

Timeless

June 24, 2020

King Pasenadi once came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asked him, “What have you been up to today?” And in a remarkable display of candor, the king said, “Oh, the typical things of someone who’s obsessed with power, consumed with the desire for more power.” The Buddha asked him, “Suppose a reliable person were to come from the east, saying that there’s a huge mountain coming in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. And suppose another reliable person were to come from the south, saying that there’s a huge mountain coming in from the south, crushing all living beings in its path. Another person from the west, another person from the north: altogether four mountains moving in. In the face of this horrible destruction of life, and reflecting how rare it is to gain human birth, what would you do?” The king said, “What else could I do but practice the Dhamma?”

Then the Buddha said, “I tell you, great king, aging, illness, and death are moving in, crushing all living beings in their path. What are you going to do?” And the king had to say, “What else should I do but practice the Dhamma?”

This is a good conversation to reflect on. It points to the fact that the Dhamma is timeless. We live in a time of turmoil, a time of disease, yet the Dhamma stays the same. It’s not that we have one Dhamma for when times are comfortable and easy, and another for when they’re not. Aging, illness, and death are moving in all the time. This fact is always relevant.

As the Buddha said, when the sun rises in the morning, you should remind yourself that you could die today. You don’t need a pandemic. You could simply get careless as you walk down a path: trip, fall. I knew someone onetime who’d made a list of all the strange ways in which people die, and some of them seemed so arbitrary. So ask yourself at sunrise, “Are you ready to go?” And the answer usually is, “No.” Well then, you’ve got work to do: Exactly what is it that’s keeping you from being ready? What are you holding on to that’s unskillful? Or what skillful qualities have you not yet developed? Work on those—and work on them now.

When the Buddha talks about the importance of being in the present moment, he’s not telling you to just be there to stay. He wants you to get there so that you can do work, because there’s work to be done in the present moment. Just as death can be random, the things that come up in your mind can be random, and you can grab on to them very easily. Something you

haven't thought of for years suddenly shows up, and the simple fact that you hadn't thought of it for years will compel you to go look into it.

Again, imagine what it's going to be like when death comes and suddenly your whole life starts flashing before your eyes. All kinds of events could suddenly grab your attention. Have you trained the mind well enough so that it's not going to be interested, it's not going to be waylaid by those things? If not, you know what you've got to do: You've got to work on your concentration, work on your mindfulness, work on your discernment—to bring your discernment in line with the word the Buddha calls *penetrating*.

He talks about the faculty of discernment is *penetrating* discernment into how things arise and pass away, but it's not simply a matter of watching them arise and pass away. You also have to see that there's variation there, there's a diversity there in the arising and passing away. Some things arise and they're good, skillful. Other things arise and they're not. You want to learn how to discern which is which, so that you can know what's worth going for. Only when your discernment is penetrating like that is it really useful and safe.

If you just see things arising and passing away, you're not seeing anything that anyone else hasn't seen. People who see arising and passing away in the world can continue to do unskillful things and go unskillful places.

It's when you see how you can give rise to skillful things and get them to stay, and how you can see unskillful things arising and get them to go away and not come back: That's when you're really seeing something special. That means you have to learn how to take them apart. See what it is that sparks your desire to go for them.

As we were saying today, when the Buddha talks about the origination of mind states, in some cases the explanation is simply that there's contact—in other words, there's old karma—but in other cases he says that it's because of your desire now: These things come and you welcome them, you relish them, you feed on them. Why?

Giving the mind better food with concentration is going to help you with that, because otherwise, if you're hungry, then when anything comes up, you just go for it. But when you can satisfy some of your hunger with the concentration, then when other things come up and you feel tempted to go, you can begin to see, "Oh, this is why I go, but it's really not worth it." That's when your discernment becomes penetrating, the kind of discernment that can protect you when random things come up in the mind.

When your discernment gets really strong, then even when the body is weak, the mind can

maintain its determination: It's not going to go there. When you see this happening in the mind—something that would ordinarily spark lust, or anger, or greed, or fear, jealousy, resentment, whatever, but it doesn't spark the emotion it used to spark—then you can say, “Now I've learned something important, something useful.”

Of course, it's no guarantee that you're totally safe from those things, but you can improve your odds by practicing this again, and again, and again. You don't have to count the number of times. You can't say, “Well, I've already contemplated x ; I'm done with it.” You have to be alive to the fact that it could come back and it could disturb you again.

Years back, when I was first returning to the States, I was back east in a meditation center, and I was sitting in the kitchen, talking to someone. A woman came in and said, “Quick, quick, I need a book on death contemplation. I took a retreat last year on death contemplation and I thought I'd taken care of the issue. Then last night while I was having a trip, I suddenly realized I was still afraid of death.”

Well, one retreat is not going to take care of this sort of thing. This contemplation is something you have to do again, and again, and again—but don't get tired of the doing. After all, the only thing you'll have as you face death will be the skills you've developed in the mind. Everything else will leave you.

And as with any skill that takes time and requires practice, you do it again and again and again. There will come a point, though, when something takes hold in the mind. There are moments, experiences, that radically change things inside.

Where do they come from? They come from following the path like we're doing right now: getting the mind concentrated and noticing where it's still creating unnecessary stress for itself, looking for the cause, learning to let go of the cause. You just keep at it, at it, at it. When something really special opens up at some point, that's when you know you're safe. That's when you know you're ready. Up to that point, you're not ready.

You may manage to muddle through, but you really want to be confident that nothing can get the mind to fall. That's when you can face death with confidence.

We know that we're going to face death—it could come at any time—but we don't know when. This pandemic is going to come in waves. Maybe we survived the first wave, but who knows about the second or the third. Even if we survive all the waves of the pandemic, something else is going to get us. It's the nature of the body—once it's born, it's going to have to die.

So we have to be prepared. Any knowledge that helps us prepare in a way where we really can be confident is something that you really want to give a lot of time to.

That's the knowledge the Buddha provides: how we can experience aging, illness, and death, and not suffer from it—and not do anything unskillful around it. That's the kind of knowledge that will keep us safe.