

Inconstant, Stressful, Not-self

May 17, 2013

We've had another death in the community. Todd passed away yesterday. And so each of us has to think about two people: One, we think about Todd. We remember his good qualities, his many skills, his work with animals, his many kindnesses. We admire his goodness and feel gratitude that we had the opportunity to know him. Now he's gone on. We'll miss having him here. We wish him well where he's gone, dedicate the merit of our meditation, dedicate the merit of our chanting to his wellbeing wherever he's taken rebirth.

Some people wonder about the practice of dedicating merit. The Buddha was asked by a brahman one time, "When you dedicate merit to the dead, does it actually get to them?" And the answer was, "Yes, if they're in a place where they're capable of receiving it." In other words, if they know about it and they have the chance to express their appreciation, even if only mentally. This is why, in one of the basic chants for dedicating merit, there's a phrase that says, "May they know of this and rejoice in the merit dedicated to them. If they don't know, may the devas inform them." In other words, may they get the chance to express their appreciation, because that appreciation itself is the merit that they gain. So wherever Todd may be, may he learn of our efforts to help him, and may he rejoice.

Todd's the first person we think about. The other person we think about, of course, is ourselves. In fact, the Buddha told us to remind ourselves, every time we think about a dead person, that that is our fate. We haven't gone beyond that yet. Someday we're going to die, too. This reflection makes us look at our lives. We have some time left. We have some energy left. What are we going to do with that time? What are we going to do with that energy? We know we have some energy now. We know we have some time now. So let's make the best use of it.

We also have to think also about what we take when we go. You want to prepare for your going in a way that leads to long-term happiness. The Buddha taught three perceptions, or the three contemplations as tools in helping us to sharpen our vision as to what true happiness would be, where we can find it, and how we can go about finding it. These are the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. He doesn't say why he focused on these three perceptions aside from the fact that they provoke feelings of disenchantment and dispassion. He wants to provoke dispassion because the passion we have for fabricating our worlds of becoming, our sense of who we are and the worlds we inhabit: that passion is what keeps these processes going. It keeps us tied to these processes and to the worlds of experience they create. If we learn to develop dispassion for these processes, then the mind is released.

But you have to do this reflection in stages. You don't just drop everything and go off and lie down on the ground and hope for everything to end. First you have to develop good, skillful states in the mind. This is why we're meditating, working on concentration, working on mindfulness as we stay with the breath to develop a good, solid state of mind inside so that we have something to help us peel away all the really unskillful desires that may arise.

This is one area where the three perceptions are useful. There are two ways that you can look at them. One is from the perspective of the question that the Buddha says is the foundation of discernment: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" There are three important concepts in that question: "my," "long-term," and "happiness." The three perceptions line up with those concepts. They're perceptions you apply to any possible happiness

to see if it measures up to the standard set by that question. If you find a pleasure that's not long-term—in other words, it's inconstant and unreliable—then it's going to be stressful. That means it can't be really be happiness. And if it's not really happiness, would you want to claim it as yours? Would you want to put effort into attaining it? Use these three contemplations to look at prospective ways of spending your time, prospective ways of deciding what you want to hold onto, what happiness you want to work toward. Ask yourself, "Is it really worth it? Is it going to lead to any kind of happiness that's really worthy of the name, anything you would want to claim?" This is to counteract the mind's tendency to keep on creating new issues all the time without really thinking about where those issues will lead.

So when there's a temptation to create a new world of experience and a new identity in that world, look at it. Is this something that's going to be long-term? Is it going to help lead to the end of suffering, or is it going to lead to more suffering? Is this part of the path or is it something that leads away from the path? Part of the Buddha's strategy is that you *do* have to use things that are inconstant and have some amount of stress as part of the path, so those things are worth pursuing as long as they're helpful. But as for things that you can clearly see are not part of the path, try to observe and analyze them to see how inconstant they are, and to see the stress that's part of that inconstancy. Then you can ask yourself: Do you really want that? Do you really want to lay claim to that? If not, let it go. You don't have to claim it as you or yours.

Once the path has been brought to its culmination, that's when you apply the same analysis even to the aggregates that form the path: the form of the body sitting here meditating, the feelings of pleasure you've created through concentration, the perception that holds you in concentration, the mental fabrications that maintain the intention to stay in concentration, and the awareness of these things. There is a point where you want to take *these* apart as well. This is where, as Ajaan Mun says, our attachment to what's good gets in the way. The concentration is good, but it's not totally good. It still lacks something in terms of providing true happiness because you'll find that it, too, is inconstant. Even the pleasure of the concentration has some stress. So why would you want to lay claim to it, why would you want to have passion for it, if there's the possibility of a deeper happiness that's totally reliable? So at that final stage in the path, this series of perceptions, this series of contemplations can be applied to everything to open the way to the happiness that appears when all mental fabrications fall away.

That's one perspective on these three perceptions.

The other perspective is to view them in terms of the Dhamma summaries that the monk Ratthapala taught to King Koravya: (1) The world is swept away; it does not endure. (2) The world offers no shelter; there's no one in charge. (3) The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. (4) The world is insatiable, a slave to craving.

The first three summaries are related: (1) The world is swept away. Things change. Inconstancy. Ratthapala illustrated this summary by asking the king, "Are you as strong now as you were when you were twenty years old?" The king, who was eighty at the time, said, "In no way at all. When I was young I thought I had the strength of two men. But now, when I think to put my foot in one place, it goes someplace else." This is the teaching on inconstancy. Aging is the big illustration for inconstancy. You can get things really, really ideal in terms of a good relationship, a good family, but then everybody grows old and things start falling apart.

(2) The world offers no shelter. Here the king was curious, "How can you say it has no shelter? I've got a palace. I've got armies to protect me." So Ratthapala asked him, "Do you have a recurring illness?" The king did. He had a wind illness, which in those days meant shooting pains through the body. Ratthapala asked, "When you're there, lying ill in bed with this wind illness, and people are hovering around to see whether you're going to die yet, can you ask them

to share some of the pain, so that you you will feel less pain?” And even though Koravya was a king, he couldn’t do that. So the teachings on stress are related to illness.

(3) The world has nothing of its own. Again the king, who had lots of possessions, was curious: “How can you say that? I’ve got plenty of gold and silver stashed away in storehouses.” So Ratthapala asked him, “Can you take those possessions with you into the next life?” And of course you can’t. You have to leave them behind. So death is the big teaching on not-self. Even your body has to be left behind. All your memories of this lifetime, all your activities and projects in this lifetime – you’ve got to drop them at the moment of death. There’s suddenly a big wall between you and the things that were very intimately yours before. They seemed to be yours. You had some control over them, but now you realize that ultimately there are some big areas where you can’t control them at all.

So the teaching on inconstancy relates to aging; the teaching on stress, to illness; the teaching on not-self, =to death.

The final Dhamma summary refers to the fact that we keep going for these sorts of things over and over again. We’re slaves to craving. Ratthapala illustrated this with a series of questions. He asked the king. “Suppose someone came and told you that off to the east there was a kingdom with lots of wealth that you could conquer easily. Would you try to conquer it?” Here’s the king, who’s eighty years old and already has a fine kingdom, yet he says, of course, he’d be happy to mount an army and send it off to conquer that kingdom. “And how about if there were another country to the south, another one to the west, another one to the north, another one on the other side of the ocean? All wealthy but easy to conquer. Would you try to conquer them, too?” The king said, “Yes, of course. I’d go for them as well.” This shows how insatiable craving can be. Even kings, with all their wealth and power, can’t get enough. This is the craving that keeps us coming back to things that age, grow ill, and die, over and over and over again.

This final Dhamma summary points to the problem, craving, but it also points to the solution. And the solution is this: learn how to develop some dispassion for these processes—these forms, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and moments of consciousness—that we crave, that we keep going after, that we fabricate again and again and again.

We want happiness, but we keep looking for it in processes that will disappoint us, that keep us stuck with aging, illness, and death. If you bring some wisdom to your search for happiness, you’ll learn how to use the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to save yourself from getting passionate about things that are going to age, grow ill, and die. Only then can you find a happiness that won’t die. That’s why these three perceptions aren’t negative. They’re aimed at weaning you away from things that are sure to disappoint you, so that you’ll be able to lift your sights to something more positive, focusing your energies on a happiness with nothing lacking, and that never will change.

So this is how we think when we’re confronted with a sudden death as we had today. On the one hand, we want to help Todd as best we can by sending him goodwill and compassion through the currents of our minds, dedicating to him the merit of our meritorious acts: our generosity, our virtue, our meditation. On the other hand, we have to reflect that we’re going to die, too. Where are you going to put your energy, where are you going to focus your time, however much time you have left? Because you don’t really know how much time you have. The Buddha says that the only people who are really heedful are the ones who say, “May I have one more in-and-out-breath. I’ll try to make the most of the practice for that amount of time.” If you stretch out the amount of time saying, “Well, may I have another day, another half-day,” then he says, “You’re heedless.”

The practice is something that has to be done with each in-and-out-breath. You have to be on top of your mind with each in-and-out-breath, because if you’re caught by death in a moment of

heedlessness, it's really hard to gather all your forces together at that last out-breath, scrambling around when you suddenly have to go. So try to be prepared.

Use these perceptions in a way that will fulfill their purpose, which is to lead to not only a long-term happiness, but to a happiness that's totally unconditioned. That's the wise way to respond to the fact of aging, illness and death all around us: remembering that *these things are in us* as well. But they don't have to be. We can direct our lives to the dimension where happiness has no aging, illness, or death at all.