

Swept Downstream

April 11, 2023

An issue came up in our Zoom meeting yesterday. One of the people was commenting on how he first encountered that questionnaire about things being *aniccam*, *dukkham*, *anattā*. *Aniccam* usually was translated as “impermanent.” The question is, “If something is impermanent, is it easeful or stressful?” He said he didn’t see any direct connection between things being impermanent and stressful, because with some things, when they’re impermanent it’s actually good. When your disease is impermanent, that’s a good thing. Or a bad situation of any kind is impermanent—that’s a good thing.

But when you translate *aniccam* as “inconstant,” that helps you to see the connection. Something that’s inconstant is undependable, unreliable. Ajaan Chah’s translation in Thai is *mai nae*, which means it’s “not for sure.” When you see that something is unreliable, you realize, “Okay, it *is* stressful.” Whatever comfort you’ve gained from it so far, you can’t depend on it. It’s going to change at some point, and you don’t know when, which means you have to be prepared. That’s stressful.

As we chanted just now: “The world is swept away.” Time is passing. If you could see time pass, it’d be whizzing right past you all the time. You wonder, where can you settle in? Every place you’d settle into, it would be whizzing past, whizzing past. There’s one theory, actually, that space-time moves at the speed of light. That’s how fast time passes. So it’s awfully fast, and there’s nothing you can really hold on to. There’s no way you can freeze a moment or call the past back.

The Buddha gives an image of someone who’s floating downstream in a flood. He’s afraid of being swept away, so he tries to grab onto the grasses on the bank. But they’re just grass, and either they get pulled out by the roots, or they have sharp edges. They cut his hands and they end up getting swept away together with him.

So when you live in a world like that, what are you going to do? Most people decide to pretend it’s not happening. When they create their little worlds of security, deep down inside they know that those worlds are not secure, but they keep going for them anyhow.

You know the story of King Koravya talking with Ven. Ratthapala about why Ratthapala had ordained. Ratthapala points out: “The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own.” He illustrates his points with incidents from the king’s life, starting

with the fact that he's aged, and when he means to set his foot one place, it goes someplace else. This was after he was endowed with superhuman strength when he was young. When he has a disease, his courtiers are standing around, basically waiting for him to die. He has no power over the disease to say, "Can you take out some of this pain that I'm feeling so that I can feel less?" Even though he's king, he has no sovereignty over his pains. And even though he has storerooms filled with gold and silver, he can't take that gold and silver with him when he dies.

So he's been reflecting on this. Things are inconstant, stressful, not-self, subject to aging, illness, and death. Then Ratthapala asks him, "If someone were to come with word that there was a kingdom to the east with a weak army but lots of wealth, and you could conquer it, would you go for it?" And even though the king has been reflecting on the impermanence of life and how he can't really hold on to anything, he'd still be willing to send his army out to kill and plunder so that he could have more wealth.

As Ratthapala points out, this is what is meant by his fourth Dhamma summary: "We're a slave to craving." These things keep slipping past, slipping past, slipping past, yet we keep trying to come back to them because we don't see anything better. When the Buddha tells us there *is* something better, we don't really believe him. It seems like the path there is awfully stringent and requires a lot of us. But then, just taking what seems to be the easy way out requires a lot of us, too, because it means we're subject to the fears of what's going to happen when we die. If you haven't gained the Dhamma eye yet, you're not really sure.

You say you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but do you really take refuge in them? Where *do* you take your refuge? As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, for most of us, the reality is: *kilesaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*: "I take refuge in my defilements." We look for some fun in thinking about sensuality, getting worked up, or getting angry about something. There's a pleasure there. You've got the whole list of the defilements, and those are your actual refuge.

It's like an addiction. You know that it's bad for you, but to make a change requires effort. And part of you has too much inertia to make the change. So what's going to make you see that you really do have to make the change? How bad do things have to get? You look around. It seems like the world is falling apart. It always has been falling apart, but it seems especially obvious now. We've got crazy people in power who think that war is a good thing, greed is a good thing, lying is okay. We have monks telling us that the Buddha didn't really mean that we should observe the precepts all the time, that there's a time when killing is a moral duty.

So look at the world. It's swept away, swept away. What are you going to do so that you're not swept away with it? You've got the practice. It's been laid out. It makes sense. So what's the obstacle? This is a question each of us has to ask ourselves, because what you *are*—this “being” that you are, which you've taken on as your identity—is just made out of a lot of clingings and attachments to things, like the grass on the side of the river bank. The Buddha lists five kinds of grass corresponding to the five aggregates. They all get pulled out as you try to grab on to them, as the flood washes you downstream.

So where is your island? The Buddha says you try to establish your mindfulness—ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, so that you can get the mind into concentration. This gives you an island that gets you out of the flood for a bit, but you're still in the middle of the river. You haven't made it all the way across. But it gives you something to hold on to in the meantime.

So you want to be really good at this. As Ajaan Lee used to say, the people who manage huge farms, with thousands of acres—he could have added the people with corporations, with many thousands of employees—they manage to handle it. And here we have only four jhanas, and he says you can't catch hold of them right. Isn't that embarrassing? As a meditator, this should be something you really should have under your control. This is what you should master. At the very least, you can get up out of the flood a bit.

Then look at what you've got. This island that you're on—it, too, can get washed away. But you don't want to go back into the flood. Where are you going to go? What are you going to do? That's the challenge of discernment. But at the very least, get to that island. That should be your main concern every day as you wake up. It's only then that you can begin to rely on yourself and keep your nostrils above the water flowing past.