

2 - The Buddha's Life as a Series of Victories

Introduction

Although we are accustomed to using the title “Buddha” (which means the awakened one) he is also commonly known by other titles, one of which is “the victor” (the *Jina*). These notes explore the Buddha’s victories.

The Buddha’s breakthrough at the time of his Enlightenment was not the only time he had a spiritual breakthrough. Far from being his only victory it was the culmination of a series of victories. This is only to be expected because spiritual life is like that. We do not develop the fullness of wisdom and compassion all at once. Nor do we develop the energy and heroism necessary to overcome confusion and bad habits all at once. We do not develop any spiritual quality all at once. As the Buddha says in the Dhammapada:

A pot becomes full by the constant falling of drops of water, so, little by little, does a person fill themselves with good.

Without the victories prior to his Enlightenment, it would hardly have been possible for the Buddha to attain Enlightenment.

Going forth into homelessness

His first victory that we know of was when he went forth into homelessness. [This was described briefly in last week’s notes.] There are several accounts of what happened on that occasion, some of them very colourful and romantic. But the oldest account is very simple. Reminiscing in his old age, the Buddha simply said to his disciples:

Then I, monks, after a time, being young, my hair coalblack, possessed of radiant youth, in the prime of my life although my unwilling parents wept and wailed having cut off my hair and beard, having put on yellow robes, went forth from home into homelessness”.

[Ariyapariyesana Sutta, trans. I.B. Horner].

We may not be accustomed to considering his going forth into homelessness as a victory, but that is what it was. Suppose we were the son or daughter of wealthy parents, with high social position. Suppose we were young, healthy, good looking and happily married, perhaps with a child. Would it be easy to give it all up for the sake of something we had yet to experience?

Victory over complacency and ambition

Having gone forth from home into homelessness, Siddhartha (the Buddha-to-be) approached two famous spiritual teachers. These teachers, who seem to have been good and noble men, taught Siddhartha everything they knew. They taught him what they believed to be the highest truth. Siddhartha was a very good pupil and learned what they had to teach. Whatever they taught him he experienced for himself, becoming their equal. Realizing this, they offered to share with him the leadership of the communities they had founded. But Siddhartha refused and, leaving them, returned to his solitary wanderings.

Siddhartha knew there was still something higher which he had not yet realized. He knew he was not yet fully Enlightened, despite what his teachers were telling him. In other words, he did not settle down with a limited spiritual experience; even though by ordinary standards it was quite a high experience. It was a victory over complacency.

Moreover, his teachers had offered to share with him the leadership of their communities. But Siddhartha refused. His decision was based on a concern with truth, with Enlightenment, not with leadership and prestige. He therefore overcame worldly ambition.

Fears

Continuing his quest alone, Siddhartha sometimes stayed in haunted places, believed to be inhabited by ghosts. These were places in which feelings of fear and terror were likely to arise. And those feelings of fear and terror

did arise in his mind. If the fear arose while he was walking to and fro, he continued walking to and fro until he had overcome it. He did not run away; he did not try to escape from those feelings. Similarly, if they arose while he was sitting still, or while he was lying down, then that is where he faced and overcame it. In this way he was victorious over fear.

In medieval India it was common for yogis to deliberately court fears by visiting cremation grounds, particularly on new moon nights when there was virtually no light. This situation would naturally bring up their fears, and thereby provide an opportunity for the yogis to confront them, just as Siddhartha did. Even for ordinary people it can sometimes be helpful to deliberately engage with fears head-on. But sometimes it's more constructive to just focus on building up emotional positivity and a sense of well being so that we are better placed to face a fear later down the track. To change the simile, if we want to take up marathon running it's not necessarily wise to attempt a full marathon on the first day of training.

It's also important to distinguish between instinctual fears that are hard-wired in us, and unhelpful fears that can be dissolved through wisdom.

Going it alone

Siddhartha embarked upon a course of extreme self-mortification. He very nearly died doing it. But there were compensations. He became famous, and had attracted five close disciples.

But Siddhartha did not attain Enlightenment in this way, and had the courage to give up self-mortification, even though he had been practising it for years. To the shock of his disciples he started taking solid food again. The five disciples immediately left him, deeply disappointed that he was not the man they thought. They believed he had returned to a life of luxury.

In giving up self-mortification Siddhartha had overcome the very human tendency to refuse to admit one has made a mistake, and that one needs to retrace one's steps.

If we have invested a great deal of energy, time or money into something we are usually very reluctant to admit it has been wasted. But Siddhartha did this, even though it meant losing his disciples and being on his own again. It would have been easy, in comparison, to continue with his self-mortification.

Complete victory

Several years later, just prior to his Enlightenment, Siddhartha came to a pleasant place called Uruvela. While he sat there under a shady tree, with a river flowing nearby, he recollected an early childhood mystical experience that had come spontaneously during the ploughing ceremony. It had emerged without any special effort. He reflected that it may be better to adopt a similarly relaxed approach in his present situation and allow experiences to spontaneously come forth. He decided not to try to force things. Using this approach his experiences deepened, and he had a series of profound experiences, culminating in his Enlightenment.

He attained a state which is above and beyond conditioned existence (*samsara*). It is not that after attaining Enlightenment the Buddha could not be reborn in the human world if he wanted to be. But he would not be reborn there out of compulsion, as a result of previous karma. He would be reborn, if he was reborn at all, out of compassion in order to continue to help unenlightened human beings.

In artistic depictions of the Buddha's Enlightenment the Buddha is sitting on a heap of grass beneath the spreading branches of the tree. He is surrounded on all sides by thousands of fearsome figures, all horribly misshapen and deformed. Some of them are wielding enormous clubs, some are spitting fire, some are hurling great rocks, some are discharging arrows.

But the Buddha is not taking any notice. He is meditating with his eyes closed or half-closed, completely surrounded by an aura of golden light. As soon as the various missiles touch this aura they turn into flowers and fall at the Buddha's feet, as though in unintentional worship. The Buddha carries on meditating. He was

victorious by being himself; by letting his own excellent qualities emerge.

Enlightenment as complete victory over *Mara*

The Buddha's Enlightenment is sometimes described as a victory over *Mara*. *Mara* is generally spoken of as the negative tendencies (*kilesa*) within our own mind. But there are different dimensions to this, and tradition sometimes talks of there being four *Mara*, described below. Having read about the four *Mara* we can consider in what sense the Buddha's Enlightenment was a victory over each of them.

1. *Mara* as death (*maccumara*)

Mara in this sense simply means death or destruction. Death is usually very unwelcome. Sometimes people are really surprised when it comes, even though they should have known it was coming all along. Because death is so unwelcome, people tend to regard it as an evil. But in itself death is neither good nor evil: it is just a fact of existence that has to be recognized.

Although the Buddha's body passed away at death, he had overcome death in the sense of having gained Enlightenment and therefore broken through to a transcendental state outside time. Sometimes Enlightenment is referred to as the "deathless state" (*amatapada*).

2. *Mara* as the inherent qualities of things (*khandhamara*)

The name of this *Mara* comes from the Pali word *khandha* [*Skandha* in Sanskrit] which crops up frequently in Buddhist texts, including the Heart Sutra.

The important point is that the five *khandha* collectively make up the whole of the physical and mental world.

So this *Mara* represents the inherent qualities of the world. This includes their impermanent nature (as covered by the first *Mara*) and also their unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and insubstantiality (*anatta*).

According to Buddhism all things are unsatisfactory in the sense that:

- in life a certain amount of pain and discomfort is inevitable; and
- in comparison with the bliss of Enlightenment (*nirvana*), all other pleasures are insignificant.

And all things are said to be insubstantial in the sense that: nothing in our experience:

- is outside the process of change, or
- stands apart from the rest of life.

Just as the Buddha transcended impermanence by gaining Enlightenment he transcended unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality. For instance a well known early Buddhist scripture (the *Dhammapada*) says "Enlightenment (*Nirvana*) is the supreme bliss".

3. *Mara* as "unskilful" states of mind (*kielsamara*)

Kilesa comes from a root meaning "to adhere" or "to stick". Broadly speaking in Buddhism it refers to "unskilful" mental states. The five principal *kilesa* are craving, hatred, ignorance, conceit, and distraction. However there are many ways of classifying unskilful states of mind, not just five categories - just as there are any number of ways of describing the different shades of a rainbow.

4. *Mara* as a figure in Buddhist mythology (*Devaputtamara*)

In Buddhism *Devaputtamara* is a mischievous figure who lives in one of the lower heaven realms. Some regard him as mythological although others may consider him an actually existing spirit that has a mischievous nature.

He is keen to stop us experiencing more sublime states of consciousness, of the sort that can emerge in meditation, and from which we can gain Enlightenment. When we feel distractions to our meditation practice

we can figuratively speaking attribute them to *Devaputtamara*.

Acknowledgement

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