One Thing Clear Through

July 9, 2025

Most people don’t like to think about death, because they think there’s nothing much you can do about it when it comes. You just have to give up and go with the flow. Which means that when death does come, people are unprepared. Because a major part of the Buddhist message is that there is something you can do to prepare. As the chant says just now, we’re subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. But we do have our actions. On the one hand, we can create the good circumstances for a good rebirth by what we do. And we can also go beyond birth altogether. And the chant says that aging, illness, and death are unavoidable. There is one way to avoid them, and that’s to avoid being born. And that’s something that people can do. So on the one hand, the Buddha does point out all the negative aspects of life. And sometimes he’s accused of being pessimistic, because he does. But he’s pointing them out because he has a solution. He’s like a doctor who talks about the facts of illness. Not to get you depressed, but because he has a cure. And it starts with training the mind. And the training is not just meditation. Every aspect of the path, starting with generosity as a foundation for the path, and then the training in what the Buddha calls heightened virtue, heightened mind, and heightened discernment. This is the way out. Because we’re training not just the mind but also the heart, which is why generosity is a good place to begin. The word citta in Pali covers both mind and heart. And if you’re going to watch your heart, watch your mind, you want to do it while it’s doing something good. And to counteract this tendency we have to try to accumulate things. To feed off of things, to take them in. The Buddha says happiness can be found by giving out, sharing. And you realize that it’s true. When you feel you have enough to share, there’s a sense of wealth. Not the wealth of material things, but just the sense of more than enough. That’s wealth. There are a lot of people who have a lot of things but they don’t have a sense of enough, and they’re poor. So you try to develop this attitude of inner wealth. And it’s expansive. The heart expands to include others. Then you get the gift not only of material things, but also of your time, your energy, your forgiveness. This expands the heart. Then you get the gift of what the Buddha calls safety. This is the gift of virtue. It goes in two directions. As you avoid unskillful actions, harmful actions, you’re protecting yourself. And at the same time you’re offering protection to others. You may not be able to protect them from other people’s unskillful actions, but at the very least, from your quarter, there’s no danger. And that quarter of universal safety allows for you to have a share of that universal safety as well. Then there’s the gift of goodwill, the beginning of meditation. They tell that of a Jon Mun, who every day when he would wake up, would spend a fair amount of time extending goodwill in all directions, all levels of being. In the afternoon, waking up from his bent day nap, he’d do it again. At night, before going to bed, he’d do it again. Goodwill is a framework for the practice. It reminds you that you’re looking for happiness that harms no one. You could find it out. You could search the whole world over and not find anyone you love more than yourself. But at the same time you have to realize other people love themselves just as much. If happiness were a zero-sum proposition, that would mean you’d have to fight everybody else off. But it’s not. True happiness comes from within. So your true happiness doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. And their true happiness doesn’t take anything away from you. Which is why the Buddha said, when you reflect on how much you love yourself and how much others love themselves, the proper attitude is that you would never harm anybody or cause them to do harm. Because after all, if you cause them to do harm, that would become their karma, and that would harm them in the long run. This is the foundation for universal goodwill. As a reminder that our happiness that we’re searching for here doesn’t need to take anything away from the world. Again, we’re giving. Giving goodwill. As we get the mind into concentration, that too is a gift to ourselves and to others. We allow the mind time to rest. Time to get to know itself. Because when the mind settles down, it’s like water that’s been murky. As it settles down, settles down, it finally becomes clear. All the mud settles to the bottom and the water becomes clear. It’s not totally clear yet, but at least it’s clear enough for you to see what’s going on inside. That’s when you develop the gift of discernment, in which you realize the ways in which you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering. And you realize that it is unnecessary. There are ways of constructing your present moment that don’t have to make you suffer at all. When you see yourself clearly this way, then your greed, aversion, and delusion get weaker. And there’s less greed and aversion and delusion going out and disturbing the neighborhood. And finally when you get really clear on what’s going on in the mind, really clear on how you’re constructing your present moment, each present moment, you arrive at something that’s totally unconstructed. At that point you give up everything. You even give up the path at that point. All these good practices you’ve been doing. You realize there are strategies. And there’s any strategy. They’re like tools. You pick up the tools to do the work that needs to be done. Say you’re building a chair. You pick up the hammer when you need a hammer. You pick up the nails when you need nails. The planer, whatever tools you need for the chair. When the chair is done, you can put them all down. That’s when you can put the path down, because you’ve cleaned everything out of the mind. There’s no more work for it to do. That’s your ultimate gift to yourself. As the Buddha said, it’s panca-dhamma. Each of us has to know it for him or herself. But the fact that you’ve done that, you become a member of the Noble Sangha. You become a refuge for others. All too often you’re terrified of being accused of being selfish, because we’re working on our own salvation, our own release. But that’s the only way that release can be found. You can’t release somebody else. It’s not a zoo or a prison where you can release the animals or release the prisoners. It’s a bad habit. And each of us has to kick that bad habit alone, on our own. But you provide a good example to others. The more you’re able to kick this bad habit, the better advice you’re able to give to others. So as the Buddha said, we suffer because we feed. The word upadana, for clinging, also means to feed. We’re constantly taking in, taking in, commandeering things and claiming them to be either us or ours. That’s why we suffer. So the opposite movement is to give. That’s what the path is. From the very beginning to the very end. Lumpu Dune once came to see Ajahn Swat when he was staying at Tamsik Gyal. After staying for a week, he was about to leave, the monks came to pay their respects to him. He made a comment. He said, “The things in the world come in pairs. There’s dark and there’s light. There’s good, there’s bad. But the Dhamma is one thing clear through.” He didn’t say what that one thing was. But the act of giving is a good candidate. So as you sit here with your eyes closed, remind yourself this is not just for you. Although it is for you in a way that is also for others. It’s a goodness that breaks down barriers. The goodness that comes from wealth, status, praise, sensual pleasures, that can often be zero-sum. In other words, you gain, someone else loses. That creates barriers. But here it’s not zero-sum. You’re giving and you gain better things in return. Other people gain things as well. That’s what breaks barriers down. So this is a practice that makes us all relatives. The principle of giving is such that if you have to charge for something, you’re creating a barrier. And you’re putting that person outside of your family. But if you give, the barrier is down. That creates a relationship. You become relatives. As long as we can see the world as filled with relatives like this, and act in line with that, we’re working against all those who see that happiness is zero-sum. Or that the boundaries are natural. This is our gift to the world.

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