

To The Cemetery and Back

by

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To the Cemetery and Back

In this city, as in all, the dead are granted a little space. Our business and pleasure take us past the old iron gates a hundred times on the way to seemingly more immediate destinations. But on this odd morning when time hangs lightly and pure chance finds us here gazing over these hills of stone and ivy, let us actually turn our steps into the cemetery and along its crooked paths. The day is fine (or certainly we'd never venture here), the flowers glisten with last evening's rain, and a fair fragrance rises with the first breeze. Just inside the gates, someone stands at an easel and paints flowers. Farther off, a caretaker trims a hedge. The signs are propitious — we shall have privacy but not solitude, and the morning's grace restrains the onslaught of gloom. We may even, carefully, allow ourselves to think thoughts appropriate to the place.

On these finely tended hillsides the music of birds mingles strangely with the numberless testimonies of death. The earth is half-paved with the stone remembrances and the middle air is full of obelisks and angels. Names and dates surround us, some sharp and raw, some worn nearly to oblivion, all crowding upon us with the particulars of spent lives — of this family, of this age, with these virtues, with this hope of heaven. What can this mean to us, especially if we have no family here? The wind flings a rag of shade across the bright grass: We too shall die. The birds sing on, the bees hum in the violets, and the thought is not so terrible. Not so terrible, we remind ourselves, if the fever of life ends here, swathed in honeysuckles and southern airs.

We stroll on, reading the chronicles of grief: beloved wife, infant aged three days, daughter, son, darling children. Generations are drawn from the world by the chain of mortality. Do these stones mark an ending or only a continuance? The deceased

fare on according to their deeds while we living stay to grieve. Where is there an end? These picturesque stones only mark the limit of our knowledge. Dress them how you will, O gardener, they bespeak our helplessness.

The rumble of the city dwindles and fails in these granite acres until a somber stillness attends our steps. Despite our resolutions and the sparkling sun, we are troubled and would turn back to the gates, but unaccountably we are lost and the hills roll on with their bare legends. Nothing to do but keep walking. assuredly we still live, and while we live we can try our philosophies against enormous mortality around us. Look now, a butterfly flails at the air in what we hope is joy. Beneath that tomb lives a chipmunk — see him frisk about and vanish down his hole. We are briefly cheered and then plunged in doubt, for why should we lament the extinction of life and hail its repetition? We grow weary of sentiments careening back and forth and wish for equilibrium within the volatile universe. Samsara, we are told, is the terrible round of birth and death, but this disquiet, this resolution of doubt — is it not samsara as well?

Hardly can we set a foot down for fear of treading wrongly, so crowded is this cemetery. We walk narrowly, wobbling on over the beautiful, terrible hills. Here where the path straightens for a moment let us pause and experiment by closing our eyes. At once the world collapses into red darkness and the pressure of the wind and sun. Now we shall take a step, hesitantly, feeling the gravel underfoot, imagining boundaries and perils. We move further. Somewhere the ground drops off, but where? Anxiety throws its coils around us, and we are walking through our minds — with danger unseen but guessed on every side. Open eyes! The world blurs back to us, green and lovely, composing itself slowly and almost mockingly. Are we quite sure what is real? Are we quite sure we understand death?

Here's an iron bench in the shade we can rest and consider our position. Eyes closed or open, it's mind that assembles our world. Mind stirs up fear, mind accommodates grief, mind moves thoughts and limbs according to its nature. What is this nature? To judge from our confusion and instability, it is restlessness. We are, it would seem, not firm in space or conviction, not fully in control of anything. If we watch closely, here in the semi-silence, we may discern the flutter, the whirl, the unease of this shifting mind. It knows not itself, it knows not the world, it only wants and hates by turns. The odor of flowers heaves it momentarily to paradise. The chiseled history of dead children hurls it down to despair. A crow on a stone angel's head call forth a smile. A fresh name on an old monument chills us. Delight pulls us one way, grief another. Neither can bear us across doubt or fear.

The mind runs endlessly in moments that flare and fizzle. There is a being-born and a dying with every one of them — a birth and death of every thought and every breath happening right here while we worriedly scan the horizon for a supposed Great Death. Consider this dying that goes on all the time — fits of memory and feeling, spasms of cells, torrents of desire and aversion, all tumbling in birth and death, birth and death — the weary reiteration of samsara. Each instant ends but gives no rest because it ignites its successor; and in this the physical death memorialized around us is no different — the troubled flame of being is passed on and on. What we fear out there, among the graven sorrows of the cemetery, is

burning in here, in the mind, right now. Death has been our neighbor long before we came to ponder headstones. The Buddha understood this. We as yet do not, and tremble in the presence of innocent stone — wide-eyed toward the symbol, blind to the blazing fact.

Sitting here alone, while the shade splashes silently around us, we hold all the worlds in our lap and can study them as the Buddha taught us, not with hunger, but with the clean dispassion that lays bare truth and liberates the beholder. The Buddha called craving the source of suffering, and indeed, as we bend our attention closer, what do we find but craving nesting even in the fractured moment? Every little death, every wretch of disappointment, is preceded by a birth, an upsurge of craving founded on ignorance. Being blind to the true nature of things, we continually give rise to passion that veers this way and that, never satisfied, forging link by link in the moment the chain binds us over the years. Events in themselves are only events; the deluded mind invests them with horrors and delights and ties the mortal chain around itself.

This cemetery with its solid stones is only a mirror, into which the Buddha bids us look to find the funeral procession within ourselves. Say we look, then. Say we are able to observe the deplorable state of our mind. What can we do about it? If birth and death are whirling on so mechanically and inexorably all efforts would appear futile. Indeed, though we begin to notice the cascading instability of body and mind, our mere intellectual recognition does nothing to free us. Birth — that is, the uprising of craving — will of necessity be followed by death — that is, the pang of impermanence and loss. But craving itself is not an inevitable phenomenon; it springs up only in the soil of ignorance, and when ignorance is dispelled craving and its resultant miseries cease to exist. The whole teaching of the Buddha drives to this end. We are urged to strive diligently to see things as they are, to resist craving, to observe it unsparingly, to uproot it altogether. All the defilements and afflictions of mind exist, as it were, with our permission. Not knowing we have the power to end them, we go on muttering, "Yes, go ahead, there's no help for it." But when we realize we do have the power to alter the painful course of life our excuses will no longer suffice. We must look closely, fix on a straight line, and sail by the three points of morality, concentration, and wisdom.

Spurred by these thoughts, we rise from the iron bench (how quickly it has become uncomfortable!) and continue walking through the endless field of graves. This business of being alive once seemed simple — either you were or you weren't — but even a brief contemplation reveals surprising complexities. It appears we have long considered death as a single grim monolith that will one day thump us on the head, while in reality death is subtle, manifold, and coexistent with the mind that fears it. Our steps drag slowly over the gravel, and around us the cemetery seems more empty than ever. There is nobody to be seen, even the birds have vanished, and our solitude is complete. The question must arise now; if we have misunderstood death, have we not misunderstood its corollary, life, as well? If what we have been calling death is not singular and unique but threaded throughout the living process, can we even draw a clear and meaningful distinction between the two? Here we must turn to the Buddha, who did not speak of "life" and "death" as independent realities but rather pointed out that experience is a continual becoming, a process of ceaseless

change, a flux of arising and perishing — which is to say samsara, the great wheel of cause and effect, on whose flashing rim no beginning and no end can be found.

As we examine mind and body we feel increasingly the inadequacy of conventional words such as "birth," and "death." We have taken definitions for granted and now find them useless when we need them. Experience upsets imagination. We are forced to ask ourselves, "Whatever these words mean, who is it that is born, who is it that lives, who is it that dies?" Having so grossly misunderstood events we reach desperately for the one who undergoes events, but can we even find such a one? The Buddha many times patiently explained that human beings are temporary compounds of five aggregates: form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. These aggregates are constantly changing, but so swiftly that they appear to retain a distinctive identity — hence the conventional notions of "you" and "I." But such words and ideas are only conveniences which do not accord with ultimate reality. Life and death are only the continual becoming of the five aggregates, within which there can be found no indwelling core, no identity or permanent "self." Well, we may ask, does such-and-such a person live or not? Of course we may say that he or she or they or I live — it is true enough on a mundane level. We are all, in a sense, lost beings wandering through cycles of existence. But we must clearly understand that ultimately there are only the five aggregates spinning through birth-and-death, afflicted with pain and pleasure, weighted with ignorance and goaded by desire and fear. The question "Who?" becomes meaningless as we study mind and body. Here we find instability, misery, and doubt burning in rightful chain reaction. Rather than searching futilely for an owner of the fire, hadn't we better put it out?

The Buddha did not proclaim the Dhamma in order to satisfy our curiosity about the origin or end of the universe, or to reveal startling secrets, or to stimulate worship. His purpose was to teach us to put an end to suffering — the same suffering we feel now as we contemplate these symbols and evidences of death. By investigating with dispassionate minds we come to see things as they really are, seeing them we turn away from the destructive habit of craving, turning away we are by degrees liberated from all suffering. We may be familiar with this idea and may even give it our intellectual assent, but until we make it work in our daily lives we must remain in doubt and under the sway of continual death. We shall be buried soon enough — shall we stay in the tomb till then? The light of insight can dispel the charnel darkness and free the suffering mind even in this present life. If the present is well attended to, the future will take care of itself.

We look up through sunlight and find that our steps have gone full circle: just beyond a bank of ivy and flowers stand the gaunt gates of this cemetery. The painter has gone; the caretaker is nowhere to be seen; nobody accompanies us on this quiet journey. We pause by a final marker, an old one, whose legend has been eaten by time. It lays flat, abject to the sky, speaking no longer any name of man but uttering the truth of impermanence. Its individuality has been effaced — it is scarcely more regular than random nature — but still it declares in the sounding-box of thought the ineluctable fate of all compounded things. It will bear our names as easily as any others, and indeed already does so — let the wise man read his own! The death of the body is real, as are the small convulsions of flesh and thought in the present

moment. Let us drive to the end of all of these. No evasion shall avail us, no distraction blur the sight — this marker is our own. It shall not yield to the blows of hope or fear, but only to the long, cool gaze of wisdom.

We issue from the iron gates into the churning city once again, and the granite hills slip into distance and memory. Walking familiar pavements we find, strangely, that we carry still a mood or vision before which all objects fall into atoms and aspects of the Buddha's revelation. The city shows as many symbols as the graveyard. Around us life burns as profligately as gunpowder — in getting and spending, gaining and losing, craving and hating. We see buildings, avenues, hurrying people, but if we are careful we also see that we are really still walking among monuments in the mind. We make our fate right here. The cemetery and the city are one. Shall we continue to build upon our little insight? It's not so hard: the body moves, feelings spring up, mind comprehends, mental objects succeed one another — all these may be observed. In city or cemetery the process is the same — let us simply keep looking, noting with cool attention the flow of the phenomena. The defilements of mind cannot stand the scrutiny; they must perforce dissolve. Who shall oppress us then? Life, till now one long fatality, may unfold in understanding. When birth and death are understood they are overcome, and with them all manner of suffering.

Whoever realizes a little, should he not strive to realize more? Whoever would be free, should he not lay hands on his chains? Whoever would act rightly, should he not found his actions on knowledge? The Buddha has declared the nature of suffering, its origin, its end, and the means to its end. His words hang in the air — pregnant, epic, awesome — until we begin to move by their guidance. Then they become living truth. Then the dark and mortal way we tread brightens with direct experience. Final emancipation may be far or near. What matters is the going.

Dark Ages, Golden Ages

Without quite intending it, we find ourselves over the years burdened by more and more responsibilities, difficulties, and doubts. It seems practically a consequence of growing older. Time passes like a river — so smooth to our puzzled eyes — but leaves, as if by magic, these boulders on our backs. All of us but the very young sense this weight and wonder why, since we asked for none of it, it settles on us and will not be shirked. Troubles old and new bear on us despite all the care we take to persevere ourselves and to build our castles against a turbulent world. We will all, of course, acknowledge the possibility of catastrophes which could plunge us into genuine grief at any moment, but why now, as we live in relative comfort and health, should we feel this weight on the heart, this strain of apprehension?

Little annoyances and thorns of worry are just part of life, we tell ourselves as we make our way between the twin imponderables of birth and death. If we are brave, determined, and optimistic, that should be enough, should it not? Yet even in our joys there falls the shadow — the menace of great forces around us, the obscure sadness looking back at us from the mirror, the occasional sense of overwhelming futility and frailty. We look around, wondering who is to blame? If no culprit is forthcoming, we may turn with suspicion to the great, grim world at large and

wonder if its influence goes deeper than the indigestion occasioned by the evening news. Even if we are personally healthy and prosperous, perhaps malaise of the times has subtly infected us. If the age we live in is corrupt and decadent can we remain altogether uncontaminated? What sort of age is this, anyway?

Probably all but the most fanatical optimists have from time to time, while hearing of the latest crime or war or degradation of human decency, considered the proposition that the world has gone screaming mad. The iniquity of mankind these days seems to surpass the merely incidental and to approach willful dementia. Moral values retreat before the onslaught of hysterical cruelty and lust, and everywhere we see wicked fantasy enthroned — mankind and nations having lost faith in the god and the right. Science, once hailed as our deliverance, labors mightily and produces bombs and video games to pacify — in one way or another — the frenzied multitudes. But there is no peace. Drugs, alcohol, and insanity hang on the communal body like leeches, draining what life remains and imparting a fever of nihilism that burns fearfully bright with decadent delights. There is a murmur of woe but little resistance, for who can turn the trend of history? The honest man — never easy to find — fades from view as evildoers are first excused, then celebrated by the timid and the envious. Like a worn-out carousel, our society jangles, and wheezes toward collapse.

The instinct of most of us in times such as these is to keep our heads down and hang onto our pleasures and possessions and bear our pains as best we may. We wish to run no risks in a world with chance so badly skewed against us. The result is that we are trapped, closeted with our fears while the storm rages worse outside. Here in this tight space dread grows, and the possibilities for remedy are few. On television maniacally cheerful people contrive to sell us happiness. Buy! Enjoy! Experience! Out on the streets glowering zealots paste up posters urging struggle, war, confusion, and the death of their enemies — after which, presumably, mankind will enjoy bliss. Civilization appears to be spiralling down into awesome decadence, and the fall of Rome comes to the minds of those not altogether oblivious to history. It's an unpleasant thought, so we take shelter in our small delights or else in the blandishments of psychological and religious quacks who — for a fee to defray the costs of their own indulgences — will tell us anything we want to hear. Do we feel guilty? It's probably someone else's fault. Are we tempted by vice? Go ahead, fulfill yourselves! Will we have to give up anything to achieve happiness? Oh, never! Perish the thought! A golden age is dawning.

Most of us avoid the worst excesses of the age — not out of sturdy virtue so much as out of a trembling sense of self-preservation. But all of us, Buddhists included, feel the sickness in our surroundings and grow fearful, hiding where we can. In a dark age, who can blame our caution?

Yet the trouble with such caution is that it may mask mere cowardice or sloth. Let us examine the matter a little closer. Does this hobbling, failing century really qualify as a dark age? Without pressing evidence to the contrary, we are apt to regard our own woes as the worst ever endured by the race. (Self-aggrandizement comes in curious forms.) But if we read a bit of history we will be hard put to champion the depravity of our own age against the past. If we define dark age as a period when the light of

understanding is eclipsed and evils multiply, what age of history may not be called dark? The perfidy and wretchedness of our ancestors must give us pause and take the edge of our own complaints. Wars, plagues, persecutions, and crimes abound in every era. There's plenty of horror to go around, and the special poignancy of the present version is only that it's happening to us.

However dark the world may appear to us, we are not justified in retreating to the extremes of hedonism or nihilism. There is a task to be done, and that task is not — as many people believe — to readjust self, society, or world to fit our blind desires. Rather it is to train ourselves to the point where we know reality for what it is and free ourselves of the burdens of passion that now oppress us. This task faces all Buddhists, though we are reluctant to admit it and tend to excuse ourselves on the grounds that the times are so bad and responsibilities so weighty that we cannot — most regrettably — take on the additional project of earnest Dhamma practice. The woes of nations and the afflictions of persons are thereby perversely made reasons for not doing anything, and the way of Dhamma is implicitly called a burden. As if it were not suffering that first impelled the Buddha toward liberation. As if the Dhamma were not the means to that liberation.

Some of us may even rationalize to the extent of believing that since the times are too difficult for us to make a genuine effort toward emancipation, they are probably too difficult for everybody. The days of high attainment are gone, and with them any reason to exert ourselves beyond a modicum of morality and ritual observance. With war, crime, and madness round about, we have enough trouble just saving our skins. Better to keep our heads down and (over another glass of wine) lament cruel fate.

Yet to look honestly at ourselves and the Dhamma must bring us to another conclusion. One era may be better or worse than another — as the world goes — but old age, sickness, and death come to all. Anxiety, depression and grief come to all. If we cannot overcome them now, how should we ever face them in heaven or a golden age when we are swimming in bliss? What motivation would we have then? A dark age will pass in five years or five hundred, the age of dukkha never. This pervasive suffering, coarse or fine, settles like dust on us — swiftly or slowly with the winds of circumstance. We can't outwait it, yearning for a golden age which, if it ever came, could only enervate us and leave us none the wiser. Let it rain champagne, the heart will still thirst.

No time is worthier than now, for we have no other time. The past expires at our feet; the future is being wrought for our present action. We need not pretend that the world is good or evolving toward an age of light, or deny the dangers that beset us in this savage century, but we should rouse ourselves with the knowledge that the serenity and happiness preached by the Buddha remain as accessible now as ever, transcending and abolishing the jungle of the years. A thorn in the mind is the father of all griefs. The Buddha teaches us to pull it out.

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in reading, meditating, and Dhammáactivities. Reproduced from The Washington Buddhist.