

There Is This

November 2, 2021

Birth, aging, illness, death: These things present us with a lot of challenges. The body does things it never did before. There are certain things that it used to be able to do that it suddenly can't do. You find yourself thwarted, and the mind becomes really frustrated if it hasn't been trained. This is why we have to train it in meditation. Otherwise, craving takes over, and we become slaves to our craving. It'll bring us back to more birth, aging, illness and death.

Think of King Koravya: He's had that conversation with Ven. Raṭṭhapāla about why Raṭṭhapāla had ordained. Raṭṭhapāla told him the four Dhamma summaries he had learned from the Buddha.

The world is swept away, it does not endure: a teaching on inconstancy, aging.

The world offers no shelter, there's no one in charge: The illustration there is of an illness where even a king can't say, "Now that I'm ill, can someone among my courtiers take some of this pain away from me so I can feel less pain?" Even kings can't be in charge of their pain. This is a teaching on suffering, stress.

And both of those teaching are also teachings on not-self. In other words, this body that you thought would do what you wanted it to do is suddenly not doing what you want it to anymore. Pain comes, and you can't share it out among others. There's a lot you can't do around that.

Then of course, there's death, that's the third: *One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. One has nothing of one's own.*

Yet *we're a slave to craving* for these things. Raṭṭhapāla asks the king, after he'd been reflecting on his aging, illness, and death: "If someone were to tell you there's a kingdom to the east that you could conquer, would you want to conquer it?" The king says, "Yes, of course." "Another kingdom to the west, north, south?" "Yes. Yes. Yes." "How about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean that you could conquer, would you try to conquer that, too?" "Yes." Craving knows no bounds.

I remember a monk in Thailand who commented on that one time. He was an old monk who stayed at Wat Asokaram. We were having our evening drink on the

porch of the *sala*, and an enormous *farang* came into the monastery with a tiny, tiny little Thai woman. He looked at that couple and said, “Craving knows no bounds.” That’s what you’ve got to watch out for.

So you got to train the mind to have a matter-of-fact attitude, both toward the good things and toward the bad things in life. As the Buddha said, you have to see their dangers, see their allure, and see the escape from them.

This can seem obvious with bad things. But to see the allure along with the drawbacks and the escape requires that the mind be very, very neutral as it observes these things, very matter-of-fact. Not neutral in the sense of just allowing whatever is going to happen, to happen, but very observant, like a spy who wants to figure out the activities of the enemy. The spy has to be very matter-of-fact in watching the enemy. Otherwise, he’ll send back misinformation. We’ve got to see: What is it about the things that age and grow ill and die that keeps pulling us back to them? There are qualities in those things in and of themselves, but a lot, however, has to do with our own imaginations around them. Which is why we have to develop this ability to be aware of something, see our perceptions around it, and see the thing and the perceptions as separate—and see our awareness as something separate, too.

This applies to the good things in the meditation as well, all the way up through the path to find an escape. We’re going to run into really subtle things that are really seductive.

Insights come and they seem so profound, and then we create a sense of self around the insight. We get stages of concentration and we can develop a sense of self around that. Sometimes the sense of self is very pronounced; other times, it’s lurking inside something else. So here again, you have to have a matter-of-fact attitude as you spy on these things.

When you’ve had a good insight, Ajaan Lee recommends thinking: “To what extent is this true, and to what extent is the opposite true?” Kee Nanayon would say, “When you have a good insight, watch what happens next in the mind, its reaction to the insight.”

The Buddha talks about a monk who’s been meditating and is able to get past speculations of the past, past speculations of the future, past the feelings of

pleasure in jhāna, and the feelings of neither pleasure nor pain in jhāna, and then announces, “I am at peace, I’m unbound.” And it was the fact that he has an “I” in there: That proclaims that he still has some clinging.

The ideal attitude is: You see that there are these things, and then there’s the cessation of fabrications with regard to them. Then, the Buddha said, you have to see the escape from that. Imagine how difficult that’s going to be. You see the cessation of fabrications, and it’s as if everything comes crashing down, and something amazing opens up. And even then, you want to not latch on to that.

This is where *sabbe dhamma anattā* comes in, to remind you to let go even then. There are these great insights that are going to come, and if the mind hasn’t been trained to be very matter-of-fact about what happens, what its experience is, it’s going to fall for them. So learn to develop a resilient awareness of things—a matter-of-fact attitude—both for good things and for bad things.

In the beginning, you have to start with the bad things, and be matter-of-fact again. It’s not that you’re just going to sit there and be with them and say, “Well, this is where I have to be. Nothing I can do about it.” You’re trying to figure things out.

It’s like the spy trying to observe the movements of the enemy to figure out what they mean. You have to be very observant. You can’t jump to conclusions. That will hold you in good stead.

Ajaan Chah has a passage where he talks about what apparently was an awakening experience that happened three times, right in a row. In each case he didn’t jump to any conclusions. He just said to himself: “What’s this?” He just watched it. One of the reasons why awakening is partial awakening for some people is because they latch onto their passion, say, for the deathless, or their passion for the great insights that have arisen. They have to learn how to let go of that attachment.

It’s very subtle and very strong. So when you have to let go of even the really good things, all the more so for things that are unskillful. Notice that, yes, you do have these attachments. Try to look into why. You’re going to see some things that you don’t like about yourself. If you don’t have a matter-of-fact attitude toward them, you’re going to cover them up. You won’t be able to admit them to yourself.

So there should be that sense of resilience that says, “I can watch anything.” This will grow with the practice. This is what concentration is for, to get the mind resilient. We practice it day-in day-out, day-in day-out, so that it becomes more and more the mind’s natural way of being, so that it doesn’t jump to conclusions. It watches—for the sake of understanding, and then for going beyond.

I had a student talk to me recently. She’d undergone what apparently was a minor stroke. She’s had many illnesses in the past, and many occasions when she thought she was going to die. But this was the scariest because her brain wasn’t working, and she was struck by the thought, “Well, what do I do now? How can I access the states I accessed before?” That fear, if she had died at that point, would have been the big obstacle. The obstacle wouldn’t have been the brain, it would have been the fear.

So you have to look at the fear. Even in a situation like that—your body has stopped working, your brain has stopped working—you’re going to have to let go of any fear around that, and just be very matter-of-fact. It’s going to require a lot of you, but it can be done.

We have the ajaans as our evidence. We have the great disciples of the Buddha, and the Buddha himself as our evidence that if the body stops working, the mind doesn’t have to get into a turmoil. It can accept these things with a matter-of-fact attitude and see the escape.

“There is this. There are these things happening.” That’s the attitude, the matter-of-fact attitude, and then beyond that, there’s something beyond. So you adopt that “There-is-this” attitude for the sake of the escape.

We have the Buddha’s testimony that we can be confident that there *is* an escape, as long as you can maintain that attitude of the patient observer—that when it sees something it will say, “Oh, there is this,” and will keep watching.