

A Tale of Two Kings

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There's that chant that we repeat often: "I am subject to aging. Aging is unavoidable. I'm subject to illness, subject to death. They're unavoidable. I'll grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me." If the reflection stopped there, it would be a reflection for acceptance: This is the way things are. Simply accept that and you'll be okay. And there is that line of thought in a lot of Buddhist circles. It's because we try to fight against these facts that we're miserable, they say. If we simply accept them, go with the flow, there's no stress in flowing along. That's what we're told, but it's still pretty miserable. You're finding happiness by lowering your expectations.

Fortunately, that's not what the Buddha is teaching. Because there is that fifth reflection: "I am the owner of my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." The implication there is that it's through your actions that you can make a difference.

Now, in the original sutta, the Buddha has you go on to think that this applies not only to you but also to all beings. No matter where you go in the universe, you're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, and you're the owner of your actions. You are responsible for what you do and you will reap the results of what you do.

It's a chastening thought, but as the Buddha said, when you think in those ways it gets you on the path—because it's through our actions that we can find an end to aging, illness, and death. We can actually go to a dimension that's beyond them: a dimension that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. And it's done through our actions.

You see the difference that this thought makes in comparing those two stories of kings that we often talk about. One is the story of Koravya who meets up with a monk, Ven. Ratthapala, and asks him, "Why did you ordain? Here you are, you were wealthy and healthy. You had a good family. What would have inspired you to ordain?"

Ratthapala teaches him the four Dhamma summaries: "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." Those are the first three summaries. The king asks him about the meaning of those summaries, and Ratthapala draws examples from the king's life. Here he is, eighty years old.

He used to have what he thought was superhuman strength. But now he means to put his foot one place and it goes some place else. Aging.

As for illness, he has a recurring illness, and when it hits, he's debilitated, with shooting pains throughout his body. His courtiers and relatives stand around saying, "Maybe he's going to go this time, maybe he's going to go this time." You wonder about the tone of voice with which they're saying that. As Ratthapala points out, there's no way the king can ask them to share out some of his pains so that he feels less pain. He has to feel all the pain all on his own. Even though he's king, he can't order his courtiers to do that.

As for the third summary, it's about death. Even though the king has treasures, he can't take them with him when he dies.

The king admits the truth of all these statements, but then Ratthapala gives his fourth Dhamma summary: "The world is a slave to craving." Hearing this, the king objects to being called a slave.

But Ratthapala points out, "If someone were to come from the east, saying that there's a kingdom to the east with lots of wealth, one that you could conquer with your forces: Would you do it?" And here the king has just been reflecting on aging, illness, and death and how he can't take anything with him. Yet he says, "Of course, I'd go for it. I'd try to conquer that kingdom."

"How about a kingdom to the south, the west, the north? How about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes."

This is what happens when you simply accept the facts of aging, illness, and death. There comes a point where you can't just accept them anymore. You say, "What the hell. Might as well try to get what I can, while I can." After all, the simple fact of impermanence can be interpreted in a lot of ways, can be used to justify all kinds of behavior, one of which is: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." Another may be more mouse-like in accepting impermanence, but if that's all we're thinking about, then it's simply a matter of personal preference, personal choice. No one can tell anyone else what's the right way or wrong way to think about and react to the impermanence of things.

But the Buddha points out that it is possible through our actions to put an end to suffering. That changes the equation. It's no longer a matter of personal preference. The question is: Here this opportunity is there. Are you not going to take advantage of it? Otherwise, you'll just keep coming back to the same old suffering, having to accept the same old suffering.

There's another king who got at least an inkling of what the Buddha was talking about. Again there's an image of east, west, north, south. King Pasenadi

comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him, “What have you been up to?” And the king, remarkably frank, says, “Oh, I was engaged in the activities that those who are obsessed with power tend to be obsessed with.”

The Buddha asks him, “Suppose someone were to come from the east and say, there’s a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. Another person would come from the west, another from the north, another from the south, all with similar news. There’s a mountain moving in from the west, one from the north, one from the south, crushing all living beings in their paths. In the midst of all this destruction and realizing how rare it is to get a human life, what would you do?”

The king replies, “What else could I do but skillful practice, Dhamma practice?” That’s one thing that the mountains can’t crush: your karma. And the Buddha says, “Okay, I tell you: Aging and death are moving, in crushing all living beings in their wake. What are you going to do?” The king gives the same answer: “What else could I do but skillful actions, Dhamma actions?”

It’s through our actions that we can make a difference. That’s why the Buddha places such an emphasis on kamma. He calls himself a *kamma-vadin*, which means someone who teaches action. There were people in his day who taught that human beings had no power of action. Either your actions were unreal or they might be real but they have no impact. What’s going to happen to you is something totally beyond your control. Other kamma-vadins, like the Jains, taught that everything you’re going to experience now is the result of past actions and you have to put up with it. Just learn how not to act. Lie down, be very still, put up with all the pain of lying still and not eating, and then at some point the pain will be done when all the bad karma is burnt out.

But the Buddha taught kamma in a different way. Your life is shaped not only by your past actions but more importantly by your present ones: what you’re doing right now, how you’re fashioning your experience right now. This is why we meditate. What you’re doing right now is focusing on the breath. Direct your thoughts to the breath. Evaluate the breath. Hold certain perceptions of the breath in mind so that you can create a feeling of well-being and allow that feeling of well-being to spread through the body. The choices you make as you do that really do change your experience. And they teach you the lessons you’re going to need so that you can dig deeper and deeper inside to see how you fabricate your experience. You get more and more skillful at it. You finally get to the point where you meet up with something unfabricated. And that unfabricated dimension: That’s the way out. Something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die.

So when the Buddha teaches acceptance, it's an acceptance of the fact that there is this problem: We're subject to aging, illness, and death. But there is a solution, and the solution doesn't lie simply in acceptance and sticking to equanimity. It means learning to become more and more skillful in your actions. There is a potential as you develop the path to find an opening that will lead you out. At that point the problem is solved, not because you've lowered your standards. You've actually raised your standards and you've found something that's totally satisfactory as a result. It is possible.

So, which kind of universe would you rather live in? A universe where we stop with the four reflections, or are you going to the fifth? That makes the difference between a universe with no hope and one in which the best hope is possible. It can be attained. It can come true. The Buddha encourages you to go for the second alternative. And it is the wise choice.