

The World Offers No Shelter

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Those four Dhamma summaries that we chant so often: The first three are basically about how the world is not going to provide what we want. We want something solid to hold on to, some protection, something we can lay claim to as our own, and it keeps denying us these things. “The world is swept it away. It does not endure.” What does the world have to offer? Gain but then loss. Status, loss of status. Praise, criticism. Pleasure and pain. It gives but then it takes back. As Ajaan Lee says, “The parts of the world that are true are not good. What’s good is not true.” If you want to find something that’s good and true and enduring, you have to build it inside.

This is why we’re fortunate that we have the Dhamma, because it can supply what the world lacks. It teaches us to develop qualities in the mind that have a lasting value. They start with the qualities of the path: virtue, concentration, discernment. And even before that, with the bases of merit: generosity, virtue, developing goodwill. Even though these things are not permanent, they can take you to a place that does not get swept away. In the meantime, they provide you with a certain amount of stability—stability that the world outside cannot provide. Not only the world outside, even your own body can’t provide that stability, either. Just like the world, your body is swept away.

Think of the story in the Canon that goes with that particular summary. King Koravya, who’s eighty years old, comments on how when he was young he thought he had supernormal strength. Now that he’s eighty, though, he means to put his foot one place and it goes someplace else. So that’s what the world has to offer. You have to create something inside that doesn’t get swept away, something that does endure. That’s the only way to be able to find any happiness.

The same with the second summary: “The world offers no shelter. There is no one in charge.” You have to provide your shelter. You have to put mindfulness in charge. Mindfulness is what remembers that the goodness in life comes from the good qualities you develop in the mind. If there are any good qualities that aren’t there yet, you try to develop them. If they *are* there, you try to maintain them and help them grow. That’s your shelter. That’s your refuge.

“The world has nothing of it’s own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind.” Actually, we don’t leave everything behind. As the Buddha points out, you take your karma. So you try to only take good things with you by making sure you create only good karma.

Ajaan Suwat used to comment on how the Buddha would talk about how the aggregates are not-self, the sense media are not-self, not-self, not-self. But then he would turn around and say, “We are the owners of our actions.” In Thai, the translation is basically that we are the doers of our actions and the owners at the same time. Our actions are ours. So again, you develop the qualities of mind that give you good actions that you can depend on.

Here, too, mindfulness has to play a role: mindfulness to keep things in mind; alertness to watch what you’re actually doing; and then ardency, the wholehearted desire to do this well. You really do have to put your whole heart into this. Otherwise, the world will lure you away and say, “Try this, try this, try this. Here’s a short-cut.” It’ll fill your mind with all kinds of information that’s totally useless as far as your well-being is concerned—which is why you have to be very selective in what you take in.

Ajaan Lee’s image for sense restraint is a house with windows and doors that you can open and close. You open them to good things, and close them to bad. What you take in is important because of its influence on what’s going to come out as a result. What comes out of the house—your actions, your thoughts, your words, your deeds—are your genuine possessions. So you want to make sure that when you allow things in, you’re going to allow things in that will encourage you to develop good possessions: good things for you to hold on to. Anything that’s not relevant to that, you just let it go.

Because there is that fourth Dhamma summary: Even though it says, “The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving,” the issue is not so much the world, although people in the world are slaves to craving. The question is: Are *you* a slave to craving?

That’s one of the big ironies of that passage. Ven. Ratthapala has been going over these points with the king. The king has had to reflect on the fact that he’s old, can’t depend on his body anymore. He’s not protected from illness. Even though he’s king, when he gets sick, he can’t command that his courtiers take a portion of his pain so he doesn’t have to feel all of it. No matter how much treasure he gets, he’s going to have to leave it behind.

But then Ratthapala asks him, “If you were told that there was a kingdom to the east that you could conquer, one with lots of wealth, all kinds of things that you’d want. You have the armies with which you could conquer it: Would you go for it?” And the king says, “Yes, of course.” “How about a kingdom to the south, another to the west, one to the north?” “Yes, of course, of course, of course.” This is just a minute or two after having reflected on he can’t keep anything. “How

about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean, would you go for that too?”
 “Sure.”

That’s the problem in the mind.

When we do some of the reflections to develop a sense of heedfulness, they end by focusing on where the problem is. When we do the five reflections, they end with a reflection on karma. Here, the reflection ends with a reflection on craving. No matter how insufficient the world is, we keep wanting to come back. That’s what the problem is. That’s where you’ve got to look. As long as you’re a slave to craving, you’re a slave to whatever and wherever the craving may go. So you have to develop some measure of independence. You have to think about developing something inside that does not get swept away, that does offer shelter and that you can lay claim to as your own.

What you have that’s your own right now is the realm of your awareness: the body as you feel it from within; the mind as you experience it from within. That’s yours. You want to develop that. When that’s developed, then you’re less likely to want to go craving after the world. And you have something of solid value.

So even though the world is swept away, you’re not swept away. It offers no shelter, but you can create shelter for yourself. It has nothing of its own, but you have your own actions, you have your own qualities of mind. And even though it’s a slave to craving, you have to remind yourself that the mind doesn’t need to be a slave. It’s taken on its slavery voluntarily because it doesn’t know any better. But the Buddha offers this alternative, the path to freedom.

Ajaan Lee talks in these terms many times. He always contrasts the world with the Dhamma: how the Dhamma is both true and good. As for the world, the good things are not true, the true things are not good.

If we didn’t have the Dhamma, the world would be a miserable place. The fact that we have the Dhamma as a way out is why there’s hope. The more we appreciate the Dhamma and practice it with a sense of appreciation, the happier we’ll be.