Bursting Bubbles

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One of the teachings that tends to get overlooked is the teaching on elements or properties, not dukkha. This is a shame because it’s a very helpful teaching. There are physical elements and there are mental elements. In each case, you’ve got potentials. There are physical elements that you can bring up or that you can strengthen. On the physical side, there are the physical elements of earth, water, wind, and fire, which, as they say, can get provoked. In other words, each of them lies there as a potential, but then you can provoke it to get it to show itself more. These things tend to get provoked on their own anyhow, particularly in the body. Sometimes you find the heat element is dominant, and sometimes the water element or the wind element is dominant, and things can get out of balance. Then you want to bring things back into balance. You can use the power of the mind to do this. Just focusing on whichever element is weakest, you can strengthen it. When you’re feeling hot outside, you can focus on the water in the body. It cools you down. There are cool sensations someplace in the body. You focus on those. You try to make them more prominent. Simply by paying attention to them, keeping them in mind, you can make them stronger. When you’re feeling lightheaded and dizzy, you can think about the earth element. That helps to steady you. When you’re feeling sluggish, you can think of the wind element. You make these things more prominent. It helps bring the body into balance. The same principle applies in the mind. There is a potential for sensual desire. There’s a potential for ill will. There’s a potential for each of the hindrances. And there is the opposite potential as well. The problem is that we don’t give appropriate attention to the potentials that can get rid of the hindrances. The hindrances take over because we tend to forget. When a particular hindrance is there, it’s squatting in the mind. It’s moved in and it’s claiming rights of ownership. It’s just that. It’s a squatter. There are other principles in the mind that have just as much right to be there, but we’re not with the squatter. We move into that particular thought world. It seems like everywhere we look, it’s colored by that perspective. It’s like being in a red bubble or a green bubble. You look outside the bubble and everything is red and everything is green. You realize that there are other potentials there that you could focus on. You have to get out of the bubble and realize that there are other potentials here in the mind. For example, with restlessness. We talked about this a little bit today. When the mind seems to be overcome by restlessness, you’ve got to remember that there is a part of the mind, there are these potentials in the mind, that you could be bringing to the fore. One of the potentials is that even though the thoughts may be there in the mind, you’ve still got the breath. The breath doesn’t have to be a restless breath. You can try to calm it down. Or the thought of your death, and that’s just as real as any of the other things that you’re worried about. Death could come at any time, and when it comes, there’s nothing you can do about it. You can’t bargain for a few more days, or you can’t bargain even for a couple more extra hours. It just swoops down and takes you. And the question always is, “Are you ready to go?” The Buddha uses this as a contemplation to help pull you out of whatever unskillful mind state you find yourself surrounded by. Death could come at any time. You have to ask yourself, “Are you ready to go?” Are there any unskillful mind states still in my mind that I haven’t let go of? Are there any skillful states that I need to develop more? And the question in both cases is, “Yes.” So you’ve got work to do, and the Buddha says, “Act as if your head is on fire. You’ve got to do it right now.” Because you never know when that earthquake is going to come, or when the guesthouse is going to collapse on you. As they say in the text, “Many are the possible ways of my death.” You could be out in the grove and all of a sudden a rattlesnake comes out. Well, that’s not a good example. That’s total fantasy. Rattlesnakes tend to run away from you. They don’t run toward you. But there always is the possibility that this could be your last day, and it’s not what you planned, of course. The purpose of this thinking, of course, is not to get you morbid, but simply to put things into perspective. So you can look at your thoughts and say, “Oh my gosh, what a piddling little thing. I’d be embarrassed to die in the middle of this thought, or this concern, or this worry, or whatever.” It helps you to step outside. And then you can develop the alternative potentials. You can breathe in a soothing way. You can remind yourself of topics that calm you down. And those potentials are always there. That’s what you’ve got to remember. We tend to forget that you get sucked into these thought worlds like those bubbles. Everything looks like a cause for restlessness. Everything looks like a cause for anxiety, because you’re looking at it through these colored bubbles that you’re inhabiting. You’ve got to step outside the bubble and realize, okay, there is that green bubble in the mind, there is that red bubble in the mind, but it doesn’t have to take over and it doesn’t have to color everything you see. So it’s good to think about these potentials that are there in the mind, because willy-nilly we do step out of our thoughts. I don’t know of anyone who’s stayed restless about a particular thing, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, throughout a year. If they do that, of course, they’ll go crazy. But what usually happens is something else comes up, grabs your attention, and the bubble bursts, and you find yourself in another bubble. It’s only because nothing else compelling comes up that we stay in these bubbles and allow ourselves to be totally taken over by them. So you want to strengthen the observer in your mind that notices, “Oh, I’ve gotten caught up in this bubble,” and strengthen the mindfulness part that remembers there are these other potentials. This is why simply doing a meditation technique is not enough. You’ve got to reflect on things, reflect on what’s important. In your life, reflect on the actual position you have here. You’re a human being at the moment, and human concerns tend to pull you in line with your family, in line with your job, in line with your other activities. But they too burst at the moment of death. This is why death is such a good contemplation. It’s a great solvent. It’s a recollection of death. It’s a good recollection of the suffering that surrounds you on all sides. Again, this is not to get morbid or depressed. It’s just to remind you that there’s work to be done. But it’s also to put your ordinary, everyday concerns into perspective. I went to a medical museum in Bangkok, where they had corpses on display in different parts of the body. They had taken this one person’s nervous system and taken everything else away from the body and just left the nerves. You got to see all the different parts of the body laid out. And you realize what a great leveler death was, those bodies that were floating in those formaldehyde vats. They had their hopes, they had their dreams, they had their worries. But now those were all past. I came out of the museum with this huge sense of relief, the ability to step back from my own hopes and worries and dreams. I did see how a lot of them were very small and minor and really not worth all the work and all the agitation that usually accompanied them. So this ability to develop Sanghvega is an important part of the practice. Seeing that your ordinary, everyday concerns really are petty and minor, and you’ve got much more important things to deal with, no matter how big they are in terms of your life, your life is going to end at some point. Then they’re not going to matter at all. What really matters is the quality of your mind. This is where you pair Sanghvega with vipassana. There’s a way to develop the quality of your mind. You’ve got these potentials. You’ve got the potentials for unskillful qualities, but you’ve also got the potential for skillful ones. And you can emphasize the skillful ones. They’re there. No matter how all-encompassing your worries are and your irritations, remember, they’re not totally all around you. Think of them like a holograph. There’s always one spot in a holograph which is empty, is open. Try to find that. What would be the conditions? Under which this particular worry would not matter at all? That’s the opening in the holograph, so you can step out. That’s the spot where you can burst the bubble. Now, as soon as one bubble is burst, it may come back again. It gets blown again, and you get into it again. But the more you remember, there are these spots where you can step outside. There are these other potentials, these other properties that you can emphasize, that you can bring to the fore. That way, you’re not totally imprisoned by your thoughts. You’re not totally imprisoned by your worries. There is this way out. And you’ve got this range of skills for doing it. On the one hand, you’ve got the breath. No matter how bad things get, you can always stop and say, “At least I can breathe in a way that’s not agitating, in a way that’s not restless.” And then when the thoughts come back and say, “Hey, wait a minute, you’ve got to worry about this. You’ve got to get worked up about that,” that’s when you use your contemplations, whatever you can draw to develop that sense of samvega. This stuff really is unimportant. There’s no reason for me to allow it to encompass my mind, to overwhelm my mind. I’ve got other things that are more important. So always remember, you’ve got the possibility to step outside, to look at the thought from the outside, to see it simply as an event, as a state of becoming that’s moved into the mind. But you don’t have to move in with it. You do have that choice, so you want to make the most of it. you

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