

For When the World Can't Help You

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In Thailand, they have a custom of printing books at funerals and handing them out to all the people who come. Most often, they're books about Dhamma, but sometimes about other things. If there's been enough time between the death of the person and the cremation, they'll include a little biography—how the person was born, educated, got married or didn't get married, what work the person did. They'll talk about how his life went on, beginning to notice a disease here and a disease there, and at first it was manageable, then it got heavier and heavier until it finally got to the point where the doctors—even the best doctors—couldn't help, and the person died.

You always wonder what the person thought at that point when even the best doctors said, "Well, sorry we can't help you now," what that person was able to do. If they had a practice, they could focus on that. If they didn't, their minds would be all over the place.

It's good to think about that.

There will be a time when people with the best will in the world, people with the most capabilities, can't help you, when the body reaches the point where it's too sick, too decrepit, whatever. There's just you facing the fact that you're going to die. What would you do then? The best thing would be to work on the good qualities in the mind. As for what effort you've put in, leading up to that point in working on the good qualities of the mind, you'd be glad you did it.

It's good to keep that perspective in mind every day, every day, as you sit down to meditate: There will come a time where you're going to be passing away and all you have is your meditation. That helps give you a perspective on what you're doing and on the worth of what you're doing, because all too often the world has other messages: Other things are more important, your study is more important, your work is more important, your family is more important, and of course the media will scream at you with all kinds of things: Pay attention to this, pay attention to that, you wouldn't believe what so-and-so did, what so-and-so said. That kind of stuff won't give you any help. You'll need your ability to keep the mind focused, along with strong sense that there is an awareness that's not dependent on the body, and you want to find it inside. It's something you can take as your refuge.

We talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge, and refuge

occurs on many levels. There's the external level, of course. The Buddha was a good example of how to practice. He was determined that there must be something deathless and he was either going to find it or going to die in the process. He was that dedicated. Think about that.

We tend to think of Buddhism as being opposed to desire, but he had a very strong desire and very strong determination that there must be a happiness that's not going to let you down. He searched for it and he put himself on the line, tested himself again and again as he tested different teachings, different paths of practice, and it was through being very truthful with himself, and being very observant—or as he later said, being committed and then learning how to reflect—that he finally found the way.

So we have his example. We also have the example of the Dhamma he taught on how to train the mind in generosity, virtue, and meditation. Then there's the Sangha—the people who've practiced in line with what the Buddha taught and found that, yes, it's true: You can achieve the deathless through this path.

That's an external refuge. Then you try to internalize that refuge by developing the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha in yourself.

In terms of the Buddha, he's said to have had three qualities—wisdom, compassion, purity—and you try to develop those within you. In terms of the Dhamma, the Buddha has said when you take the Dhamma as your refuge, you're taking yourself as your refuge. In other words, you internalize the teachings. In particular, you establish mindfulness right here at the body. Stay with the breath coming in, the breath going out, because that's your anchor in the present moment. As long as you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment.

If you lose the breath, it's easy to wander off to the past, wander off to the future. But there's no future breath you could watch, no past breath you could watch, so when you're with the breath, you know you're here in the right place. You want to observe the mind right here, because the movements of the mind are what make the difference between creating suffering and putting an end to suffering. So you stay with the breath. Try to keep it comfortable. Breathe in, breathe out in a way that feels good all the way through the body, because there will be those tendencies that will run out after the world again, and you need something to counterbalance the forces that point outside, outside, outside all the time.

You want something that points inside instead, because if you want to get some control over the mind, you have to learn how to understand it. That's the biggest fear, as the Buddha said, when you pass away from this body and go on looking for another one: It's going to be through the power of craving. Sometimes our cravings are desperate and sometimes our

cravings are random, totally out of control. Things can just pop into the mind.

As the Buddha said, there's nothing quicker to change than the mind. You seem to be going in one direction, then all of the sudden, you're going someplace else. You want to learn how to take advantage of that quality. In other words, if you see the mind is headed in a bad direction, remind yourself you're not committed to a bad direction. You can always think of something skillful. But you have to watch out for the other tendency: to leave something skillful and go back for something that's not.

So you want to understand why those changes of direction come. You've got to stay right here and watch the mind as you try to keep it with one object, keep it with the breath, because it will wander off. You have to keep reminding yourself, "No, that's not where I want to go right now. I want to be right here."

We had those reflections before the meditation—*the world is swept away, it does not endure; it offers no shelter; there's no one in charge*—just to remind you: If you go out looking in the world, you're not going to find the satisfaction you want. You're not going to develop the skills you're going to need when the world can no longer help you.

Then you can reflect further: What does the world have to offer? It has material gain and material loss; status, loss of status; praise and criticism; sensual pleasure and pain. That's pretty much it. And how are those going to help you? You get caught up in the merry-go-round that goes up and then it goes down, and then up again and down again. You realize that the best place to be would be outside of all that.

So you keep directing the mind in, directing the mind in, and as you do this, you're also internalizing the qualities of the Sangha: The Sangha practices well, practices straightforwardly, practices masterfully. You really want to master this practice as a skill, because this is the one skill that will hold you in good stead, when, as I said, even the best doctors can't help you anymore.

So the meditation is a combination of technique and values. The main value, of course, is heedfulness—realizing you need to develop these skills for your own safety, for your own well-being. We have that chant—"May you forever be well"—after we've been chanting about how the world is swept away and how we're subject to aging, illness and death. It sounds like a wan hope, but actually it's a real hope. As the Buddha said, there is a deathless happiness—something that's not subject to change.

Permanence is one of the epithets he gives it, along with *refuge, harbor, safety, freedom*. These are all good things and they can be found in here. They're not going to be

found out there. You may have heard of that Zen koan where the student asks if dogs have Buddha-nature, and the master says, “No,” which goes against all the standard Mahayana teachings. Well, I think what the master’s getting at is that if you’re looking outside for enlightenment or for guarantees of enlightenment, you’re looking in the wrong place. You’re not going to find it. You have to look inside. That’s where awakening will be found.

So keep turning your gaze inward. This doesn’t mean that you’re not aware of the world, but there are times when you have to put the world aside. This doesn’t mean that you neglect your duties. You take them on, but you learn how to wear them in such a way that you can put them down. You’re not carrying them around all the time.

In the old days in Thailand, they used to have coolies at the docks in Bangkok who would carry huge loads on their backs—bent over as they walked up the planks to the ships, bent over as they came back down again. Even when they weren’t carrying loads, they were bent over. They’d been carrying so many loads for such a long time that that became their normal posture. All too often our minds are like that. We’re carrying loads day after day after day, and even when you take the load off, you’re bent over.

When you meditate, you’re learning how to stand up straight. You’re learning how to maintain your balance. You’re learning to stay centered so that the world doesn’t knock you over, so that aging, illness and death don’t knock you over.

So this is important work that we’re doing. Always have a strong sense of its importance. It’s worthy of your full attention, and when you give it your full attention, it’ll give you full rewards.