

Bad Stuff Happens

June 4, 2018

That passage we chanted just now—“I’m subject to aging, I’m subject to illness; subject to death. I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me. And I am the owner of my actions; heir to my actions. Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir”: The first four reflections are there to remind ourselves that bad stuff happens. The fifth is to remind us that it’s because of our actions. In other words, you don’t just say, as they said during the Iraqi War, “Well, stuff happens”—in other words, no one was taking responsibility.

Bad things are going to happen in life: not only aging, illness, and death in our own bodies, but being separate from those we find appealing, or changes in relationships. People you thought were kind and sympathetic suddenly turn unkind and unsympathetic. After my mother died, I was looking through her things. And I found a letter that she had written to one of her agents. She was a novelist and was proposing a new novel. It was about the end of a marriage. And one of the things she said was, “Worse than the death of a loved one is the death of love.” But these things happen. And the question is, are we going to allow ourselves to be made miserable by them or are we going to find a way to happiness in spite of them? That’s the path that the Buddha offers. He’s not proposing to put an end to aging, illness, death, separation, and changing relationships. He’s saying, “Look inside for the causes of your suffering. If you take care of those causes, then things that happen outside won’t make you suffer.”

So we have to be willing to look within. What are we holding onto? That’s his analysis. We suffer because of clinging. Sometimes this is hard to admit to ourselves, which is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: to get the mind in a good space where, on the one hand, it is more immune to the changes in things outside because it has a source of happiness within, and then on the other hand, when you’re in a good space, you can look at yourself and see, “Oh yeah, the problem does lie in here.” This is not to say that bad things don’t happen outside. They do happen. But the fact that you’re letting yourself suffer from them—that’s the operative word here, *letting* yourself suffer: That’s the important thing. You need to learn the skills *not* to let yourself suffer. You’ve got to look inside.

The Buddha says we have to get rid of unskillful states. But to do that, we first have to admit that they’re there. And when the mind is in concentration, it’s in a much better place to be able to make that admission. We’ve generated the sense of

ease, the sense of well being, not for its own sake, but because it's a path. And it's a path that provides a good support for discernment. And the discernment is what's going to see you through the clinging. It's going to see you through the reasons we cause ourselves to suffer: the clinging and the craving. And we can do something about it.

It's not the case that you gain discernment only after you've perfected concentration. In the course of getting the mind to settle down, you learn a lot about the currents in the mind, as they call them in the Thai forest tradition. Those currents can be awfully strong, and yet they can flow under the surface in ways that we ordinarily don't see. It's when you put a barrier in their way: That's when you become sensitive to them. You make up your mind that you're going to stay here with the breath. And before you know it, the mind's off someplace else. There's no way you can just say, "stay," and it'll stay forever. It's going to want to move. It's like a dog. It can't stay forever. But in the course of not staying, you want to be alert to what it's doing and quick to bring it back. That way, you're going to learn a lot about it as you develop alertness. You give yourself a landmark. And then you're alert to see: Does it move from the landmark or not? And then, when it has moved and you bring it back, what does it say? Does it complain? If it complains, you can learn something about it: "This is one of the reasons why I go for that particular kind of thought."

Now, in some cases, the distraction is simply from lack of energy. You don't have the strength to stick with the topic, which is one of the reasons why you try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment that will strengthen and energize you.

Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who had been away from him for a couple of years. When she came for a visit, he looked at her when she was meditating one night—he had this ability to look at people's minds—and he said, "You're doing nothing but subtle breathing." He said, "This isn't good for you." There's part of the mind that really likes it. Once you can get the mind into really subtle breathing, there's a sense of ease, a sense of relaxation. But staying there and not going back to more blatant breathing at all is not good for the body in the long run. And it's not good for the mind. You need to be able to give rise to a sense of refreshment, even rapture, so that when the mind does settle down to be calm and everything gets calm in the body, you can maintain a sense of balance in the health of your body—and also balance in the health of the mind so that you don't just drift off out of a lack of energy.

Other times, though, the distraction has nothing to do with a lack of energy. The mind is very active and energetic, and it just wants to think about other

things. This is where you learn about it. Why does it like to think about those things? Why does it like greed? Why does it like anger? Why does it like lust? Why does it like delusion? You learn why it likes these things by thwarting them. It'll complain, but if you develop some solidity in your concentration, you're not going to be swayed by the complaint. It's when the concentration's not strong and it's not giving you a sense of well-being: That's when it's very easy to say, "Well, this is getting boring," or "Nothing's happening," or "I need some entertainment." But when you can drench the body in a sense of well-being and the mind feels refreshed, you're a lot less likely to go with whatever the excuse is, a lot less likely to believe it.

So we work on the concentration not simply to get calm, but also to understand our minds. After all, the mind is the source of the suffering. It's what causes itself to suffer. People outside are going to say good things. They're going to say bad things. That's normal. There's that passage where the Buddha says, "What is human speech like? There's true speech and there's false speech. There's well-meaning speech and not well-meaning speech; useful speech and useless speech." This is the nature of human speech. So when people say things to you that are hurtful, untrue, useless, you have to remind yourself that this is normal. This is the way things are. Then you just tell yourself, "Okay, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And see if you can leave it there. If you can't leave it there, ask yourself, "What is it that keeps pulling the message in, bringing up the issue? Why are you particularly upset about that particular kind of speech or that particular kind of action?" That's where you see your clinging.

And it's in seeing the clinging that you're actually performing the duties of the four noble truths. You want to understand these things. You want to comprehend the clinging to see that that's it: The suffering is the clinging. And if you can find the craving that underlies that clinging and you can abandon it, you don't have to suffer. So you ask yourself, what do you want out of the world? Can you learn how to make yourself more independent so that the ways of the world don't weigh down on the mind?

There is a dimension inside that can be touched right at the mind. It's right here. It's not far away. When we say that it's outside of space and time, it sounds very far away—further away than the ends of space and further away than the ends of time. But that's not the case. It's closer than space; closer than time. It's right here.

We don't see it because we're rushing around, trying to make the world this way, make the world that way, creating a new sense of who we are in a particular world, and then getting upset when those worlds fall apart or don't turn out the

way we wanted them. You have to ask yourself: How much longer are you going to keep eating peppers hoping to find the sweet one? You have to learn to see that the problems of the world that weigh you down are actually caused by a problem in the mind, and that if you can solve that problem, then even though there still will be problems in the world, they don't have to weigh on the mind. From that point on, to whatever extent you're able to help with a mind that's not weighed down, you're happy to help.

But you realize that the ways of the world are going to keep on going: Aging, illness, and death are not going to stop. You read about those Silicon Valley millionaires who don't want to die, don't want to get old. They may be smart in terms of Silicon Valley, but they're awfully dumb. The problem is not aging, illness, and death. The problem is clinging. That was the Buddha's main discovery. And he made that discovery available for all of us to use. So make good use of it because it really can release you from the things that weigh the mind down.