

Dhamma for Laypeople

April 7, 2015

There are two stories in the Canon that provide an interesting contrast. The first is one in which Anathapindika is on his deathbed. Sariputta and Ananda go to visit him, and Sariputta teaches him how to not be attached to anything at all, giving him a long, very thorough list of things to let go of. And he gets to the last item in the list, where he recommends training oneself, “My consciousness will not be attached to consciousness.” And Anathapindika starts to cry. Ananda’s concerned that Anathapindika is losing his grip, but Anathapindika says, “No. It’s just that for all these many years I have been visiting the Buddha, and he never mentioned anything like this.” Sariputta says, “This kind of teaching is not normally given to householders.” And Anathapindika asks, “Can it please be given to householders? So many of us out here are suffering because we don’t get this teaching.” That’s one story.

The second story concerns some householders who come to see the Buddha and ask him for a teaching that’s appropriate for them. He starts out with emptiness, but they complain, “That’s a little bit too high for us.” So the Buddha teaches them generosity and virtue.

The two stories provide an interesting contrast, and get at an issue that’s really important. We see that many of the teachings in the Canon are addressed to monks, but to what extent are these teachings appropriate for laypeople? On one level, of course, they’re appropriate for everybody. Dispassion, for instance: Monks aren’t the only ones who suffer from passion while laypeople don’t suffer from passion. We all have passion. To what extent that we have passion, we all suffer. But to what extent can you apply the teachings on abandoning passion in your life?

Well, in every case, whether you’re a monk or a layperson, you start out by applying it selectively. Even monks who don’t have that many responsibilities, that many attachments, do have to be passionate about some things. They have to be passionate about the training. They have to be passionate about the path. It’s not like they deflate all their passions all at once. They have to learn how to be

selective. The same lesson applies to laypeople. You take the teachings on dispassion and figure out where to apply them and where you're not ready to apply them yet.

There's also the fact that things don't happen immediately. People can learn about dispassion and it just goes right past them. You can contemplate death for a whole night and then forget about it the next day. When Ajaan Suwat was teaching in Barre, he brought up the topic of body contemplation. Some of the people complained, "Gosh, if I do this for a week, I won't be able to go back to my partner. I won't have any lust anymore." Ajaan Suwat replied, "Well, that's pretty amazing: Just one week of this and it's going to get rid of your lust." A lot of these teachings go against the grain, but they're skills we need to develop repeatedly because the mind tends to go so heavily in the other direction. This is why we have to practice again and again.

Meditation is like learning a second language. Our first language is attachment, desire, passion. But it's good to have practice in dispassion. Even if you don't go with it all the way or are ready to apply it that much to your life, it's a good skill to have in the background. It's like having a second language. You never know when you might have to go to that country. And as it turns out, in this case, this second-language country is one to which we all have to go.

Ajaan Lee makes the comparison. He says we're going to have to emigrate at some point; leave everything we have behind and go to another country—the next life—where we'll need to exchange our wealth into the currency of that country. In other words, we need to have generosity as our preparation.

We also need a foreign language. And here, the foreign language is learning how to let go. Aging, illness, and death come to everybody. They don't come just to monks or nuns. We all have to meet with these things. Separation comes to all of us. We all have to be prepared. So even if you're not ready to let go of everything, you want to learn the skills in how to let go when you need to.

It's like you're going to go to France. You don't wait until you get to France before you learn French. You practice beforehand. And meditation is our practice in learning the language of dispassion before we get to the place where we need it in spades. After all, as

we're sitting here, what are we doing? Thoughts come up and you have to put them down. They come up again. You have to let go of them again. Those skills will really come in handy when you're forced to let everything go.

And you want to practice them every day, in the same way that you practice a foreign language every day—because it goes against the grain. The vocabulary, the sentence structures, the sounds, are not quite the way you normally think or speak. Start out practicing it as a game. You learn the grammar game and you learn the vocabulary game. And you learn how to make sentences, just in the abstract, because there comes a time, when you go to that country, you're going to need water; you're going to need help. You're going to need this or that or the other thing and you want to be able to say it.

When I was first learning Thai, the book I first used was one prepared during World War Two. It was intended for American soldiers landing in Thailand toward the end of the war. The first phrases were “Hello. How are you?” and the third phrase was, “Where's the bathroom?” - because there inevitably comes a time, when you're in that country, that you're going to need a bathroom, and that phrase is something you very much want to know.

It's the same sort of thing here. There are a lot of skills you're really going to need when aging, illness, and death come. But they don't all come at the end of life. Death comes at the end of life, but separation comes before then. Signs of aging come before. Illness can come at any time. Other disappointments in life can come at any time. You need to be able to keep your thoughts under control. You need to have that skill of dispassion. So as we get practice here - and this is why we call it *practicing* meditation, because we're practicing skills that we're all going to need as we go through life - we're getting practice in learning how to die.

That contemplation we recite frequently, about being subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, and on the fact that we're the owners of our actions: As the Buddha said, this is something everybody should think about every day, whether you're lay or ordained, man, woman or child. This is a thing we all need to reflect on because we all have to be prepared for these things.

At the same time, we have to learn how to think in these terms so that we don't get complacent or careless. As the Buddha said, when

you think about these things every day, it helps you to abandon any unskillful behavior – because otherwise our intoxication with health, youth, and life can make us do all kinds of crazy things. The Buddha chooses his words carefully. These things can induce a type of intoxication. We're drunk with these things and we can't think straight. So you have to sober up.

At the same time though, he says that when laypeople and monastics think of these reflections, they should go further. It's not just that *you* are subject to these things. Everybody everywhere is subject to these things. The whole universe: Think in those large terms. The whole universe is subject to these things. This larger reflection, the Buddha says, goes beyond simply teaching you not to be complacent. It gives rise to a sense of *samvega* – a sense of the terror and dismay that grows when you think about the way that life can be so futile.

Now a lot of people don't like to think about this if they have jobs to do and other responsibilities, but it's good to have that in the back of your mind, because it makes you think in larger terms. And when you're suddenly up against the larger issues, you want to be prepared. At the same time, it makes you even more careful about what you want to do with your life – when you take on responsibilities; when you take on attachments. You want to do these things deliberately. You want to do them with a sense of purpose – not just willy-nilly taking on things that are going to weigh you down.

This reflection also helps give you a sense of priorities – and an escape clause. If you're a layperson, it's good to be able to straddle the line between being in a monastery and being out in the world. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, it's like learning how to be good both at Thai boxing and at what the Thais call universal boxing, i.e., Western style boxing. That way, when the world gets crazy, you've got a place to go and you've got the values that go with that place. Meditation is not just a technique. It's also a matter of values. The technique is an important part of it, because you're learning the skills of letting go. But right view and the values of right view are also a skill. The values about what really matters in life: These are the things that really keep you sane when the changes of the world inevitably come.

So when you think about dispassion, it's not just for monks and nuns. It's a skill that we all need because we all suffer from the results of passion. The teachings on disenchantment, dispassion, release: Even if you can't apply them all across the board, you want to learn how to apply them selectively, appropriately. Look at what things in your life are causing you trouble – things you can let go of, things you can put down. Learn how to do that. Get good at this skill. Keep practicing this second language every day because there will come a time when you have to go to a country where it's the only language they speak. The more you can practice, the more prepared you'll be.