pastime. It need not be unwholesome in itself, but it is mere entertainment, save for the professionals, the fanatics and the financial managers who give to sport the meaning of their lives. How absurd is that! When the Buddha-to-be realised at the end of youth what he was heading for, he suffered an existential crisis. It wasn't that he wanted to leave his family and all he treasured. It was that he had no choice. Capturing the full meaning of the four Devadhuta – Messengers from the Gods (Ultimate Truth) – the sick, the ageing, the dead - he realised that this was his destiny as a human being. The fact that he believed this would continue rebirth after rebirth simply added to the horror. The fourth was an ascetic sitting under a tree. It was this gave him an inkling of hope. It is the horror of meaninglessness that drives us to seek comfort in the pleasures and joys of life and causes us to fight off and flee from anything that turns us towards these dour Messengers. By the time the Buddha sat beneath the Bodhi tree and made the Great Determination not to move until he had explored this meaninglessness or die, he had the invincible courage of someone who knows he has nothing to lose. If life was just a pastime after all, then all there was left was to enjoy it as best one can. Such was and is the position of annihilistic materialists. If it did turn out to have meaning after all, then that would be the end of the despair of absurdity. His realisation was an actual experience. He called it Nibbana. Although this word has been given various meanings, they revolve around non-attachment and liberation. Non-attachment was his new relationship to the world. Nothing mattered. Liberation was how he experienced this. 'Something' was set free. That something was intuitive awareness, Satipanya. Upon this realisation, everything mattered. For he realised that that the purpose of life was to bring this Satipanya to its own realisation. It was a rite of passage. A passage from ignorance and all the suffering towards Buddha realisation. Questions as to why this should happen in the

first place are deemed irrelevant. This is the way it is and this is the way we must go. And again all that seemed absurd, now take on profound meaning. Our lives - personal relationships, work, even pastimes - take on the same meaning, journeying towards the same sublime destiny. And art takes on the task of attempting to communicate the inexpressible. It will never succeed, but try it must. Seeing the delusive state of other people and knowing their potential, the Buddha had no choice but to teach. There he found meaning in his existence as a human being. And there he found the flowering of his personal joy into the joy of helping others make their way to their own sublime destiny.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.