The World Is Swept Away

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The Pali Canon would like to point out again and again how even the life of a king is not very enviable. Even the king who is wisest, Bimbisara, is not above being teased by his queens. There was one time he was suffering from hemorrhoids, and the queens teased him that he was having his first period, and soon he was going to give birth. He was very embarrassed about this, and he sent for the Buddhist doctor to help cure the hemorrhoids. Other kings perpetrated this as being a lot more intense. Bimbisara, after all, was a stream-enterer. Pappasenidhi, Gauravya, they come across as a little dense because they’ve been fooled by the appearances of the world. You see this in the four Dhamma summaries. Ratabala, who was the son of a wealthy family, went forth, became an arahant, came back to visit the family. The family just did not give him the proper welcome at all, so he went off to meditate in the king’s pleasure garden. The king found out about this and wanted to talk to him because he was curious. Here’s a son from a fine family who hadn’t suffered any loss of relatives, loss of health, loss of wealth, and yet he ordained. The king couldn’t understand why anybody would want to ordain, after all the pleasures of power, all the pleasures of wealth. And so Ratabala taught him the four Dhamma summaries. It took the king a while to understand them. That’s when the world is swept away. What does that mean? The king is eighty years old, and a lot of his body has been swept away. He may have been thinking that as a king he still had his power, but that was going to be swept away too. So Ratabala asked him, “When you were young, were you strong?” “Yes, he was very strong. Sometimes he felt like he had the strength of two people.” “How about now?” “Sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place,” the king said, “and it goes someplace else.” Same body, but it’s a different body. This particular Dhamma summary is one on aging and two on the principle of inconstancy. Things are going to change. There’s another passage in the Canon where a monk says, “Aging drops on you as if out of nowhere, and your body is something else than what it was before.” The second Dhamma summary is that the world offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. What does this mean? Of course, the king feels he’s very much in charge. So Ratabala asks him, “Do you have a recurring illness?” The king does. It’s a wind illness, which means shooting pains through his body. This isn’t when your courtiers are hanging around. What do they say? The king says, “Well, they’re basically saying, ‘Now he’s going to die, now he’s going to die.’” Imagine that, surrounded by people who can’t wait for you to die. Then Ratabala asks him, “Can you tell the courtiers to share out the pain so that you don’t have to suffer so much from it?” The king says, “No, I have to bear it myself.” Okay, there it is. The world offers no shelter. When pain comes, it’s your pain. And you can’t parse it out and say, “Well, I’ll lessen today’s pain. I’ll spare it out a little bit so it’s not quite as intense.” Whatever intensity it’s going to be, that’s the intensity it’s going to have. However long it’s going to be, that’s its length. This is the principle of illness and the principle of stress and suffering. The third principle is that the world has nothing of its own. Again, the king says, “What do you mean it has nothing of its own? I’ve got all these storehouses full of treasure.” Ratabala asks him, “Can you take it with you when you go?” The king says, “No, I have to leave it.” Aging, illness, and now death. And then inconsistency, stress, and now not-self. Sometimes people think of the teaching on rebirth as a huge self-teaching. In other words, you’re not going to die. You’re going to keep on going. But there’s so much you’ve got to let go when you die. And then in spite of all this, Ratabala points out in the fourth, “The world is a slave to craving. It keeps wanting to come back again and again and again.” The king says, “What do you mean it’s a slave to craving?” So Ratabala asks him, “Suppose there was someone to come and say there was a kingdom off to the east, wealthy but weak. With the force of your army, you could conquer it. Would you conquer it?” The king says, “Yes, here he is, eighty years old. He’d go for another kingdom.” And that’s just one other kingdom. Ratabala goes on, “A kingdom to the south, a kingdom to the west, a kingdom to the north.” In each case, the king would say, “Yes, I’d go for that one, too. How about one on the other side of the ocean? I’d go for that one, too.” The world is insatiable. It never has enough. Because it keeps lying to itself about what it’s going to get. In all these cases, Kuruvilla is portrayed as being blind to what’s actually going on right in front of his eyes. Of course, he’s typical for all of us. We get in our heads that we’d like something. We’d like power, we’d like wealth, we’d like fame, we’d like beauty. We’d like a good relationship with somebody. And then we get blinder. Of course, we can only see that one thing that we focus on, and we don’t see all the drawbacks. Now, a lot of the things that we go for are like mirages. They look real enough, but as you get there, there’s nothing there. Or if there is something there, it’s certainly not what you thought it was going to be. This is why the Buddha said that craving is based on ignorance. We willfully ignore things about the world, and that’s why we’re hungry for them. So the cure, of course, is to learn how to step back and look at that hunger, look at that craving, and also look at what the world has to offer and ask, “Isn’t there something better? Isn’t there something worth desiring?” Now, some people would say, “Well, you just have to learn how to accept the things, just come and go, and be okay with that.” Then you won’t be disillusioned. But still, you have to struggle, struggle, struggle to maintain even just a life. Isn’t there something better than that? It was in quest of that something better that Ratabala left all his wealth and his power and his comforts. And as the story said, because he became an arahant, he found what he was looking for. So it is possible to find something that’s not swept away, something that does offer shelter. After all, shelter is one of the names the Buddha gave to Nirvana. And even though there’s no sense of it being your own, once it’s there, once it’s attained, you don’t lose it. So it’s so often the case in the Buddhist teachings that we focus on the drawbacks of the world, not just a bad mouth. But we remind ourselves that there must be something better. This is why we meditate. This is why we look inside, because the something better is inside. It’s not in the world. As I said last night, the Buddha’s instructions are, “Don’t go for the world. Put aside greed and distress with reference to the world, and just look at what you’ve got in and of itself right here.” Because these are the things from which you make the world. You’ve got body, you’ve got feelings, you’ve got the mind. How about making something better out of them? How about making them into a path? You can’t make them into Nirvana, but you can make them into a path to the ultimate peace. You focus on the breath, create a feeling of well-being, get the mind bright, alert, insightful, clear-seeing. And you can do a lot when you learn how to resist the appeal of the world. Karavi, when you come down to him, is a pretty sad figure. He’s got all these things, but because he has all these things, his courtiers can’t wait for him to go so they can grab their share. He’s getting so old now that the things really don’t have that much more meaning. And then you look at Ratabala, and you think, “Ratabala was wise enough to see that this is not where happiness is found in wealth and power. He was wise enough to leave his house, leave his home. He required a lot of sacrifice. I mean, he had to sacrifice the love and respect of his family. But he knew that if he just lived his life in that old way, he’d end up like the king at best—deluded and disappointed. That’s because the Buddha offered something better. It is possible, through our efforts, to find something inside that has more lasting value, that’s not swept away, that offers shelter, and that’s not going to leave us. So as you look at your body and its aging, you run up against illness, even as you’re facing death. Remember, there’s a part of the mind that doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t age, doesn’t die, and it’s thirsty for something better. And so you tend to that. Because all too often, as aging, illness, and death come, we start grasping after what we had before. This is why people get reborn. They just come back for the same old stuff over and over again. But the Buddha is asking you to develop this perception of how no world at all is ever desirable. There’s a case of the monk Girimananda, who was sick. And the Buddha told Ananda to go teach him ten different perceptions. And one of the perceptions is how no world at all is desirable. But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing at all desirable. There’s something that’s not a world. That’s what you want to focus your sights on. So try to develop the qualities of mind through your body, through your feelings, putting them together with the right state of mind. And you can create a path to that something other that’s not a world. That’s the Buddha’s message. And the fact that these four Dhamma Summaries are not mentioned anywhere else in the Canon, simply in Ratanpilla’s report to the king, makes you wonder how many other teachings that the Buddha got lost, teachings that he would give to individual monks and laypeople, nuns, that they remembered but were not remembered by the community as a whole. We’re lucky we have this teaching. It makes very graphic the case for why it’s good to be meditating, why it’s good to be practicing. And whatever efforts you make in the direction of getting beyond these worlds that are swept away is all very much worthwhile.

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