To Disturb Your Complacency

June 25, 2025

Our evening chanting frequently has that contrast. Chants about aging, illness, death, separation. Chants about the parts of the body. Chants about how the world is swept away, does not endure. When you die, you can’t take anything with you. And then we say, “I’m happy.” We put those together to remind ourselves that our search for happiness has to be done in this world, where the facts of aging, illness and death are all around us. This morning I talked to one person whose mother is dying of cancer. Someone else said, “Oh, by the way, I had a heart attack last Friday.” Fortunately, she was able to get to the doctor in time and they gave her the proper shots. She was able to survive. We live on a knife’s edge. We’re intoxicated with our life, with our health, with our youth. We can so easily lose these things. We need to find something inside that’s more solid. That’s what the meditation is for. What the Buddha proposes really is solid. There’s a dimension that you can touch, he says, or that you can see with your body. Interesting idea. See with your body. And it’s outside of space and time. Which is why when the Buddha talks about things in space and time, he tends to focus on the negative. Because there’s something better. He’s not being negative just to show how negative he could be. He’s negative with a purpose. We want to find that happiness is better than this. Happiness that’s not subject to aging, illness and death. That’s not swept away. Which means that our search for happiness has to be clear-eyed. A lot of people, when they search for happiness, tend to put blinders on. I was talking with someone one time who had built a very large house in Florida. And I asked, “Well, what about the rising sea levels?” And the person said, “We don’t want to think about that.” That’s not how the Buddha would look for happiness. He would look squarely at whatever dangers there are and do his best to prepare for them. There’s a sutta where he has the monks reflect on the dangers of living in the forest. Death could come easily. The thing is, it’s not only in the forest where death can come easily. In the middle of a city, in the middle of a hospital. It can come at any time. Deaths in the house occur in the bathroom. And yet we don’t think of it as a dangerous place. But yes, you think about these things. So it will stir you up to practice, as he says, to find, attain the as-yet-unattained, to realize the as-yet-unrealized. There’s something really good at the end of the path. And it’s perfectly fine to have a goal orientation. I think I mentioned the letter that came to me the other day. Someone said they thought you could detect a subtle goal orientation in some of my writings, as if they were a blemish. Well, look at the Buddha. He was extremely goal-oriented. He was going to leave his house, leave his home, leave his palace, go into the wilderness. Because he had a goal. When he attained his own personal goal, then his goal was to teach in a way that was effective. As he said, there were two types of assemblies. One, the assembly where the teacher teaches empty words that are beautiful, but doesn’t want to be questionist what they mean. Doesn’t want to be challenged. And then there’s the assembly where the teacher is willing to be challenged. He’s open to questioning, “What does this word mean? What does that word mean? How is it supposed to be used?” He said his assembly was the second kind. Because he wanted to be taught, excuse me, he wanted to teach in a way that was understood. That could be put into practice. One of the things he said that can get in the way of awakening when you’re listening to a talk is that you think you understand when you don’t. So if you have any misunderstandings or anything that’s not really clear, you want to ask. So much of the teaching of the Dhamma is in questions. I’ve been going through collecting the different passages where the Buddha gives a teaching and the people listening to the teaching gain either the Dhamma-I, in other words, one of the lower levels of awakening, or they gain full awakening while listening. What’s striking is how many of the teachings are in a question-and-answer pattern. In most cases it’s the teacher asking questions. Basically asking you to look at this. What’s this? What’s happening here in your mind right here? What’s your experience of form right now? What kind of feelings do you have right now? What are your perceptions right now? What are your thought constructs, your intentions? What about your consciousness right now? How do you experience these things? Are you suffering from them? If you are, what are you doing with it in relationship to them that’s making you suffer? In other words, you have an inquisitive attitude to what’s going on in the mind. Because that’s how we found awakening and that’s how we can all find awakening too. If we’re not inquisitive, if we just sit there and say, “Well, this is the way this is, and that’s just the way that is, and we have to accept it.” Don’t try to figure it out. We just stay where we were. The image the Forest of Gems take, or like to use, is of someone in a prison. There’s a key to get out of the prison, but instead of using the key to get out, they just put it on the wall, admire it, and try to make the prison cell as comfortable as possible. But this is why we have that reflection in Aging, Illness, and Death. It is a prison cell. We want to get out. So try to be audacious like the Buddha was. There is something really valuable inside that will take a lot of work to get. The Buddha was willing to put in the work. He’s made it easy for us in the sense that he’s shown that there is a path. He shows what kind of questions we should ask as we follow the path. To spark a sense inside that we can’t just rest here. There’s something very wrong about the way we engage with our world. But we don’t have to do it. What is it? There are three kinds of fabrication. Bodily fabrication, the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. You’re engaging in these things all the time. In fact, your sense of who you are usually has a lot to do with these things. You’re willing to question that, take it apart. Usually when we hold on to something as us or ours, we’re very protective of it. We don’t want to see it challenged. But if we don’t challenge, who’s going to challenge it for us? Well, aging, illness and death are going to come and challenge it. But they get us when we’re down, when we’re weak. So you’ve got to prepare while you’re still strong. While you’re young, while you’re healthy, while you’re alive. Don’t be intoxicated by youth, health, life. Take the opportunity that I provide you to peer inside, to question what you’re doing, the way you’ve been doing things all along. And see that there’s something incongruous there. The way we engage in these types of fabrication is for the sake of happiness, and yet we’re creating suffering. Sometimes we recognize the facts, sometimes we don’t. We have to remind ourselves the Buddha’s there to stir us up, to get us to question what we’re doing. And so he brings the facts of suffering, he brings the facts of aging, illness and death. So look away from these things, look at them. Use them to motivate yourself to practice, to find what you haven’t found before, to attain what you haven’t attained before, to reach what you haven’t reached before. We’re looking for something unexpected, so we’re going to have to do some unexpected things, ask some unexpected questions. The Buddha gives us some guidance, but for us, we take his guidance and we figure out, well, how does this apply to me? Use some ingenuity in how you do it. That’s the way out.

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