

## *The Body is Borrowed Goods*

*March 28, 2018*

We have that chant that we repeat regularly, “We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death.” The purpose of that is not to get you depressed. As the Buddha said to one of his students, the body may grow sick but the mind doesn’t have to be sick. The body can grow old, but the mind doesn’t have to be old. The body dies but the mind doesn’t die.

What does it mean for the mind not to be sick even when the body is sick? You learn how not to focus on the illness and look instead after the well-being of the mind.

When the Buddha was sick, he made a practice of spreading goodwill to all beings. He wasn’t thinking just about his own illness. In his case he’d been wounded, but he had goodwill for the person who had wounded him, and from there he went to all beings.

As for the body, you have to realize it’s not yours, it’s something you’ve borrowed for the time being. At some point you have to give it back. So you want to get the best use out of it.

But there are times when it doesn’t offer you much to work with. That’s when you have to focus specifically on the mind, to make sure at least that the mind is in good shape, so that whatever happens to the body, the mind is not disturbed, the mind isn’t harmed.

This is why we work with the breath. Now the breath, of course, is part of the body, but it’s the part of the body that’s most responsive to the mind. You can breathe long, you can breathe short. Deep, shallow. Heavy, light. You can breathe in a way that helps to bring things in the body into balance, or at the very least gives you some spot in the body where it’s comfortable.

As Ajaan Lee once said, if every spot in your body were painful, you wouldn’t be able to stay. You’d die. So the fact that you’re still alive means there’s someplace in the body that’s okay. Try to find that spot, focus your attention there. And to whatever extent you can spread the well-being from that spot, let it spread. If it doesn’t spread very far, at least you’ve got a place to stay. The mind doesn’t have to get worked up about things that it can’t control.

That’s one of the things we have to admit about the body: There are times when it lies under our control and we get so used to that that when it resists our control, we get frustrated. But again, think of it as borrowed goods that are not working very well. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. It’s like Windows. Make what you can out of it.

There was an old woman in Thailand I heard of who’d gone along with a friend to Ajaan Maha Boowa’s monastery. The friend had cancer and went to stay at the monastery for three months to meditate and deal with her illness. He gave the two of them Dhamma talks every night—eighty-some Dhamma talks in all. The old woman went along because she was a retired doctor and could look after the friend. When they came back, after a couple of months the friend died and left behind all the tapes of the talks. So the old doctor decided to squeeze as

much goodness as she could out of her old body. She transcribed all the talks, two huge volumes when she was done.

So when parts of the body don't cooperate, focus on the parts that *do* cooperate and see what goodness you can squeeze out of them. In that way, when you have to hand back these borrowed goods, you've gotten the best you can out of them. What you hand back doesn't really matter, it'll just be earth, water, wind, fire. But you've got the goodness of the mind that you've squeezed out of the body, and that's what counts.