

The Source of Life is Calling

『生命故鄉的呼喚』

Follow your Heart to where your Home is

Let Your Heart Be *Alive*

The Profound Beauty in the Garden of Life

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Chapter Ten

The Gracefulness and Embarrassments of Life

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There is an idiom in Chinese – “Mischief happens very often in life: 8 to 9 times out of 10”. This conceptual idiom is very misleading and fools many of us.

If worldly matters – sleep, travel, career, personal relationships, family, health, education, finances, meals and entertainment - are messed up 8 or 9 times out of 10, our lives would be total chaos. Surprisingly, many of us take this idiom as true. What and where did we go wrong?

Realistically, if only one percent of our daily matters are adverse, life will be riotous. There are too many positive incidents in life that we are unaware of, or that we take for granted.

Conversely, we tend to keep in mind inauspicious incidents and disregard or overlook auspicious ones.

How often would you get two speeding tickets on the highway in the same day? Honestly, how often does “everything go wrong” as we claim? Even if we do have those days, did the day really end as a complete catastrophe? Most often, these statements are only exaggerations—illusions.

Generally speaking, there are two types of attitudes in our personality. We tend to lean either towards optimism or pessimism. We usually overlook our joys, but exaggerate the setbacks and relish the pain. As a result, we feel the happy times are short-lived while the pain lingers on. Joy and delight manage to skip by quickly; depression and misery tends to haunt us.

“Life is filled with difficult challenges”. Many of us have experienced or tried to comfort others during these difficult times. This sentiment seems to be consistent with the Buddhist teaching of “impermanence”. But, this is not the complete picture! Life is also filled with moments of joy. Still, we often tend to emphasize the sad and painful periods, even to the point that the pain becomes overwhelming!

During cultivation, we should learn to distance ourselves from pain and suffering, and cultivate the more blissful times in our lives. There is a DNA for optimism in life, yet this DNA seems to be forever dissolving while the DNA for pessimism is metastasized rapidly like cancer cells. This is referred as the “Dharma Ending Era” in Buddhism.

The “Dharma Flourishing Era” refers to the period when the ‘optimistic’ DNA is prevalent. In the “Dharma Regressing Era“, the optimistic and pessimistic DNA's are of about equal proportions. And in the “Dharma Ending Era”, the pessimistic DNA outnumbers the optimistic ones; the joys we experience are overwhelmed by the pain we feel. A minor setback induces vigorous expansion, clouds our daily activities and triggers the onset of the depressive mood. Actually, the hindrance is very trivial, but it manages to trigger the pessimistic DNA to erupt beyond control and defile our mind. The fermentation and function of this negativity will deteriorate the quality and outlook on our lives.

A minor taunt or a practical joke can sink us into the depths of absolute misery. We become angry, suspicious or traumatized. Each of these emotions will cause the quality of our lives to spiral downwards. We corner ourselves into melancholy and do not know how to turn ourselves around. At such an instant, we will not appreciate any apologies from or the kindness of others. We are being contaminated by the pessimistic DNA; we are plunged into the realm of suffering!

Moreover, we may start to have misgivings about the person who mocked us, or even mistrust everyone. Thus the problem becomes serious as our personality starts to be twisted, unwholesome character developed and psychological harm produced. This domino effect will, in turn, provoke more mischief.

The harmful consequences of the pessimistic DNA are too enormous. More problems and worries will follow, coloring our outlook on life with a screen of doom. Nothing seems good! Nothing is right! We must cut off this cancerous DNA of “negativity/ pessimism”.

We live in a fiercely competitive world. It is impossible to be successful all the time. Living means to have our share of failures. There is only one winner in each game of competition! But, does this mean we should shy away from competitions?

The issue is not in winning or losing. It is how to live on well when we lose! So we can still take control of our lives, knowing who we are and be comfortable with that. Then, we can live and work earnestly, be responsible for our actions and be accountable to our conscience. If we can do that, then success or failure will no longer be important.

Losing with grace is true sportsmanship. It is a healthy attitude. But not everyone is a good loser! This is why there are so many people who try to cheat and manipulate the game in order to “win”.

For people who can say: “I flunked again!” with a hearty smile on their face, they are the true winners. Enjoy the course of the game, go home and have a good night’s sleep, do not be hung up by the outcomes. In reality, mischief does not occur in the external world but in our mind or internal world. Vexations are caused by the infection of the pessimistic DNA, inducing the optimistic DNA to wither.

We all have this experience - people with less of a sense of responsibility live more pleasantly. People with a heavier sense of responsibility have fewer smiles on their face. Why is that? Should we live joyfully? Or should we live with responsibilities and no smile?

To live responsibly does not amount to being accountable for successes or failures, but to be accountable for living. To live responsibly is to do one’s best without being pressured by the outcomes. Winning and losing are both outcomes of life! You take on responsibilities not for the sake of winning but for living earnestly; therefore, the more responsibilities you have, the happier you are!

If we are liable for our successes and failures, this responsibility will engage us to look like a dried up bitter melon, as opposed to a blossoming

flower. However, if we are dedicated to life instead, we will at once be flourishing and not saddened. Thus, success and failures are a duality whereas life is an absolute. Being liable to the absolute is blissful, to duality a strain. If we can recognize this aspect of reality in life, we will discover the enjoyment of living and be very much at ease.

Nowadays, we try to create our own world of happiness. Some of us do so by getting a kneading in a massage chair in a small, darkened room, surrounded by other high-tech gadgets. Others turn the air conditioning on full blast while they wear sweaters or padded coats indoors. They stay away from the blue sky, bright sun, fresh air, cool breeze and green meadow – the marvelous gifts of Mother Nature, and embrace the rolling blinds, electric lighting, air cleaner, air conditioning and four walls. Isn't being human ridiculous and full of contradictions? Give it a thought, this differentiation between Nature and man-made triumphs.

Humans become arrogant about their achievements, assuming that they can override nature, that they are almighty. This overuse of rational thinking, in Buddhist jargon, is known as “the burgeoning of discernment or knowledge”. The information and knowledge from this “tin can” satisfies our vanity but it can also easily drive us into a dead end.

Humans call themselves the most intelligent of all living things because they are able to invent and make discoveries. In this regard, we seem to be the most fortunate generation to enjoy all the conveniences from the technological gadgets. However, we are spending more and more time indoors interacting with illusory characters on a screen, be it on TV, video games, or the Internet. What a pitiful approach to living!

We have become much farther removed from nature, losing touch with the rhythm of life. Some people want to return to nature, but on their own terms. For example, the skiers who needed a helicopter rescue have disregarded the avalanche warning. They do so because it is a challenge for them without any regard to nature's timing, and at the expense of the society. Why such rebellion?

It is because they can no longer tolerate the confined and methodical man-made ways of living that have evolved, and which are not naturally developed.

Let us make a deep reflection: to understand the nature of life and to comprehend how are we living. As explained before, we are mistaken if we believe that life is so out of our control, and that we are subject to so many misfortunate incidents. Actually, there are far more providential happenings than mischief. Yet human beings tend to exaggerate the hardships, even to the extent that life becomes gloomy and we become depressed. As a result, any manifestation that we encounter seems to lack flavor. If we do not correct this erroneous attitude, disasters will keep on coming. If we cannot see through those fallacies in living and turn our lives around, they will contaminate every aspect and affect the quality of our lives.

Feeling a deeper impact from our painful experiences than the joyful moments is a sign of the times. It is not a true reflection of the rhythm of life. Since we are constantly under so much pressure and competition, and we are unable to sustain the slightest failures, comments or slanders, the stresses or impacts are overwhelming.

Someone may say the wrong phrase, have a slip of the tongue or hurt us unintentionally, a very simple confrontation. However, it may take us months to explain ourselves, to inform everyone what did happen. We end up being imprisoned by these slanders. Why not just let go of it and laugh it off. If we allow the pessimistic DNA to take over at this point, we will drain ourselves and bring the people around us down.

We must overcome this type of weakness in character. Why is the pessimistic DNA spread so rapidly and significantly? Why is the impact so strong? It implies that there lies a great void deep inside us, tempting us to fall.

While we are growing up, each time we feel helpless, hopeless or lose control, the void will grow bigger. Each time we have any painful experiences or disappointment, the superficial

healing is torn open, and it hurts all over again. The DNA for “negative pessimism” spreads exponentially and uncontrollably. To counteract this, we must be able to stay calm, allowing ourselves to look inward, carefully reassess and evaluate what is happening. In Buddhism, this is “The Repentance Approach (Dharma Method)”.

You do not “repent” only when you have done something wrong. Repentance is a method which allows gradual and deep exploration within your psyche to find the cause of emptiness and despair. We can deal with problems quickly and effectively with proper training. However, most of us will choose to avoid dealing with our problems and let them stay buried deep within our hearts. With time, this despair-emptiness will fester like an infected boil, bringing damaging changes to our lives and weakening the value structures which support us. When this happens, our life, like a building with a rotten foundation, will crumble at the first sign of a tremor. This is a very hazardous phenomenon!

Modern living is very hectic. We are often hit by difficult and undesirable experiences from all directions. Everybody has their own interpretation on things and this can cause misunderstanding. If we become too concerned about other’s comments, we are allowing ourselves to get hurt unnecessarily. There are many people who cannot express themselves clearly. People do not usually try to hurt others intentionally. Why do we choose to get dangled up in misinterpretation? This is one of the big misfortunes of our times.

As we have said, we are in the “Dharma Vanishing Era”. The elements that constitute sorrow expand rapidly, for life is just too complicated and our foundation too rickety. An agricultural society is stable, with everyone having their defined roles: the husband works the land, the wife manages the household. Only when both of their work is done, do they spend time together. There is a time to rise and a time to go to bed. Day after day, they follow the same rhythm as that of nature. The sky is blue, clouds are white, the sun comes out, and the grass is green with the breeze blowing gently. That is life, nothing much to complain or argue about! They

enjoy true living within nature, happy and carefree. We all experienced that in our past lives.

Life is different now! Everyday, we are bombarded with all kinds of diverse experiences, infinite desires and disappointments! You think you are busy, so do others. When you all get together, there is a problem. Everybody thinks their business is of utmost importance and the other person’s issue is trivial. Now what do you do?

A young couple came to me because they had been arguing and wanted to get divorced. I asked for the cause of their argument. She said, “He never puts the seat down after he uses the toilet”. He said, “She never lifts the seat up after she uses the toilet”. So, should the seat be up or down? After six months of bickering, they still could not come to any resolution. This is why they decided to get divorced.

They may have no trouble making major decisions in the other parts of their lives. But, if they cannot resolve a problem like the toilet seat, their angry feelings may affect how they get along in general. Although it seems trivial, it can be very irritating. If they cannot compromise on a petty issue, this will make it increasingly difficult to live with each other, and this will cause problems in the other aspects of their lives. What’s next? Should they squeeze the toothpaste from the top or bottom of the tube?

In other words, this DNA of “negative pessimism” is allowed to fester and grow too quickly. Where does this DNA come from? From the toilet seat? Why is a trivial problem able to affect our lives so tremendously? The reason is because we do not have the capacity to manage crisis or failure. What a pity!



... to be continued in next issue.

