

Dharmette: The Road Not Taken

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 13, 2010

On Monday evening here I gave a talk on intention and how meaningful it is, how important it is to spend time reflecting on what your deepest intention is, and to somehow find the ability, or the courage, to live from one's deepest intention – whether that's in the big scale of our life or it's in the moment, just this moment here.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there's a very strong tendency to be dichotomous, to point out that there's always, in every moment, a choice between two different possibilities. There are many possibilities, but two general categories or directions to go. We can do something that's helpful or healthy, or something that's unhelpful or unhealthy. And to be able to make that distinction is very important in his teachings.

If you don't have any sense of what's healthy, helpful, or health producing, you won't do it. And if you don't have some sense of what's unhealthy for you, then how would you know to avoid it? The words that he uses are 'skilful' and 'unskilful,' *kusala* and *akusala*. The idea of having some sense of intention that's informed by some understanding about what is skilful, unskilful, helpful, unhelpful, and what is most beneficial for us, what is most meaningful for us, what's most significant – and how in each moment that question can be asked. Every moment, do we meet the situation in a way that's healthy or helpful for us and others? Do we meet it with our goodness, our clarity? Do we meet it with compassion and kindness? Or do we meet it with obscurity, with resistance? Do we meet it with aversion? Do we meet it with judgements in a way that's not helpful for anyone? How do we meet every situation?

These are all introductory statements for a poem I want to read to you – a very famous part of the American canon that I came across again recently. I had to memorize it in fifth grade, and I haven't thought about it since. I didn't think about it then, either. But now I like it. For me it's very evocative. I'm sure most of you will recognise it. Maybe some of you had to memorise it.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

And that has made all the difference. So coming from out of Buddhism, and reading this poem through that frame, the woods in Buddhism are sometimes a symbol for the world of entanglement. How we get entangled in the world in all kinds of ways, in the jungle, in the binds. One of the words for attachment is a homonym – it's the

same pronunciation in Pali as the word for tree, and so it adds to this idea that the world of attachment, the world of trees or forests are something you want to become free of.

So we find ourselves in this world, this “yellow wood,” it’s the fall, right, probably New England where Robert Frost was. So yellow is the sign of death and trees, the leaves are dying. And so we come into this wood that’s dying, or the time of our life we realize that things are coming to an end. It’s very poignant to have an encounter with our mortality, and sense that things are coming to an end, that there are choices that are really important. And what we do? And so, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.” There’s always a choice, in the woods. Which way do we go? Do we go further into it? Do we get more entangled? Do we find the way out of it? To be free of it?

And here he says, “I’m sorry I could not travel both and be one traveller, long I stood and looking down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth.” So the one disappears into the undergrowth. The undergrowth in Buddhist symbolism is even more entanglements than the trees and the forest. So to be lost in the undergrowth means it’s so overgrown, you can’t even find a path any more. So here, one of them at least looks like it could disappear into the undergrowth. And as the poem goes along, that’s the one that’s most taken. That’s pretty evocative, huh? That’s the way people get lost in the undergrowth. “Then I took the other,” it says – the one that doesn’t go into the undergrowth.

I looked up this poem in Wikipedia and printed it out. There was a literary analysis of the poem that people have come up with – theories, I guess. One of them was that Robert Frost wrote this because he went walking regularly, and his companion could never decide which path to take, so it was in response to his friend that he wrote the poem. But another interpretation, a literary interpretation, is that it’s a champion of American individualism that the individual counts, and you can make your own choice; it’s up to you what path you take.

But that works somewhat well for Buddhism as well, because Buddhism also has a very strong individualistic streak because only you can walk the path. You can’t ask someone else to walk it for you. You can walk with someone. People can accompany you on the path, but you still have to walk the path yourself. And you have to make the choice for yourself. “Then took the other, just as fair and having, perhaps, the better claim because it was grassy and wanted wear.” So again, not many people go down the second path, a lot of people go down the path that goes to the undergrowth, but not so many people go to that other path.

And that’s often one of the reasons why some people find it hard to follow a path, any spiritual path – but certainly a path to liberation, because it often makes us so different from what’s popularly or socially expected of us – what’s normally seen as being the right thing to do and what our family wants.

I met with someone recently, a young person, for whom it was so clear the kind of person he was – basically a kind of a monk. And he was struggling with that side of himself, and what he thought of was his parents’ expectations of what he should do. And so, what does he follow? The path he was made for in a sense, or the path that his parents expect him to do? “Oh, I kept the first for another day!” I think it’s very powerful, the next sentence. “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.” So we make these choices, and one of the reasons it can be difficult to make choices is that the choice will make a difference. And who knows what path opens up, or how things unfold from there? You might never come back to the same thing, the same possibilities, the same choices again.

You never know if you made the right choice. Sometimes two choices, a variety of choices, come along, and you take one, and there’s not a sample group to compare your choice with. It’s unique to you. So who knows? You didn’t take that job that you should have taken. “Yeah I should’ve taken that job.” But who knows if you’d have taken that job? Maybe you’d have been hit by a truck, standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Who knows? Who knows anything?

So our choices are consequential. Do we ever come back? And so some people get frozen at that juncture. “I can’t make a choice. How do I know? I’ll lose something. I don’t want to lose something, but I can’t go forward.” So the poignancy of the choices we make – in even the small things – the poignancy of meeting a friend, appreciating a friend, or not. What do we do? “I shall be telling this with a sigh.” I think it’s very interesting that he’s predicting the future here. “I shall be telling this with a sigh, Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference.”

As some of you know, I'm fond of the analogy of two parallel lines that go on forever and never touch and never depart, always the same distance. But if you nudge one of them ever so slightly to the side, then for a long time, you don't see them any different from the departing lines at all, but over enough time they get further and further away. And with enough time, there can be an immense distance between the two lines.

A very small choice and intention and change of course today might not seem to make a big difference tomorrow or next week, but over months and years, it can make a huge difference in your life. It makes all the difference. And Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis that the choices you make, they make a difference. And that we can have a role in the choices we make. We have a role in setting the course and direction of where our life is going.

It doesn't mean that you're in charge or in control of where it goes. You're not in charge of where the path opens up, or what comes to you, or what arises because of it. But no matter what arises, there's always a choice. How do I meet this? How am I present for this? If something terrible happens, how do I meet that? If something beautiful happens, how do I meet that? That's really your choice.

Someone in an interview brought up the concept today of nature and nurture. When the person said it, I realized that it works very well for the tension that exists in Buddhism between the path of cultivation and the path of letting go. Sometimes there's this nature, or this thing that can bubble up within us that was not our doing, and that's an important part of the path. But then there's also the important part of our doing, the efforts that we make. So both exist together. Nature and nurture exist together.

So our job, the degree to which we can have something to do, is to set the course and decide how we meet the moment. And then what arises because of that, that's maybe the nurture part? And hopefully, we get nurtured by all this. I hope your path nurtures you, supports you and brings you a strong sense of well-being, a sense of being at home in your own heart.

May your heart be at home. So thank you.