

## *No Slivers in the Heart*

*February 10, 2016*

I was talking once to someone in New York. He said that he liked to listen to my Dhamma talks because of the crickets in the background. So tonight we have coyotes.

The Canon tells of the time when the Buddha was wounded. Devadatta had hurled a big rock down a mountain, hoping to crush the Buddha. The rock was split into many pieces. It ran into another rock and one of the pieces, a stone sliver, pierced the Buddha's foot and he was in a lot of pain. So the doctors treated him and he was lying down recovering when Mara came to see him and said, "What are you doing moping around here? Are you miserable? Are you depressed?" The Buddha said, "No. I'm lying down here with goodwill for all beings."

This is good practice for when we're sick; when we're wounded ourselves. In his case, of course, there was someone who specifically tried to wound him. In that case, it was particularly important to have goodwill for all and, in particular, the person who had wounded him.

But even when there's no one else involved, it's good to have a sense of that larger perspective, "May all beings be happy." As the phrase says, "May they be free from animosity, free from trouble, free from oppression, and may they look after themselves with ease." This helps to wipe out a lot of the stories that you may build up around your own pain, to put everything into perspective.

We all have to deal with pain. We all have to deal with trouble, animosity, oppression. And there are times when we can't look after ourselves with ease. This is what's poignant about this reflection. We want all beings to be happy, but is it the case they're all going to be happy? Well, no, because they're all owners of their actions, and people have all kinds of actions. This is true of you. This is true of everybody else. You can't go around straightening out everybody else's actions. The best you can do is get them to act in skillful ways, if you can. And even then, there's still going to be suffering in the world.

No matter where you go, there's going to be aging, illness, and death. There are some heavenly realms, apparently, where there's no aging or illness. The only pains are hunger and death. But still, there's still going to be pain wherever you go. This reflection should give rise to a sense of samvega. The Buddha talks about the reflection we often do, "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death and separation, and I'm the owner of my actions." That's the reflection we chant

quite frequently, but it's just part of the sutta in which it comes from, the part that's supposed to develop a sense of heedfulness.

The sutta then goes on to say not only is this true for me. It's true for everybody, everywhere in the universe. We're all subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. We're all the owners of our actions. And reflecting on that larger perspective is meant to give rise to a sense of *samvega*, that no matter where you go, these things will be there, too. You leave this lifetime and you may think, "Well, maybe the next time around it'll be better." It may be better, but it's still subject to these things. You keep trying to find better and better and better, but as long as there's birth, there's going to be aging, illness, and death.

It's this kind of reflection that sent the young bodhisatta, the Buddha to be, off on what he called the noble search, the search for something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die. Which, of course, meant something that wasn't born. That search, he said, was noble. Everything else you might search for in life, he says, is an ignoble search.

The good thing about the noble search is that it's open to us all. It's not just for nobility in the conventional sense. We can all make ourselves noble. We've got the breath. We've got the mind. All the qualities that the Buddha said led to his own awakening—resolution, ardency, heedfulness—are qualities we have to some extent. And they're all open to us to be developed. It's like a vast empty continent with lots and lots and lots of land, enough land for everybody to develop what they want. And here's our chance.

So when you're dealing with pain, try to be resolute. Don't let the pain get you down. When you're dealing with tiredness or a general weakness that can come either from working too hard or from the simple fact that your body's beginning to, as someone said this morning, lose the wheels on the cart—this part doesn't work; that part doesn't work—be resolute in the face of all of that.

One of Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks to a woman who had long been a student of his—she was on her deathbed—was on just this theme. There's strength of body and there's strength of mind. As we live our lives normally, each supports the other, but there comes a point when strength of body is going to fail. That's when we really need a strength of mind that can depend on itself. So, whatever way you can talk yourself into sticking with the practice and accelerating your efforts, even in the face of difficulties, do that, heedful of the fact that even though this may not be the best situation—you've got aging, illness, death, weakness, whatever—there's always still the possibility to improve the mind.

That reflection on heedfulness that "I've got this breath. I can do a lot with this breath": That should keep you on top of things. Of course, this goes together

with ardency, the realization that if you don't develop skillful qualities now, you won't have them to fall back on when things get really difficult. If you do develop them, there's a lot to be gained.

So these three qualities—being resolute, being ardent and being heedful—support one another. These are the qualities, the Buddha said, that lead to awakening.

Speaking in slightly different terms at another time, he said the two things that led to his awakening were, one, the determination that he wasn't going to give up on his search and then, two, he wouldn't be content with skillful qualities. He framed his search in terms of looking for what was skillful. He knew that there was something that had to be *done*. There was a skill to master in order to find the deathless. The skill itself doesn't cause the deathless, but it enables you to get there, the same way that knowing how to climb a mountain doesn't cause the mountain, but enables you to get to the top.

But he said he didn't rest content with his level of skill. He gained strong states of concentration. He had all kinds of psychic knowledge: knowledge of his previous lives, knowledge of how beings are born in line with their kamma. But he didn't stop there. He told himself, "There's got to be something more." There was still, as he said, an arrow in his heart and he wanted to pull that arrow out. And so as long as there was the least little bit of anything, the least little sliver in his heart, he was going to make sure that he would take it out. Slivers in foos can be painful, but slivers in the heart can be even worse.

These are qualities we can all develop ourselves, so learn not to be dissuaded by weakness in the body or by pain. The mind can have its own strength. It can be independent of the condition of the body. Try to develop that independent strength, because it's something we're all going to need. We need it now, and we're going to need it even more as life progresses and the body regresses. Have it there as your refuge.