

## Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Rev. Master Seikai

Often I have a vivid mental image, while in meditation, of rowing a canoe or a kayak. It is a peaceful image, one that conveys the quiet effort of stroking the water with a paddle, first on one side of the boat and then on the other side. In pure meditation practice, there is a harmonization of the effort to sit still—and not allow all the distractions that the mind comes up with to pull me away from being awake and mindful—with the effort to have an open heart and embrace thoughts that present themselves with an accompanying feeling of anger, sadness, or dis-ease of any kind.

*Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily  
Life is but a dream.*

About ten years ago, I printed out this poem and put it up on the wall next to the door of my room in the monastery for a period of time. It was a constant reminder to relax in the midst of tension. Probably every child easily learns this little song, and then as we age into adults, we just as easily forget it. But it has very great meaning in its few short lines; it is a very Buddhist rhyme. I particularly like the word ‘gently,’ which is a reminder and a pointer away from pushing it too hard, or having the attitude of expending energy in a heroic manner in order to achieve something eminently desirable.

America is a nation that epitomizes the Asura realm. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Mandala painting, there are typically six worlds, arranged in a circle as slices of pie in a dish, around a small inner circle with images of three animals—a pig, representing desire; a snake, representing anger; and a cock, representing the delusion of a separate self, an ego to be glorified. One of those six pie slices is the world of the asuras, said to be titans or giants who are usually depicted attempting to storm their way into the heaven realm. The army of heaven is shown repulsing the attack.

Asuras do not have it bad. They have a comfortable existence. And yet, they are not content with it and so, because of their ambition, they feel it is necessary to have it even better and thus they are compelled to find a way into heaven. Many, many people suffer from this condition, and I use the term *suffer* in the Buddhist sense of: *this is suffering*. All of us can look at our lives and see some past event or some current attitude in which we fall for this condition of mind.

What the asuras lack is gentleness of mind. They are slaves to aggression, ambition, comparing themselves with others—the lack of contentment. They are literally trying to climb a ladder into what they imagine to be a better world, the heavenly realm where, presumably, they will be eternally happy.

Even if asuras were to succeed in gaining access to heaven, they would eventually stumble into an immutable law of the universe: There is no eternal happiness of the kind that they seek. What is more, the realm that they had already occupied, the asura realm, is a perfectly good realm to begin with, and all the effort to escape it has been in essence for nothing. It has all been a big lie. And so it is with Americans who try so mightily to amass wealth, to gain power, money, status and eternal security against all the forces arrayed to erode away their imagined happiness.

The experience of the asura realm—ambition for life to be bigger, better, more secure and happier—is one way to find out for oneself the truth that the Buddha taught: The root cause of suffering is ignorance, i.e. simply not knowing that we are already sufficiently endowed with

what we truly need to be happy and content, and that desire follows upon that ignorance with the swiftness of a flash of lightning. Desire, no matter how subtle, will forever be a cause for a deep inner feeling of lack or want, which we often give the name of *inadequacy*. Inadequacy and its marriage partner pride are the foundation for all the delusions of a separate, inadequate self.

*Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream.* Obviously, the stream is a metaphor for human life. Rowing is the effort we make on a moment-to-moment basis to pay attention, be still and open; rowing gently is to be content with life, and not demand more from it than we really need—a totally un-American attitude of mind. Thus it can seem that to ignore the current of what most people are doing is to seemingly be committed to rowing upstream against the current. The Buddha is said to have put his begging bowl in the current of a river and watched it float upstream against the flow of the water. It was a small miracle to indicate that what he was doing was on the right track, and that it is possible to flow gently in the current, even if it is against the current of the world.

People often ask me how it can be that if desire is the cause of suffering, you can still have a motivation to train yourself—a positive desire to find peace in your life, or some level of spiritual attainment. The answer is, as Rev. Master Jiyu often said, that it is necessary to “start out on the me side of things”, which is to say that the motivation to find peace of heart, or to look for an end to ones suffering, is a good motivation. What tends to happen, however, is that our human tendency to have a self-driven orientation can get in the way of the purer orientation of just giving up our selfishness. After all, “What’s in it for me?” We want good stuff that we can definitely say we have found, that we know, that has made us better people. What’s in it me for works for a while, but then life will beckon us to find a deeper source of motivation, to look for a deeper meaning to our inner lives.

So we are left in an ongoing situation of having to slowly purify our motivation and let go of the clinging that is in it. This is inherently not easy to do; even in the helping professions, areas of life in which people are trying very hard to give of themselves, make a difference, work for the welfare of others, it is still very easy for self to get into it. “Look what *I* have done to help people; look what *I* have done to save the world!” It’s good as far as it goes, but if there is still clinging to what a self can do, there will still be suffering.

*Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream.* This line gives us a new perspective on things: if life is a dream, what is there that is truly solid or lasting that we can hold onto and say, “this is mine—I did this”? In Buddhism, the teaching of selflessness and impermanence point us to this basic orientation. There isn’t anything really permanent or lasting to call a self or label as an accomplishment of me. There is an endless flow of change, an endless coming into being of phenomenon, endless change and endless dying, passing back into nothingness. It is simply the way things are.

When I was young, young people—having read some sort of Hindu philosophy or something—would sometimes say, “It’s all just a big illusion—*maya*.” That was a way to duck out of taking responsibility for ones actions, or of just saying ‘to hell with it’. There is a deeper way, a Middle Way, which is to care deeply for living beings, including oneself, and to make consistent efforts to help beings. Life is a dream and yet it is still good to do something positive and to practice wholeheartedly. It is possible to put great effort into practice and not get too caught up in the results, or look upon the results, or the lack of results, and think that you are either a really good person or a real chump.

It took me many years to see the value of being merry, or at least of being a basically positive person who was happy with himself and with life. It took a lot of Buddhist training and a lot of effort to get there. But it was worth it. I wouldn’t look back and want it to be different. Being negative, cynical, disparaging, or saying ‘to hell with it’ is a basically self-indulgent attitude, mired in suffering. If we train well, we can start to see clearly that to nurture such an attitude is in itself suffering. It is so much better for oneself and the world to put it down. And it should not be

underestimated that doing so helps the entire world. *Life is but a dream, which is worth living, which can be "the playground of the Bodhisattva."*

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