

Question 31:

About a year ago I experienced what seems to be described as an awakening, and initially spent a lot of time contemplating what this was and why had it happened to me, an extremely agnostic Roman Catholic who turned his back on religion a long time ago. I have my whole life experienced dukkha at a very deep level, not quite at a suicidal level, but at a level that made life very unpleasant for more time than was pleasant and at times seemed quite unbearable.

In the years leading up to this awakening I had gone through a very messy divorce, lost my house, kids, dog, business, and everything I owned, eventually being forced into bankruptcy. I went from a nice home to living in a trailer. I had a very deep underlying sense of not wanting to ever experience another lifetime like this one no matter what. The awakening came during a funeral of a dear friend and future brother-in-law. Since the awakening I have been filled with an overwhelming desire to do as much good in this world as I can. I feel very strongly drawn to the practice of bodhicitta. But here is a conflict: I still feel that I don't ever want to return to another life of suffering, but also feel that the suffering I experienced was necessary to have awakened me. A bodhisattva as you know, is committed to returning life after life to help others. How can I possibly commit to doing this when I also don't want to return to another life of dukkha? *From Mike*

Answer:

With spiritual growth comes a stronger feeling of compassion and inter-connectedness with other beings. Understanding of and inter-connectedness with other beings helps you understand your own self (albeit you are constantly changing), which in turn encourages reaching out to others with compassion and kindness. Having experienced prolonged and intense dukkha in this life, that compassion and inter-connectedness becomes a powerful motivation to help others avoid or escape similar dukkha. Even the earnest thoughts of helping others bring good results to us, and increase good habits of wholesome thoughts. Anguttara Nikaya I, 10.

But on the other hand, the experience of such profound dukkha also results in fear or avoidance of having to experience it again. That fear or desire to avoid future suffering is natural, and leads us to make efforts to prevent further suffering to the extent that we reasonably can. But the fear and desire to avoid suffering also can be sublimated by understanding. That is, understanding and deep conviction that our own karmas (actions) are what cause our negative experiences. Knowing that our karmas from past lives must come to fruition as suffering before we can attain enlightenment, we develop courage to experience them and let them pass. By regular meditation, we develop the ability to better cope with various types of suffering. And, by engaging in good thoughts, words and deeds we do not make additional negative karmas, so we develop confidence that we will not have to suffer any bad results of our current karmas. Then the desire to avoid future lives on the Earth becomes weakened; we develop equanimity (upekkha).

The Bodhisattva vow in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, "May I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings," is a noble desire for enlightenment without selfishness, and instead with universal compassion. In Theravada Buddhism, the ultimate goal is for full enlightenment, liberation from samsara and suffering, that is, becoming an Arahant. But that goal is to be maintained along with strong compassionate motivation to help others, which avoids selfishness. An intention of returning to Earth to help others, along with our quest for

enlightenment, develops greater compassion and reduces our desire for pleasure and rest in a devaloka or brahmaloka (heaven-world). However, the ultimate Mahayana or Vajrayana vow of a Bodhisatva to be the last to attain Buddhahood after helping all other sentient beings to attain Buddhahood is not a part of Theravada Buddhist practice.

One need not make any commitment to return to Earth or not to return to Earth, in Theravada Buddhism. With development of equanimity (upekkha) and confidence, from our striving in practice of Dharma, that we are attaining wisdom and peace, desire for any certain type of future birth gradually diminishes. With development of compassion, our desire to help other beings in whatever way we can increases. Therefore, we strive to use our skills, gifts and resources to the best of our ability to help others, however and wherever we travel along the path to enlightenment.