

The Noble Search

June 30, 2017

The passage we chanted just now, “The world is swept away, it does not endure; it offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge; it has nothing of its own, one has to pass on leaving everything behind; it’s insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.”

Those are the reasons a young monk gave one time when a king asked him, “Why did you ordain?” As the king had said, “A lot of people ordain because they’ve lost their health, they’ve lost their relatives, they’ve gotten old. But here you are: You’re young, your relatives are still alive, you’re still healthy, your family’s wealthy. Why did you ordain?”

And the monk Ratthapala gave these answers. The first three correspond to the problems of aging, illness, and death. When the king asked, “What do you mean, ‘The world is swept away?’” he said to the king, “When you were young, were you strong?” And the king said, “Yes, sometimes I thought I had the strength of two men.” “How about now?” “Well, now I’m eighty. Sometimes I mean to put my foot one place and it goes someplace else.” Aging.

“The world offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge.” Ratthapala illustrated that with an example of illness. He says, “Do you have a recurring illness?” The king said, “Yes. Sometimes the courtiers and my relatives stand around saying, ‘Maybe this will be his last breath.’” And Ratthapala says, “Here you are a king. Can you order that the pain that you’re feeling can be taken and shared out among others so that you feel less?” And the king said, “No. I have to face it all alone.” That’s illness.

Then the king said, “And what do you mean, ‘The world has nothing of its own’? I have storehouses full of gold and silver.” And Ratthapala said, “When you die, can you take it with you?” “Well, no.” That’s a reflection on death.

So the first three reasons relate to aging, illness, and death.

And that last one, that the world is insatiable, a slave to craving, it keeps coming back for more and more and more: The “world” here basically means the world of your mind. If that’s all there was possible for human beings to experience—things that age, grow ill, and die, as they themselves age, grow ill, and die—then you might say, “Well, just learn to accept what you’ve got and put up with the bad so you can enjoy the good.”

But the question the Buddha asked and the question that led him to go off into the wilderness himself was, “Is there another possibility? Is there something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die?” And as he termed it later, he said that that’s a search for something noble. The search for other things that are subject to aging and illness and death, he said, is not noble at all. Everybody does that, even common animals do it. But it takes a human being to figure out, “Might there be something deathless? Something that doesn’t age, grow ill, or die?” And so he went forth and he found it.

Which is why when they talk about how Buddhism tends to bad-mouth the world or have a pessimistic view of the world, it's because there's something better. And the quest for that something better is a noble quest. You develop good qualities of mind: you develop compassion, you develop goodwill, you develop concentration, mindfulness, discernment; you develop the principle of harmlessness. All of these things are noble parts of the path. This is why the path is noble—not only because it leads to a noble goal but also because the activities it involves are noble as well.

And so as we're meditating, we set our sights high. We've all seen the pleasures that the world has to offer, and we figure there must be something better. Part of the contemplation to get our minds on that path is to turn around and look at the drawbacks of the things that we ordinarily go for.

The Buddha has an analysis called the three perceptions. Sometimes they're called the three characteristics, but they're basically perceptions you develop. And they correspond to those first three reflections that Ratthapala taught to the king. "The world is swept away": That's the principle of inconstancy. You look at the things you're trying to hold onto and you see they just slip through your fingers like water. "Offers no shelter, there's no one in charge": That's the principle of stress and pain. If you try to find happiness in things that wobble on you, there's no real ease. It's like sitting in a chair that wobbles—it's very easy to tip over if you're not really, really careful. And then, "You have nothing of your own" – that's the principle of not-self. When you realize that things that are inconstant and stressful are not really worth holding onto as being you or yours, you let go in search of something better.

Again, these analyses sound pessimistic but they're pointing to something better than all this we're going for ordinarily. That's why we have the practice, because there is something better.

So we keep that in mind: that we're aiming for a noble goal and that the means are noble as well. This means that when people make the decision to go forth, it's something that should be encouraged, something that should be admired. But as we'll see tomorrow when we have the ordination, it's not just an individual thing. There's a whole community around this now. We've got the candidates going for ordination, but there's also the community of monks who take them in and promise to give them the training. Once they see that the candidates are qualified, they say, "Okay, you can be one of us." And there's no question about race or nationality or language or whatever.

I found this when I went to Thailand. The day I ordained was like becoming part of a large extended family. Wat Asokaram is a large monastery, with a large lay community attached to it. It's a village basically. And I was taken in just like a member of the village. I found all of a sudden that I had lots of aunts and uncles.

So on the one hand, you've got the community of the monks, but also you've got the community of the lay supporters who come and show their encouragement. Because the

monastic life does require the support of other people. And here people are happy to offer that support, even though they can't go forth themselves. They see that it's a good thing and they're happy to encourage others—because the world is a better place when we have people like this, people who are looking for a happiness that's blameless, a happiness that lasts, and living in a community that's happy to share its knowledge. Even though there's no tit-for-tat arrangement that once you practice and gain the results you're going to teach other people, still, if you have the opportunity and you have the talent, people who have gained true awakening are very happy to share their knowledge. They don't sell it. They don't hold it back from anybody.

As with Ajaan Fuang: Here I was a total stranger, and yet he took me on. After he died, a group of people came one time. Word had gotten out that his robe, which was part of the museum we had of his effects, had shown a miracle. The sweat had turned into little flakes that looked like diamonds. The Thais said, "Ah, relics!" And we had people driving all the way from Bangkok just to see the robe. One day this one group came there from the Ministry of Education. They went up to see the robe and then came back down and asked, "What other miracles have there been since Ajaan Fuang passed away?"

I said, "I think it's pretty miraculous that people drive all the way from Bangkok just to see a piece of cloth." They said, "No, no, no. That's not what we meant. How about when he was alive? Anything miraculous then?" And it would have been possible to talk about Ajaan Fuang's uncanny powers, but I decided not to. I said what I found really amazing was that here I was an American and he was Thai, a very unWesternized Thai, and yet when we talked, there was no barrier about Thai or American at all. It was just one human being talking to another. I said I thought that was pretty amazing. They said, "No, no, no. That's not what we meant." So I gave them some amulets and sent them home.

There was an exchange when my father came to visit. Ajaan Fuang was still alive and I took my father to meditate with him. And my father's first question was, "Here I am, a Christian. Is this going to get in the way of the meditation?" And as Ajaan Fuang said, "First we're going to talk about the breath. The breath is common property all over the world. And then from the breath we talk about the mind, which doesn't belong to any particular religion. We talk about the mind, we talk about the problem of suffering, which is a universal problem. We don't have to talk about religion at all. We just talk about the mind's suffering because we have a cure."

Again, when they say the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths are pessimistic, the Buddha's not saying life is suffering. He's saying something more specific, something a lot more useful: There's suffering in clinging, but the clinging is unnecessary. It's something you can do something about.

Another time, someone came to the monastery and was surprised to see a Western monk. He asked Ajaan Fuang, "How is it that Westerners can ordain?" And Ajaan Fuang's response was, "Don't Westerners have hearts?"

So we're talking about a problem that everybody has, and we're talking about a cure that everyone can attempt. And as we see, it's not a selfish cure. Some people say, "You're looking out after your own happiness and suffering. What about the rest of the world?" Well, if you find a happiness that's blameless and you do it through virtue, concentration, and discernment, or through generosity, virtue, and meditation, how can looking for happiness in that way be a selfish thing? You're looking for a happiness that places no burden on anyone, that doesn't harm anyone. When you look at the world today, you can see that this is a gift.

I heard an analogy once, someone commented on how even when the monks don't teach, they're good examples, like a lamppost by the side of the road: The lamppost just stays there and it emits light, and in emitting light, it makes everything around a lot brighter. I know some people who say that even though they can't come to the monastery, just the fact that they know the monastery exists warms their heart—that there's a place like this where people can practice and conduct a noble search and there are other people who encourage it.

So this is a good family to belong to. We take on the customs of the noble ones to become a part of the noble family. It's a family that stretches way back in time. And as long as we practice, we keep that tradition, that family alive. It's something we do together.