

A Refuge from Aging, Illness, & Death

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There's a passage in the Canon that connects the teachings on aging, illness, and death, with the three teachings we chanted just now on inconstancy, stress, not-self. A king, Koravya, is talking to Ven. Ratthapala, a monk, and asking Ratthapala why he had ordained. The king felt that most people ordained because of a loss in the family, loss of wealth, sickness, some disaster. But none of those applied in Ratthapala's case.

Ratthapala answers that he was inspired by four Dhamma summaries: The world is swept away; it does not endure. That's the teaching on inconstancy, and he illustrates it with aging. He asks the king, "When you were young, were you strong?" And the king said, "Yes, I thought I had the strength of two people." "How about now?" "Oh, no, now I'm 80 years old, and sometimes I intend to put my foot in one place and it goes someplace else." So aging is the main inconstancy teaching.

The world has no shelter: That was another reason Ratthapala why ordained. The king asks him the meaning of that, and Ratthapala says, "Do you have any recurring illnesses?" And the king says, "Yes, I have a recurring wind illness" — which means shooting pains in the body. "And when you have this illness, can you ask your courtiers to share out some of the pain so that you don't have to suffer so much?" And the king says, "Oh, no, I can't do that. I have to take on all of the pain on my own." So illness is the teaching on suffering and stress.

The third Dhamma summary: The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind. The king says, "I have a lot of stuff. What do you mean the world has nothing of its own?" And Ratthapala says, "But when you die, can you take that with you?" And the king says, "No, of course not." So death is the ultimate not-self teaching. The things we hold onto as "us" and "ours," if they don't leave us before we die, they leave us at death.

So when you think about those three perceptions—inconstancy, stress, and not-self—always think about what lies behind them: aging, illness, and death. And learn to think of these things as normal. There's that other chant we do very often: "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. I have not gone beyond these things." In the Thai translation, "I am subject to these things" can also be translated as, "These things are normal." Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal. They're happening all the time.

But we suffer because of that fourth Dhamma summary: We're a slave to craving. We keep coming back for more and more and more of the same old aging, illness, and death.

Ajaan Fuang once said that the sensual pleasures that we hunger for are things we've had in the past. We miss them; we want them again. We forget about all of the suffering that goes on around those things. Of course, the fact that we're missing them now so intently means that when we gain them again, we're going to lose them again, and suffer again, just as intensely. The question is: When are you going to have enough?

In the king's case, he had no sense of enough at all. He already had a kingdom and yet when Ratthapala asked him, "If somebody came and told you there was a kingdom to the east you could conquer, would you conquer it?" the king said, "Of course." "If somebody came from the south, the west, the north, with the same news: There are kingdoms all around that the king could conquer, would he want more? Of course." "What if someone were to come from the other side of the ocean, saying, 'There's a kingdom over there you could conquer,' would you take it?" And the king says, "Of course." Here he is, eighty years old, and he still craves more power and wealth.

Although we may not be thinking about kingdoms, our craving keeps us going in just the same way. And the question always comes down to: When will you have enough? When would you be willing to look someplace else for your happiness? Of course, all of us have an inkling of that at least. That's why we're here meditating. We look inside instead of outside for a happiness that'll be satisfying.

Now, the problem is that sometimes things get really nice inside. There's a sense of ease and well-being, and we start getting complacent. The world isn't such a bad place after all. I remember a Dhamma teacher who talked about what she called the third-and-a-half noble truth: that maybe you couldn't end suffering, but at least you could manage it, it's okay. That's the attitude that keeps people coming back. So you really want to look inside.

Where are you pinning your hopes for happiness? <coyotes howling in background> Listen to those coyotes howling. They say the ones who howl are the ones that are frustrated in their desires. At least we human beings have the opportunity to look at our desires and decide how much we want to follow them. We're not quite so driven, but we don't have to be driven at all. Many of us are very driven, but we have the option to step back, look at our greed, aversion, and delusion, to look at our pride, and ask ourselves: "Are these the things that are going to take us to happiness? Can we really trust them?"

This is why one of the Buddha's most basic teaching is on the topic of refuge. We have examples of people who have stepped back from their cravings and freed themselves from that slavery. And the news of these people should shake us up. We may have doubts about how far they really put an end to suffering, how far they could go, or how far *we* could go, but at least we owe it to ourselves to ask the question: What would it be like not to have to follow our cravings? And here's a teaching that offers the possibility. It offers a path. This is what you do, the steps are all laid out. And at least they offer a way out.

One of the biggest misrepresentations of the teaching is that it's pessimistic. But the idea that just coming back again and again and again would be enough, would be okay, so why not just put up with things the way that they are?—That's the pessimistic approach. Or the third-and-a-half noble truth approach, that suffering is manageable, that it's okay, that this is as good as it gets, so you might as well learn how to accept it: That's a pessimistic approach, too. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he wouldn't rest content with skillful qualities if they hadn't taken him all the way.

So on the one hand, you accept the fact that this is where you are. You don't try to deny the situation, but you also accept the fact that it could be better. And the Buddha gives you the example that there is a way out, and so we should take his example as our refuge. That's our protection. It's so easy to shove him away, to blank him out of our minds as if he never existed. And yet when we do that, who are we benefiting? We're not benefiting ourselves, we're not benefiting the ones around us. So you always want to keep him in mind.

That's the other meaning of *sarana*: On the one hand it means refuge, but on the other it means something you keep recollecting—you keep recollecting his example, that this is what human beings can do. Recollect the Dhamma: This is the guidance he offered so that we can find that freedom. Recollect the Sangha, the noble Sangha, who showed that it wasn't just the Buddha who could do this. They applied his teaching to their lives, to their hearts, and found that they gained the same freedom.

So you always want to keep that possibility of freedom in your mind as you make your choices. As you go through life, try to make the choices that go in that direction so you that can learn what it's like to not be pulled around by the nose by craving. Have at least a taste of what freedom would be like. It's only when you've had that first genuine taste that you can really trust yourself: that even though you'll be making mistakes and still may not be totally free from defilements, at least you know that there is a way out, and it's for sure.

So there's no pessimism in the Buddha's teachings. He offers the possibility of a totally unfettered happiness. That's as good as it gets, and it's a lot better than the way things are right now.

Always keep that in mind.