

The Awful Truth

October 1, 2001

That passage we chanted just now on aging, illness, and death: There's a discourse where the Buddha says that people should think about that every day; whether you're ordained or not. It's a perspective you should keep in touch with. Basically it recreates the Buddha's own emotional crisis when he was young, before he ordained.

According to the story, when the reality of aging, illness, and death hit home, he came to realize that even though he was young, healthy, and alive, it wasn't going to be that way forever. And it wasn't fitting for him to look down on people who were older, or sick, or dead, because that was the nature of his body. And if he was going to spend his whole life looking for things that would also grow old, get sick, and die, it was a wasted life.

A strong sense of *samvega* came over him. The word *samvega* basically means *awe*—awe in a sense of *terrified*.

This is what life is all about. This is all there is. No matter how much we may dress it up otherwise, this is what it all comes down to. And the question is: How are you going to spend your life? Are you going to continue looking for things that age, grow ill, and die, or are you going to look for something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die? "Is there such a thing?" That was the question that haunted him.

The story continues that he saw a forest wandering monk, and realized if there was any way out, that's the kind of life he would have to live in order to find it: a life that cut social ties, cut his identification with society. He'd have to go out and live in the wilderness so that he'd have the time to really look into his mind. Because if there's anything that doesn't age, grow ill, or die, it's got to be in the mind.

The feeling that the young prince felt at that point, is called *pasada*: a sense of confidence: "Yes, if there's a way out this must be it."

And so, the story goes, he left his family and went out into the wilderness. And

discovered that through his own efforts, yes, he could discover the deathless.

That's why we have that fifth contemplation after aging, illness, death, and separation: All beings are owners of their actions—because it's through our actions that we can find the way out.

If we're not skillful, our actions just keep us going around and around and around in the same old cycle. But if we train our actions, they lead us to a point where we can open up to the deathless: That's our confidence.

So this is what we're doing as we meditate. We're training our minds to be more and more skillful. Because the main issue doesn't lie outside, it lies right here, in the way the thoughts of the mind interact. This is what determines what we're going to experience in life, what we're going to look for in life, what our intentions are, which issues we decide are important, which issues we decide are unimportant. Everything comes down to the actions of the mind—and they've got to be trained if we want to find true happiness.

Sometimes we tend to blame people or conditions outside and say: Well, it's because of our social conditioning that we're miserable this way or that, that we feel these limitations, that we have these wrong ideas, these wrong attitudes. Well, if the germ of those attitudes wasn't already there in the mind, there's no way you could pick it up from things outside.

So the source lies right in here. And if it's not uprooted right here, then there's no way you can escape it. Because if the problem is with human society, well, what are you? You're a human being, too.

Human society is what comes out of the way people normally interact. And the way you normally act is all part of that. This applies to all of us.

So we each have to turn inside and say, "Okay, where are the roots of these unskillful conditionings?" They lie in the greed, anger, and delusion in our own minds. These are the things that cause us to act unskillfully, so that we cause ourselves suffering, and we cause suffering for the people around us.

If these things can be uprooted, we're not going to suffer; we're not going to cause anybody else any suffering. When these things are uprooted, then no matter where you live, you don't pick up the germs of unskillful things around you, because there are no unskillful germs inside you.

If we were to make the medical analogy a little more precise: Your resistance is so great that there's nothing inside you that could catch the cold that's going around, the flu that's going around, all the mental diseases going around right now, and that have been going around, and will continue to go on. They're all part of human society.

So we dig down right here because this is the important spot. We tend to forget that. We get caught up in things outside: in this thought, that theory, this opinion, that view, this feeling, whatever. And they all point out, away from where the real problem lies.

We tend to think that things outside are a lot more important: decisions being made in Washington, decisions being made on the other side of the world, made by other people.

We have this tendency to point out there and say: That's important. We forget our own responsibility, which is right here: straightening out this little plot of land we've got right here—where we're making the decisions that shape our lives. This is where the important issues are. And they really are serious issues, because if you're not careful, they can cause a lot of suffering.

So right here is the point where you have to focus, because this is the important point: how your mind is moving around right now, and the skill with which it's moving around.

We've got the meditation technique as an initial guide: Stay with the breath. If the mind wanders off, bring it back to the breath. In the beginning, you want to give as little attention as possible to the things that pull you away. But once your center of gravity shifts so that it's inside, then you begin to look to see: What are these things that pull you away?

We build up this stillness inside so that we can use it as a foundation to look at these tendencies in the mind. In the Buddha's terminology, they're called *asavas*—effluents, things that flow out of the mind: sensual desires, states of becoming, views, ignorance. These things keep fermenting in the mind, bubbling up.

The most obscure of them, when we look at the terms, is the *becoming*. These are these little worlds that the mind creates for itself. You see this process really clearly if you notice how you fall asleep.

As you begin to lose your bearings in the world outside, there's a little world appears in your mind, and you go into it. That's your first dream, and that's when you've fallen asleep. The appearing of that little world is becoming. When you go into it, that's birth.

This process keeps happening over and over and over in our minds, and it's the same process that leads us to be reborn. So it's no wonder that when we get out of that process the Buddha calls it *awakening*, because we tend to fall asleep inside these little worlds we create, and they carry us off. Ajaan Suwat used to call them, "Places where the mind travels." We go into them and we travel around in those little worlds, and get lost in them.

So we want to be able to pull ourselves back, and say, "Okay, what is there right here, right now, really?"—with as little of that fabrication as possible. Because if there's no delusion, then we don't fall for these things.

That's a lot of what the skill that we need—so that we can be in charge of where our mind focuses, the questions it asks, the issues it takes up. This requires mindfulness, it requires alertness: the basic skills we work at when we're staying with the breath.

So have a sense of the importance of these qualities, and the importance of this meditation, because it's right here at this point, where the mind creates these little worlds for itself, that makes all the difference. If you can bring skillful qualities to it, there's no suffering, there's no delusion. And the germs that would lead us to act in unskillful ways and get caught up in unskillful attitudes simply aren't there. They're cut out.

So this is where we have to do our work. If we don't do it, no one's going to do it for us. And if we don't do it here and now, when are we going to do it?

Because it's not the case that everything will get taken care of by some overarching power that will make sure that everything is okay and then will tuck us into bed at night. There's a lot of suffering in the world that comes again and again.

When the young Prince Siddhartha realized that, he had a sense of *samvega*. We tend to forget that. That's why he has us chant every night: subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death—we all are. And it just keeps going on and on,

and on—unless we decide to make a difference.

So have a proper sense of the *awe-fulness* of what happens if we don't practice, and a strong sense of confidence in the good that will come if we do.