

A Clear, Calm Lake

December 28, 2022

“May you forever be well”: That’s our chant every evening. It doesn’t come from the Pali Canon. It doesn’t come from the Buddha. It comes from later centuries where monks were trying to figure out what kind of chants their sponsors would like to hear. There were sponsors who would have the monks come and chant this phrase, in hopes that somehow the power of the chant would make them well, keep them well, protect them.

This, in fact, is one of the great ironies of the Buddhist chanting tradition. There’s the Mangala Sutta where the Buddha talks about the various blessings that give you protection. None of them have anything to do with chants. They all come from the good things you do. It’s important to keep that in mind, that that’s your protection.

We live in a world where there’s a lot of anxiety. We tend to blame it now on the Internet, but think about the old days when news was really hard to come by. That doesn’t mean there was a big blank in people’s minds. They filled it up with all kinds of rumors. Imagine being a French peasant during the Revolution, with all the different rumors that went coursing through France. People were strung up, killed, because a rumor had come to a group of peasants that a certain class of people had done this or done that. If you happened to fall into that class of people and you happened to go to one of those villages, they’d string you up.

Life has always been very uncertain. As the Buddha said, “Birth is suffering.” You get this human body and it leaves you exposed all kinds of things. You start out totally helpless. If it weren’t for the help of other people—your parents or whoever raised you—you would have died very, very quickly. It’s because we have people looking after us that we’re able to survive. Gradually we’re able to take care of some of our needs by ourselves, but there’s a lot that’s totally beyond our control.

When the Buddha talks about the drawbacks of having a body, he lists the different diseases that the body is subject to. It seems as if every part of the body has its own disease, if not more than one disease. On top of that, as the texts say, once you have a body, you’re exposed to arrows and sticks and stones and all kinds of weapons. It leaves yourself exposed to all kinds of dangers. So it’s no wonder that the anxious, nagging voices in our mind have a lot of authority. Because it’s true: There are a lot of dangers out there. In a lot of ways, you can never do enough to prevent each danger that can happen.

But the Buddha does give us protection in his teachings. The quality of mind he wants us to develop is one of confidence. Think of the image of the hindrance of restlessness and anxiety: wind blowing over water. If you try to look into the water to see your reflection, you can't see it because the ripples are so many and are moving so fast. But the quality of *pasada*, confidence, is like a clear, calm lake. It's often said that people listening to the Buddha's Dhamma would gain that sense of confidence, even though the Buddha didn't say, "May you forever be well."

But he did give them a perspective on things, pointing out that the present moment is not totally a new moment, unprecedented. Every present moment has a pattern. There are going to be influences coming in from your past karma that you can't do anything about, but then there are going to be the things you *can* do through your present karma. Those are the things that make the difference between whether you suffer or not.

And that's what we're training in. This is where we bring in the quality of what the Buddha calls appropriate attention, where you focus on what's happening in the mind. If something unskillful is coming up, you know what to do with it. It should be abandoned. If something skillful is coming up, you develop it.

When you develop that principle even further, it turns into the four noble truths and their duties, as we chanted just now. Stress is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized, and the path to cessation is to be developed.

How do you do that? You develop qualities of ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. These things will always stand you in good stead. You develop discernment. You develop goodwill and compassion. These things are always useful. So no matter what the particular danger, or what the particular unexpected event that comes up, you've got a series of tools that will be useful in all situations.

Mindfulness helps to remember whatever lessons you've learned from the past. It goes together with concentration: You try to calm the mind. When the mind is full of worry and anxiety, you basically turn off or block off a lot of the things that would be helpful. You suddenly can't remember the good lessons from the past. So you try to calm it down.

Ajaan Lee's image is of the ocean: When the ocean is flat, you can see far distances. When there are a lot of waves, you're down in a trough and you can't see very far at all. So when your mind is full of waves like that, you're not going to be able to remember anything much.

You've got to calm the mind down. Then you can see far distances. You'll be able to remember things you learned a long time ago. Those will come in and help you.

Then you're alert to what you're doing. You realize that there may be a lot of things in this situation that are beyond your control, but you *can* control what choices you're making right now. So you focus there.

And you look very carefully at what you're doing to make sure that it's skillful. If it's not, you bring in the quality of ardency. You try to do it well.

All this is based on goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the beings around you.

Then discernment allows you to see what will be the most helpful ways of thinking at any one time. No matter what the potential dangers that are out there, you have some tools, you have some skills that can be applied in any situation.

So when anxious thoughts come up—and they will, as I said, given the fact that you have a body, there's a lot to be anxious about, and if you're concerned about its survival—you can remember that the survival of your goodness is most important, and that allows you to become calmer in the face of dangers.

After all, your goodness is something you can protect. Nobody can destroy your goodness, aside from you. They can harm your body, but they can't force you to do things that are unskillful. They may threaten punishments and sometimes inflict punishments if you don't do what they want, but if you decide, "I'm not going to do anything unskillful at all," and you're ready to face whatever the consequences are, confident in the fact that you're maintaining your most valuable possession, that confidence can help overcome a lot of your anxiety.

In any case, confidence and self-esteem have to be based on skills. This is what we're developing as we meditate: learning how to step aside when anxious thoughts come in, and not let them take over. If they're going to be there in the mind—no matter how much you try to think straight about them, they're still nagging away at you—you just tell them, "Okay, you can have part of the mind, but you can't have the whole mind." Stay with the part that's calm, collected, confident. Protect that, and the influence of still water will begin to spread.

So whatever dangers there are, you remember that the real dangers are in the possibility that you might do something unskillful. If you can be confident that you would never do that, then you're safe. The body will do its body thing. After all, once you're born, as the Buddha said, aging is inevitable, illness is inevitable, death is inevitable. But losing your right view, losing your virtue: Those things are not inevitable. You would have to choose to lose them. But when you're confident that you wouldn't, then you're really safe. That confidence can give you a good

foundation so that, at the very least, that much of your mind can be like a clear, calm lake that doesn't get whipped up by storms.