

## *The Reality Principle*

*April 14, 2006*

Those five reflections we chanted just now: We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, yet we have karma as our refuge. Actually that's only a part of the contemplation that the Buddha recommended. He also said to go on to think about the fact that all beings—men, women, children, lay or ordained, past, future, no matter what their level of being—are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, separation, and have karma as their refuge.

The two sides of the contemplation are meant to produce two different reactions. The one we chanted just now: That's to make you realize that you've got to get your act in order, to straighten out your life—because what you do makes all the difference in the world.

The second side of the recollection, though, is to give you more of a sense of *samvega*: a sense of dismay over the nature of the human condition, to expand your perspective—first, to look for a way out; and second, to get a larger sense of compassion, realizing that *everybody* is subject to these same problems. This gets you thinking in terms of the sublime abidings, the brahmaviharas: limitless goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity, not just for your friends and family, but for everybody—because everybody is subject to these same problems.

And it's not just that we're *subject* to aging, illness and death. The Thai translation of this passage is interesting. It says, "Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal." We forget about that, so it's good to expand your perspective to realize how normal these things are.

There's the famous story of the woman whose child had died and she couldn't accept the fact that it was dead. She went around asking people for medicine for her "sick" child, so people sent her to the Buddha. And the Buddha told her that it would be possible to make a medicine for the child, but it had to be made out of mustard seeds. Well, mustard seeds are easy. Those are the cheapest things you could find in India. But, he added, it had to be from mustard seeds from a family where there had never been a death.

So she went from house to house to house asking for mustard seeds. Everybody was willing to give her mustard seeds, but when she added the condition they'd say, "Oh no, we've had a death. My mother's died, my father's died, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, children had died." Ultimately it hit home—that her child was dead. She was willing to accept it because she realized this was a normal part of the human condition.

If we had a decent education system, it would teach us how to deal with aging, illness, and death, but we don't have much training in that. Our education system is designed to make us producers and consumers, and the skills we develop in that direction are not necessarily good for the mind, not necessarily helpful for dealing with aging, illness, and death when they come. This is what the Buddha's training is all about. You go to a monastery in Thailand and that's the first thing you hear: We're all subject to aging, illness and death, and the lesson is how to learn not to suffer in the face of these things. We're all subject to separation: How do we not suffer in the face of that? Those are the real issues.

This where the teaching on equanimity is important. It's the brahmavihara that helps prevent the other brahmaviharas from causing us to suffer. We want all living beings to be happy. We see that some are suffering and we want to help them. Sometimes we can, but often we can't. That's where equanimity has to come in, to put your mind in a larger frame of reference: that we're all subject to our actions. So the question is: What can you do? Equanimity does *not* teach there's nothing you can do. It simply points out the areas where you can't do anything so that you can focus on the areas where you can, where you can be of help.

It's basically a reality principle. Notice in the statements for the four brahmaviharas: The first three start out, "May all beings be happy. May they not be deprived. May they be released from stress and suffering." It's, "May, may, may." It's a wish. But equanimity is the reality principle: "All beings are the owners of their actions." There's no "may" in there at all. It's just a statement of fact. So you take that as your foundation for looking to see where you can be of help, both in terms of your own suffering and the suffering of other people. Then you can act accordingly. That's when you can actually be helpful. One of the principles of equanimity is simply to accept the fact that aging, illness, death, and separation are normal. The question is how not to suffer around these things. That's something you can do something about.

You know the teaching about the man shot with one arrow who then shoots himself with another arrow. The first arrow is the pain that comes with having a body, having a mind. These things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. That's the first arrow — when pain comes up. But then there's the second arrow — and it's not just one more arrow. Often it's hundreds of arrows that we shoot ourselves with as we get all wound up around the suffering — *those* are not necessary. And those are the ones that really cause suffering, really place a big burden of the mind. If we didn't have those other arrows, the first arrow on its own wouldn't reach the mind. Our misunderstandings, our tendency to get all upset around the suffering: Those are the arrows that really hurt, based on craving and ignorance. So those are the ones we want to learn how not to shoot

ourselves with, because when we stop shooting ourselves with those, then there's no suffering at all.

So you have to sit down and face the fact of aging, illness, and death. These things are inevitable. We haven't gotten past them. So what do you do? The Buddha says there are four reasons why death scares us, has us in fear. One is attachment to the body. The second is attachment to sensual pleasures. The third is the knowledge that we've done cruel and harmful things to other people, to other beings, and the fear that after death we're going to be punished for it. And then the fourth is not having seen the true dharma, having doubts about the true dharma.

Now if we can learn to overcome these four fears of death, death won't bring suffering. And only when we've got a handle on these things can we really be helpful to other people. This doesn't mean that you have *totally* overcome the fear, but if you learn to deal with your fear of death so that it doesn't freak you out, then you can help other people as they approach death, too.

So this is why this is not a selfish training. It really does put you in a better position to be of help if you've sorted through your attachments to the body, sorted through your attachments to sensual pleasures, learned to focus on the positive things you've done, realizing that punishment for the bad things is not necessarily inevitable. It's even better if you gain a dharma-eye, a vision of the true dharma. That's when you can totally overcome your fear of death, when you can really be helpful to other people. But this doesn't mean you have to wait until that point.

Take this issue of being afraid of the harmful things you've done in the past. The Buddha says that it's not inevitable you're going to have to suffer from them. He gives the analogy of a lump of salt: Say you've got a lump of salt the size of your fist and you put it into a glass of water. You can't drink the water because it's much too salty. But if you find a large clean river and throw the lump of salt into the river, you can still drink the water because the salt gets so diluted by the quantity of the water. That's an analogy for a mind that's developed the four brahmaviharas. When you develop these limitless qualities of mind, and the mind becomes very expansive. And it's the nature of such a mind that the results of past bad actions don't have such an impact. They don't impinge on the mind as much.

So this is one very good reason to develop these qualities of mind: When the results of past bad actions come, they don't hit you as hard. And you can train other people who are ill or close to death in the same skill. Get them to develop this larger, more compassionate, more equanimous state of mind. You can start by reminding them of their generosity: the good things they've done for other people in the past, the bad things they've avoided doing. These are forms of

generosity. These are forms of compassion and goodwill because they open up the mind and make it more expansive. When the mind is in a more expansive state, the amount of suffering grows less.

So it's good to develop these qualities in the mind. One way of developing them is to learn how to develop the same attitudes toward your breathing. Have goodwill towards your breathing, compassion, appreciation, equanimity for your breathing. In other words, allow the breath to be comfortable so you can have a foundation. Where it's not comfortable, work at making it more comfortable: That's compassion. Where it is comfortable, appreciate it. Sometimes, especially in the very beginning, the states of comfort seem to be very minor and not impressive at all, but that doesn't mean they don't have the potential to become more impressive with time. You've got to give them a little space. It's like oak trees: When they first come out of the ground, they're pretty small—a little tiny acorn. Of an even better analogy is a coastal redwood tree, which has the tiniest little seeds, and yet the tallest trees on earth come from these tiny, tiny seeds. Develop the conditions, allow them to grow, and they become a huge forest.

It's the same with the sense of wellbeing in the body. First find areas that are simply not in pain, that seem okay. That's good enough. And then be very careful to keep them okay. Don't let the way you breathe push, or pull, or squeeze them in any way at all. Just let them *be* all right continuously, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. They'll begin to grow, to develop a sense of fullness. And then you can allow that sense of fullness to expand through whatever parts of the body pick it up.

As for equanimity, when there are areas that you can't improve, develop equanimity for them. Focus instead on the areas where you can make a difference. Don't get worked up over the things you can't improve, because that gets in the way of seeing where you can make a difference, where you can be of help. Once you get practice in developing these attitudes toward the breath in your own body, it's a lot easier to develop the same attitudes toward other people because you're coming from a sense of wellbeing inside. You realize that no matter how bad things get outside, you've still got a safe place inside where you can go. And from that position you can see more clearly what needs to be done, and you have the strength to do it. So reflecting on the nature of the world, trying to develop these qualities—partly as your own protection so that you don't have to suffer more than is necessary, and secondly so you can help other people—you put yourself in a better position to be of help, because you're coming from a position of strength and wellbeing.

This is just one of the most basic lessons you need to learn in what would be a decent education—learning how to deal with aging, illness, death and separation.

And fortunately even though they don't give us much of an education like this at school, we can educate ourselves.