

The Buddha Aimed High

March 2, 2021

If you ask people how they came to the Dhamma, you get all kinds of answers. Some people come from having suffered loss; some people because they're stressed out. Everyone's looking for some peace of mind. If you'd asked the Buddha how he came to the Dhamma, he would have said because he realized he was subject to aging, illness, and death, and he wanted to find something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die.

So we owe the Dhamma on the one hand to the fact that there is aging, illness, and death; and on the other hand, to the desire to get away from those things. That's a very ambitious desire, but the Buddha found that by following it, he was able to succeed. That's why we have the Dhamma.

His quest is reflected in that reflection we chanted just now: "We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation." Those are the feelings of *samvega* that the young prince felt while contemplating aging, illness, and death. Then there was *pasada*, confidence: There's a way out, and it's through your actions. "I'm the owner of my actions." His quest as he said, was to find what was skillful, so he focused immediately on his actions. He wasn't interested in testing the idea that human action was incapable of finding the deathless, or that the deathless could be found without acting. He wanted to see: Is there a path of action that could lead to the deathless? It had to be a path. It couldn't be a cause for the deathless, because after all, if the deathless was caused, then when the cause changed the deathless would be gone.

So he went in search of a path and searched for what it was skillful. He had a lot of false starts, but he finally found the way. That's reflected in that other passage we chanted just now, the teaching he gave to Ratthapala, the one that Ratthapala said was his inspiration for leaving home. That was how the Buddha came to the Dhamma: "The world is swept away, it does not endure." Ratthapala explains this to a king, and the way he explains it, it's about aging. The king doesn't know what it means. So Ratthapala asks him, "When you were young, were you strong?" The king says, "Yes." "How about now?" "Oh, no, no. I'm 80 years old. I mean to put my foot one place and it goes someplace else." That's the problem with aging: It's a lack of control. We're beginning to lose control.

Then the second Dhamma summary: "The world is without shelter, there's no one in charge." He illustrates that with illness. "Does the king have a recurring illness?" "Yes, a recurring wind disease"—which basically is shooting pains throughout the body. Ajaan

Fuang had a wind disease, apparently it was associated with his heart. It can be fatal. As the king says, “Sometimes I’m lying there in bed in pain, and my courtiers are standing around saying, ‘Maybe he’ll die now, maybe he’ll die now.’” Ratthapala says, “Can you ask them to share out the pain so you don’t have to feel so much of it yourself?” The king says, “No, I’ve got to feel it myself.” No shelter. Even if you’re a king, you can’t be in charge of your pain. Again: loss of control.

“The world has nothing of its own, one has to pass on leaving everything behind.” That’s about death. The king says, “What do you mean, ‘The world has nothing of its own’? I’ve got plenty of treasures stored away.” Ratthapala asks him, “Can you take them with you when you die?” “Well no, of course I can’t.”

Then just as the first contemplation doesn’t leave you hanging there with just aging, illness, and death, the fourth Dhamma summary points to where the solution is: Craving. We’re slaves to craving. Even though the world is insufficient, we keep coming back for more. This case he illustrates with a question to the king, “Suppose someone were to come from the east and say that there’s a kingdom to the east with plenty of wealth but very weak. With your force of arms, you could conquer it. Would you go for it?” Here the king is 80 years old, and yet he says, “Yes, of course.” “How about someone coming from the west, the north, the south?” “Yes, yes, yes,” in each case. “How about someone from across the ocean?” “Yes.” In other words, the mind is insatiable. That’s where the problem is.

You look at those first three Dhamma summaries and they reflect the three perceptions that the Buddha has you adopt as part of the path: aging, inconstancy; illness, stress; death, not self and the ultimate loss of control. But again, he doesn’t leave you there. These reflections are there in service of that quest to find a way to bring about dispassion for craving. We suffer from these things because of our craving, and only when we deal with our craving will we get anywhere.

So that’s the focus of the teachings. It’s the kernel of the four noble truths. You solve the problem of suffering not by solving suffering, but by solving the cause. You’ve got to abandon the cause. We want to abandon the suffering, we want to push it away, but it doesn’t work. You’ve got to find the cause. It’s like going into your house and seeing that it’s flooded with water. If you just bail out the water without checking to see where the water comes from, it will just keep coming and coming and coming. In this case, it’s probably a burst pipe. You’ve got to wade through the water to find the pipe. Wading through the water stands for the fact that there’s going to be some suffering on the path, there’s going to be a lot you don’t like, but it gets you to where the solution is. That’s what matters.

You find the craving and you begin to look at it. As the Buddha said, you look at its origination, you look at its cessation, you look at its allure, you look at its drawbacks, so that you finally can get some dispassion for it. The dispassion will be the escape. Otherwise, the craving keeps going.

Someone once asked the Buddha, “How is it that a being goes from one body to another at death?” And the Buddha said it’s like a flame going from one house to another. The flame has to have some sustenance, it has to have a support, something to cling to. It clings to the wind. In the same way, we cling to craving.

So when we think about death, that’s what we’ve got to think about. It’s not just a question of what’s it going to be like when everything ends. Things don’t end. Some things end, but craving can keep going on. And it’ll go on unless you tame it.

Here it is. It’s something so intimate that we take as our friend. As the Buddha said, everywhere we go, we go with craving as our companion. We’ve trusted it all along. In the form of desire, he said it’s the root of all our experiences.

So as you meditate, think about why you’re here. The reason you came to the meditation may have been one thing, but maybe you might want to raise your sights to something more radical. If you want to get the most out of meditating, realize that it has an awful lot more to offer. But it’s going to challenge you. Craving, that friend you’ve been hanging around with so long, turns out to be a murderous friend. The Buddha talks about people trusting their aggregates, the aggregates they cling to. The image he gives is of someone who’s planning to kill you. They work their way into your confidence and then, when they find you in a likely place, they stab you.

Well, the same image applies to your craving. So what do you do? You can’t just say, “Drop craving,” and be done with it. You first focus your craving on the path, the qualities of mind you need to develop in order to look at the craving, to look at your more unskillful forms of craving. Realize you’ve got something better as you develop the path. That’s why this is a search for what’s skillful: the skills you can develop as you meditate, as you practice all the aspects of the training. They’re there to provide you with a relatively solid place to stay, so that you can begin to call some of your cravings into question.

Get the mind in a good state of concentration where there’s rapture and bliss that come from simply sitting here being very still, secluded from sensuality. Sensuality is the first type of craving you’ve got to watch out for, because that’s so pervasive. If you can pull the mind out of its fascination with thinking about sensual desires, sensual objects, and focus its passion *here*, just being inside the body, inhabiting it, that puts you in a good place to look back. You get a perspective that you wouldn’t have otherwise.

And this stillness is happiness. Usually, we get things all mixed up. We get a little thrill out of indulging in our sensual pleasures and we think that's happiness, but as we try to maintain it, hold onto it, it just slips away. It's just a little bit outside our grasp, just a little bit beyond what we can hold on to.

But if you can settle in here, you realize there's a strong sense of well-being. As the Buddha said: "There is no happiness other than peace." This is where the real happiness lies.

This isn't even the ultimate, but it's your first taste of what it's like to put down some of your craving, and the peace that can come. You're at a better position to look at what was the allure of all that sensual thinking anyhow. What did you think you were gaining from it? In terms of your self-image? In terms of your idea of holding on to something? It's there to deny everything you think about it.

So work on this concentration. It's the first step to developing the dispassion you need to get past the craving that otherwise will just keep pulling you on, pulling you on, pulling you on, having to come back to more aging, illness, and death. The Buddha is asking you to set your sights high. Aim high. Don't be satisfied with just some stress reduction or a little bit of peace of mind. There's a lot more you can accomplish. Try to get the most of what the Dhamma has to offer.