Illness Is Normal

March 8, 2018

The chant we repeated just now, “Aging, illness, and death are unavoidable,” in Thai is translated as “Aging, illness, and death are normal.” What this means is we have to make our minds normal in the face of these things. In other words, not get upset, not get angry, not get knocked over. When illness comes, we do what we can to cure the illness, if we can. But sometimes it comes in ways that the medicine won’t work. We haven’t found the right treatment yet. We have to develop patience. Patience means that we have to have faith as well, faith that what the Buddha said about aging, illness, and death is true, that the body grows ill, gets old, and dies. But there’s something in the mind that doesn’t die. It goes on. From his perspective, we’ve died many times. And here we are. We’re still around, not where we were before we died the last time. Last time we were still someplace. Now you have conviction that death is not the end. Then you can face aging and illness a lot more easily as well. The question is, do you want to face all of them skillfully? And as I said, the main skill is learning how to keep your mind normal in the face of these things. We hear many times about how if you’re going to die well, you want to be alert and mindful. But it also means you can’t let your emotions come in and stir things up. And of course, while you’re dying, it’s very difficult to fight things off unless you’ve had practice. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. You need to learn how not to participate in strong emotions, recognize them when they come, recognize the effect they have on the body and on the mind, and learn how to sidestep them. So when an emotion blows through, just let it blow through. Make sure you don’t get blown around by it. And just as we fabricate our meditation, we can also fabricate patience and endurance. The same three kinds of fabrication. There’s the way we breathe, which sometimes we can have some control over and sometimes we can’t. When we can, we use it to keep the mind calm by breathing calmly, even though the heart may be racing and the hormones are all churned out. Try to breathe as calmly as you can. But more importantly, learn how to talk to yourself in a way that doesn’t aggravate the problem. Think of that monk who, in the time of the Buddha, was going to go off to an uncivilized part of India. The people there were very uncivilized. What are you going to do if they yell at you? The monk said, “These people are very good and civilized and they’re not hitting me.” What if they hit you? “They’re very good and civilized and they’re not hitting me with a stone.” What if they hit you with stones? “They’re very good and civilized and they’re not stabbing me.” What if they stab you? “They’re very good and civilized and they’re not killing me.” What if they kill you? In that case, the monk said, “Well, at least my death wasn’t a suicide.” So as you’re sitting through, say, a really bad migraine or a really bad panic attack, or your heart is beating all over the place, strange rhythms, remind yourself at least you’re not dying. And if you are dying, at least you’re dying alert, which means you’re ahead of the game. Things come up in the mind and you can see them. So learn how to talk to yourself in a way that puts the mind at ease and doesn’t stir up trouble. Back when I had malaria, I had an attack right after I returned home to visit my father. And I’d had a couple of attacks already. Your body shakes for about an hour, and you have this intense, intense fever, although you feel very cold. I was beginning to feel the attack coming on, and so I went to see a doctor. And the doctor said, “Well, if I didn’t know your history, I’d say you probably had the flu. But go down to the hospital.” Just as I walked into the lobby, I started shaking. So immediately they put me in an emergency room, and all these interns who were just getting started put on masks to come in and see what a real-life malaria case was like. And here I am, shaking on the table, with a whole line of doctors looking at me. You can imagine what my father thought. So I had to comfort him. “It’s going to last for an hour, and then it’s going to stop. It’ll be okay.” That’s the attitude you have to have, whatever the attack is that’s coming on you physically. And even if it’s not going to be okay, try to make your mind okay about this. As I said, remind yourself it’s a good thing that you’re alert. You can see what’s going on. At the time I almost died, when I was electrocuted, the first thought, of course, was, “I’m too young to die.” I was 35, 36 at the time. But I just pushed that thought out of my mind. I said, “I can’t think that right now. If this is the time to go, this is the time to go.” And then you learn. This is what it’s like when the mind can’t stay in the body anymore. And if you can approach it with a certain amount of curiosity, you find that it’s not overwhelming. Because that’s the important part. When people are overwhelmed by death, they just grasp at anything. But when you’re not overwhelmed, you realize you have some choices, and you can make them more wisely. Fortunately, the current went through me only very briefly, so I’m here to tell the story. But the point is, there will come a day when you don’t come back to tell the story, but you can learn from the process. In the same way with illness, you can learn. And this is what happens when the body gets stirred up, the hormones get stirred up, and you can watch it. It’s learning how to talk to yourself in a way that makes you more curious about what’s going on than worried. As the Buddha said, when death comes, worry is the worst thing that you can engage in, because that’s going to pull your mind in a bad direction. Ask yourself what kind of thinking will pull your mind in a good direction. And when it’s a part of the mind that has survived all this, it’s going to survive this again. And as I said, look at it more with curiosity than with worry. That’s verbal fabrication. Then there’s mental fabrication. What kind of perceptions are lying behind your thoughts? What images are you holding in mind? Can you hold different images? Hold the image of the Buddha in your mind. There’s a passage in the Canon where a monk is out in the wilderness and he’s sick. And he asks himself, “Am I going to leave the wilderness and try to get a doctorate? No, I’m going to stay here. I’m going to use my meditation, use all the good qualities the Buddha taught me to treat the illness, and keep in mind the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.” As our example can give you strength, think about the Buddha. When Devadatta tried to kill him, a big stone sliver went right through his foot. So he had to lie down to rest. Mara came along and was taunting him. “What are you moping about?” The Buddha said, “I’m not moping. I’m spreading goodwill to all.” So that’s a perception you can hold in mind. May all beings be happy. Instead of sitting there thinking about how miserable you are, stuck with this body that’s malfunctioning, your mind can still think thoughts of goodwill. Just spread them in all directions. Finally, there’s feeling. One of the things you learn as you meditate is that the mind has a tendency to find a pain here in this part of the body, and a pain in that part of the body, and link them. You can create a huge network of pains for the body. So try to cut through them. Remind yourself that they are coming momentarily. They arise and pass away, arise and pass away. And they are distinct spots. So why should you connect them? Why should you make them a band that’s wrapped around your head or wrapped around your body? Try to see that they’re all distinct spots of pain arising and passing away, arising and passing away, without you putting a shape or any connection to them. And that’s for the question of how long that particular illness is going to last. Put that out of your mind as well. Again, this is a lesson you can learn from the meditation. If you sit here and there’s a pain, say, in your hip or in your knee while you’re sitting here, and you sit here thinking, “How much longer am I going to sit here? When is the bell going to ring?” You’re taking the better part of an hour, and you’re using it to weigh down the present moment. And the poor little present moment is just too small for that. Of course, it’s going to be crushed. But if you realize, “I’m dealing with just this moment of pain right now,” that’s it. You don’t ask yourself how much longer it’s going to last. You’re not weighing yourself down. So in this way you find that even though you may have the karma to have an illness, that’s your past karma. Your present karma doesn’t have to contribute to it. So look at your present karma the way you fabricate your breath, the way you fabricate your thoughts, your perceptions and feelings, and see what you can do to give yourself a place, a refuge, in the face of the illness, so your mind can stay normal in the face of the illness. That way you find you have reserved a strength that you might not have ever thought of before or even imagined before. They’re there. The problem is that you’ve been weighing yourself down unnecessarily. But when you remove that weight, you find that things are a lot more bearable and a lot more normal than you would have expected.

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