

## *Encouragement*

*April 8, 2019*

We often begin the meditation session with that contrast: the chant on aging, illness, death, separation, the world is swept away, has nothing of its own, offers no shelter; and then, “May I be happy.” That’s to put our search for happiness in context. The world outside doesn’t have much to offer. It offers lots of things but then takes them away. We have to regard this as normal and universal. It’s not happening just to us. In the Thai translation for those passages that we translate, “I am subject to aging, illness, and death,” they translate it as “Aging, illness, and death are normal.”

And in the original sutta where that reflection is found, it’s not just, “I’m subject to these things.” The Buddha has you go on to reflect that all beings everywhere are subject to these things. When you think about how you’re subject to them, it gives rise to a sense of heedfulness. Your actions are the only things that will provide happiness. When you look everywhere else around you, you see that the things you could hold onto will slip through your fingers. It’s like trying to hold onto a handful of water. But the results of your actions stick with you. So this reflection focuses your attention on your actions. Your actions are going to make the difference between whether you suffer or not.

Then when the Buddha recommends that you extend the reflection out to all beings everywhere, he said that it gives rise to the path. In other words, you develop a sense of what’s called *samvega*, a strong sense of dismay over the universality of all this suffering. It’s all around us. Everywhere. Everybody. We can’t see other people’s suffering, but we know it’s there. This is what motivates you to follow the path.

One of the main problems of suffering is that we feel ours very intently, but no one else can feel ours. Sometimes we feel like we’re alone in the world. We can tell other people about our suffering and they can sympathize with it, but they don’t experience our suffering. So there is a loneliness that comes with suffering. But when you start reflecting, “Everybody has their own sufferings,” it helps to take away some of the sting when it seems like the suffering is being aimed exclusively at you.

So it’s good to reflect on that for a while. Suffering is everywhere, but there is a way out. The Buddha doesn’t leave you there with *samvega*, a sense of dismay, or even a sense of terror at the universality of suffering. He has you extend goodwill

and compassion to all beings. But then he says, “Focus in on your actions because that’s the way out.”

This is why belief in kamma is an essential part of the path. Because it *is* a path of actions. And as the Buddha’s teachings show, actions are pretty complex. What you’re experiencing right now is a combination of several things: the results of past actions; your current intentions, which are also your current actions; and then the results of your current actions—all of these together. That’s what you’re experiencing. You can’t do much about what’s coming in from the past, but you *can* focus on different potentials coming in from the past. Some potentials are skillful to focus on; others are not. In fact, as the Buddha points out, what you’re doing right now is what’s going to determine whether you’re going to suffer from, say, bad past actions.

This is why we focus on the present moment in our meditation: to see what we’re doing, sensing where it’s not skillful, and then taking some advice from the Buddha and his noble disciples as to what can be done to act skillfully. That way, even though bad things can happen, we don’t have to suffer from them.

When I first went to see Ajaan Fuang, I asked him about rebirth, and his first comment was, “The Buddha has you believe in one thing, and that’s the principle of kamma, the principle of action.” Now, as it turns out, the principle of action does involve rebirth because of the universality of action. Kamma’s power is such that it’s what has determined where you’re born. A lot of circumstances of your life that you didn’t create in this lifetime came from lifetimes before you. And they can also extend into other lifetimes. This is true of you; this is true of everybody else.

This is both reassuring and scary. The reassuring part concerns people we’ve loved: When we leave them or they leave us, it’s not necessarily the end of the story. We might see them again. The scary part is that we don’t know what the conditions of the continuing story will be. To say nothing of future lifetimes, we don’t know how conditions are going to go in this lifetime. What we do know, though, is that the power of the mind is such that we can train it. Once we’ve accepted that things are uncertain, there is no protector outside, then we have to learn to be our own protectors—and we can do it.

That was the Buddha’s message. That’s what his awakening means in our lives: It is possible for human beings to find true happiness through their own efforts. It’s something we can do. Ajaan Suwat used to like to note that the Buddha keeps talking about how the aggregates are not-self and the sense media are not-self, but then we have that chant: “I am the owner of my actions.” You are responsible for them. They’re what you’re going to receive. So you focus your attention there and

you try to develop a sense of yourself as capable of doing the practice, of being a person who's responsible. You take responsibility for what you've done, but you take even more responsibility for what you can do right now.

So everything keeps pointing to: What are you doing right now? In fact, that's one of the questions the Buddha has you ask yourself every day. "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" And of course, what you become is based on what you're doing. And what you're doing is based on a sense of what your capabilities are.

It's in this scenario where the Buddha's full of encouragement. We can all develop mindfulness; we can all develop alertness. The efforts we put in to become more skillful are never wasted. So the teachings are there to give us encouragement in addition to giving us direction.

It's often stated that when the Buddha would give a Dhamma talk, he would instruct, rouse, encourage, and inspire his listeners. He wasn't just setting out a few facts about suffering and its cause. He gives you encouragement in addition to information that's really going to be useful to you. As he said, the things he would teach were 1) true, 2) beneficial, and 3) timely. There are a lot of truths he learned in his awakening that are really irrelevant for us. He didn't teach them even though they were true. Then there were times where he was harsh with his students and other times when he was gentle. But he was always encouraging. Even the harshness was there for the purpose of encouraging people, to remind them they can do better.

This is something that's often misunderstood when people read the teachings of the forest ajaans. Some of them are pretty fierce. Well, they're fierce because they realize their students have capabilities that they're not taking advantage of, and that's one way of reminding them that they can do better. At other times, though, you need to be encouraged in gentler terms. But either way, the message is encouragement. Even when you stumble, it's possible to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and just keep going.

So remember, your actions are important, and you can make skillful choices now. Now, as you live in this human life, we can't guarantee that once you've started on the path everything will be a path of roses. We all have our past kamma, the things that come at us in life from our past actions. But again, it's what you're doing right now that's going to make all the difference, so you want to focus on: What are your capabilities right now? Where are you holding onto things that are making you suffer? That was the Buddha's definition of suffering. It's not something that's happening to us. It's something we're doing. When he gave his analysis, he started with things we're familiar with: the suffering of birth, aging,

illness, and death; the suffering of separation from things and people you love; the suffering of having to be with things and people you don't like; the suffering of not getting what you want. All of these things are familiar to us. We all recognize them as suffering. But to summarize, what do they have in common? The five clinging-aggregates. This is where the analysis gets impersonal and unfamiliar. And part of the problem is that translation, "aggregates." There's got to be a better translation. It's basically groups of different actions. We're clinging to certain ways of acting, clinging itself is a kind of action, and that's where the suffering is.

And so we've basically got bad habits—but we can change them, and change starts with very simple things: focusing on your breath, learning to get a sense of well-being right here, right now, and learning to appreciate that sense of well-being, because it puts the mind in a position where it can step back from a lot of its clingings and question them.

As the Buddha said, the most important internal quality you can develop as a meditator is something he calls appropriate attention, in other words, asking the right questions of yourself. And the questions come down to: What am I doing? Where is it skillful and where is it unskillful? If it's skillful, how can I maintain it? If it's unskillful, how can I change? Again, this involves the recognition of the power of your actions. And wisdom, the Buddha says, starts with the question: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The wisdom there is that, one, it's through your actions that happiness comes. Two, long-term is possible. And then three, long-term better than short-term.

So, the basic principles are not all that difficult. It's simply a matter of giving them priority, because the mind has lots of other priorities. But when you give these questions priority, it means that you put them first, and also you try to bring everything else in line with these questions.

This is where it's difficult, because we have lots of other questions, lots of other desires. But what the Buddha's having you do is to take your desire for a genuine happiness and make it paramount, and then to bring everything else in line with that.

So the teachings are there all for your good, for your happiness, to encourage you on the path. And the times when you get down, even though the voice that is getting you down may seem to be sympathetic, commiserating with your miseries, that kind of commiseration is not helpful. What's really helpful is the encouragement that you don't have to suffer from this.

There once was a time where the Buddha was wounded by a stone sliver. Someone had tried to kill him and rolled a rock down a mountain in his direction. Fortunately, something caused the rock to shatter before it got to the Buddha, but

one of the splinters of the rock got into his foot—pierced it all the way through—and so he had to lie down for a while. Mara came and taunted him, called him a lazy-bones, moping around. The Buddha said, “I’m not moping around, I’m extending goodwill to all beings.”

That’s a good start right there when you’re feeling down. Remember that other beings are suffering, too, and you don’t want them to suffer. That’s a good wish to hold in mind: You’d like to see all beings be free from suffering. It reminds you that you’re not simply there suffering from your pains and your sorrows. You’ve got some goodness inside you that you can share. That gives you a sense of wealth, a sense of competence.

Ajaan Lee points out many times that we have lots of potentials both in the body and the mind that we don’t take advantage of. When you start getting discouraged, a lot of your potentials just get pushed off to the side, right at the time when you need them. And here the Buddha’s reminding you: Take your potential for goodwill and use it. Your potential for mindfulness, your potential for alertness: They’re there. Don’t abandon them. If you give them some room, give them some encouragement, they’ll come in and give you strength, right when you need it.

So give them a chance, and they’ll more than repay the effort you put into developing them.