

The World Is Swept Away

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Every now and then you read a piece taking the Buddha to task on the first of the three characteristics. The thrust of the piece usually is: “What’s wrong with change? Change is a good thing. If it weren’t for change, we wouldn’t have happiness. There would be no art in the world, no music, no literature. All the things that make life enjoyable,” they say, “come from change. So what’s wrong with it?”

You have to look at change in context. That’s what Ven. Ratthapala’s four Dhamma summaries – the comments he made to the King Koravya to explain why he ordained – are all about. They tie into both the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self, and into the simple facts of aging, illness, and death.

The first of the summaries has to do with inconstancy: “The world is swept away; it does not endure.” This, on its own, may not be a bad thing. Certain things’ getting swept away would not be bad for the world. But then Ven. Ratthapala illustrates his point with aging. When King Koravya was young he was so strong he felt that he had the strength of two people. But now he’s 80 years old and, as he says, “I think I’ll put my foot one place and I end up putting it someplace else.” We don’t even have that much control when aging comes.

Change can be nice when it’s well handled, but, when you think of all the beautiful music in the world, think of all the lousy music, too. People actually make an effort to write lousy music. Not that they intend it to be lousy, but it’s very difficult to write good music, create good art, write great literature. If change were a good thing in and of itself, good literature would be easy to write, good paintings easy to paint. But these things are hard. It takes an awful lot of skill to make change happy. And with even people who are very skilled at it: What happens to them over time? They grow older. As they grow older all kinds of indignities come to them. The body can’t function, and when the body can’t function they can’t entertain people as they used to. They get less control over themselves, their bowel movements, their memory, their minds, less and less control over their relationships. It’s a pretty sad state of affairs. Think of the misery suffered by Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart as they approached death. That kind of change is inevitable. It’s built into the way things are.

If you think about it, you realize that the change we try to create through art, literature, music goes against the way things are. Works of art and literature have a nice beginning, they build up a little tension, but then it’s nicely released at the end. There’s a sense of completion, a sense of coming to a satisfying goal.

But life isn't like that. At the end of life everything gets disjointed and simply falls to pieces.

That moves into the next Dhamma summary: "The world offers no shelter; there's no one in charge." Ratthapala illustrates this with the fact of illness. He asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king answers, "Yes, I have a wind illness" – which in those days meant sharp, shooting pains going through the body – and he adds that when he has an attack all his courtiers and relatives hang around saying, "Maybe he'll die now, maybe he'll die now." They might be saying this out of fear, or out of hope: Some of them might want him out of the way so that they can grab power.

So Ratthapala asks the king, "Can you ask those friends, courtiers, and relatives who are hanging around to please share out some of your pain?" The king replies, "No, of course not." Not even a king can ask other people to share out the pain that comes with illness. This illustrates the second of the three characteristics, the stress and suffering that come along with change – in other words, the natural change of the body. When you're in pain, you have to suffer it on your own.

Then the third characteristic, of not-self: "The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind." The king has lots of wealth all stored up, and of course, he has a strong sense that it's his own wealth. But when he dies he won't be able to take it with him. He's got to leave it behind. That's the ultimate not-self teaching. Even your body, your feelings, your perceptions, your thought constructs, your consciousness: You can't take those with you, either.

These first three Dhamma summaries provide an interesting point to reflect on – that the Buddha's teaching on the three characteristics may have come from the simple facts of aging, illness, and death. Aging – inconstancy; illness – stress and suffering; and death – not-self.

The fourth Dhamma summary shows why those three characteristics are so threatening: "The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving." There's never enough. No matter what you create in this world, there's never a sense of true completion. Even the sense of the completion that comes at the end of a piece of nice music, the end of a good novel, a good book, is false. Aside from Awakening, there's never a point where all your problems in life are settled, where there's nothing more to do. There's always a lot more to do. As long as there's craving, there's still an underlying sense of dis-ease and discontent in life. You keep looking for other works of art, other music to create that sense of completion, but they just can't provide it.

Ratthapala illustrates this fourth summary by asking the king, "Even though you already reign over a very prosperous country here, suppose someone were to come to you and say, 'There's a country to the east with lots of wealth, but, in terms of its military strength, it's weak enough that you could conquer it given the forces you have.' Would you conquer it?" The king says, "Of course." "Suppose someone were to come from the west with the same news?" "Well, I'd

conquer the kingdom to the west.” “...the north, the south?” “...I’d conquer the kingdoms to the north and south.” It’s unending. “What if someone were to come and say, ‘There’s a country on the other side of the ocean?’” Well, the king would send his forces there, too. It’s not the case you satisfy desire and craving by giving in to your desires and cravings. You simply make them hungrier for more. It becomes more and more habitual that once there’s a craving, once there’s a desire, you’ve got to satisfy it.

And when you think of how things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and how you yourself are subject to aging, illness and death, there’s no end to it all. There’s never a point of satisfaction. Even death doesn’t put an end to things. The Buddha says that we travel on through the craving. Just as wind can carry a flame from a burning house to another house and set the second house on fire, he says, craving carries us over from one lifetime to the next.

What’s interesting is that the Buddha says all this inconstancy, stress and not-self is rooted in desire. And yet because of the desire we’re never satisfied. It’s through our lack of satisfaction that we want this and want that, and yet the things that we create in order to fill up that lack never really give satisfaction. So we desire more. We create more. The process keeps feeding on itself, but it can never make itself full. All that work, and yet it can’t bring us to a point of completion. That’s the ordinary way of the world.

No matter how good change gets, no matter how skilled you are at riding the waves of change, it’s never enough. That’s why the Buddha advises us to look elsewhere for true happiness. And what he does is to tell us to take that craving and try to manage it wisely. In other words, that thirst of craving basically wants as much happiness as possible, as quickly as possible, and with as little effort as possible. But to develop discernment, he says, you take that desire for happiness and adjust it a bit: “What could we do to give rise to true happiness, long-lasting happiness, a happiness that wouldn’t change?” In this way you take your desire, you take the possibility of change, and you turn it into a path that leads beyond, that finally does lead to a point of completion, a point of total satisfaction, what many of the Thai ajaans call, “The Land of Enough.”

That’s what we’re doing as we’re practicing here. We’re trying to take that craving and turn it into something wise, use it wisely – this desire that the Buddha said lies at the root of all things, the root of all dhammas. “Dhammas” here means any phenomena of any kind, but it can also mean what we think of Dhamma with a capital “D” – the Dhamma that leads us out, the Dhamma of practice. There has to be a desire underlying the practice.

If you’re going to walk across the room, you’ve got to have the desire to get to the other side. The question is how to use that desire in a skillful way. Walking across the room is not a big issue, but the issue of desire in the practice is a lot more subtle, a lot more intricate. We want the desire that impels us along the path, but we don’t want it to be so overwhelming that it gets in the way. We need desire to be focused on this one issue: What can we do that gives rise to

long-lasting happiness, and ultimately, a happiness that doesn't give rise to change at all? That's what we're working on here. Wherever we may be in the practice right now, that's the general direction we're heading. That's the question that underlies everything we do. But to make sure that the desire doesn't overwhelm us, we have to refocus it on the practice, on the individual steps that will take us where we want to go.

So look at the particulars of what you're doing, in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds, not only while you're sitting here meditating, but also in the whole course of the day. What habits do you have that get in the way of long-lasting happiness—your habits in terms of dealing with yourself, dealing with other people, how you manage the day, where you devote your time, the intensity in which you focus on what you're doing. All of this is part of the practice. These are things you can look at. And this is important. All the things the Buddha teaches are things we can actually look at. He wasn't a mystifier. He didn't make anything into a big mystery. He said that everything you need to know is right in front of your eyes. The problem is that you're looking past it. So look very carefully at your intentions, right here.

I was reading today a blurb for a book on Buddhist ethics in which the author was proposing that the precepts are too simple-minded because our actions have so many ramifications that morality should be seen as a big world of mystery. What the author is doing is to take the mystery and confusion Buddha removed from our lives and put it back in. What does mystery do aside from providing a convenient hiding place for the defilements?

So do your best to clear away the mystery by looking right at what you're doing. If you look very carefully at your intentions, you can see whether they're skillful by the mental qualities that underlie them. Then you stay right there and act on that insight. Is there anger motivating your thoughts, words, and deeds? Is there greed? Delusion? If there are these things, don't act on them. Keep your focus right here.

This way the process of change in your life becomes something you can manage more and more skillfully. Don't lose sight of what's right here, because everything you need to know to attain true Awakening, to discover that happiness beyond change, is right here in your body and mind. The process of sitting right here with the mind on the breath, thinking about and evaluating the breath, perceiving and feeling the results: All the factors you're going to need to know are right here, and yet you tend to look past them.

So try to keep your focus right here. The irony of it all is that the more "right here" you are in your focus, the longer-term the happiness that comes from your actions. As you get more and more skillful at this one point, it has ramifications that go out in all directions. The process of change is something that's happening right here. Learn to master it right here. Instead of becoming the change that leads to more and more stress and suffering, to more separations, to a greater sense of dissatisfaction, you turn it around. You take that craving and you tame it

by focusing it right here. The more “right here” you are, the longer the good results will last. You give up the guesswork and speculation, you focus on things you can really know right here, right now. That’s why the Buddha’s teachings are for everybody.

Think about it. Most of the great ajaans in Thailand came from peasant families. That was back in the days when the Thai government was very proud of what it was doing to Buddhism. It was straightening out Buddhism; it was restructuring everything, starting from the top down, for the sake of the nation-state. But that didn’t have nearly the effect, the long-term beneficial effect, that the actions of a few peasants’ sons had out there in the boondocks, out there in the woods, focusing on things they could know for themselves right there in their own thoughts, words, and deeds. Those were the ones who had the biggest impact, the most long-term and deepest impact on keeping the Dhamma alive, not only in Thailand, but around the world.

So given the way the whole process of change and causality operates in this world, the more careful you are about what you do and say and think in the immediate present, the better the long-term results are going to be. Instead of trying to satisfy your desires for happiness within the world of change, you take that world of change and use it to attain the changeless. Look directly right here, right now, at every movement of craving so that you can take it apart: “Why is there craving for this thing that changes? What can be done to channel it properly? What can be done to put it to an end?” That’s what the teaching on the three characteristics is about. That’s why the Buddha keeps reminding us about aging, illness, and death – because otherwise we tend to get contented with this, that, and the other thing: “This seems to be okay, that seems to be okay, this is good enough in the practice.” But that fourth summary reminds you that it’s never enough until you get to the Deathless. Only then will there be a true sense of enough. That’s where the craving finally disbands.

So this is why we keep chanting these passages again and again about aging, illness, death, and separation: “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. The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.” It all sounds pretty negative, but it has a positive import: to remind us not to settle for less than the best. Instead of being depressing, these teachings are liberating. They remind us not to look in the wrong place, not to weigh ourselves down with expectations that can never lead to true happiness at all. Instead, they remind us to look in the right place, where ultimately all worlds disband and the happiness of the Deathless can be found. So, even though the teachings may sound negative, they have a very positive aim.