

Ways to Think

July 30, 2006

One time when I was back in Thailand, we had a sudden death in the monastery. They were constructing the Buddha image and having a cement pouring. The scaffolding was very tall. A woman fell from the scaffolding, broke her neck, and died instantly.

That night we had the regular evening chant, and one of the chants was the one we did just now, “We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, we’re the owners of our kamma.”

That was something we’d chanted many, many times before. And it suddenly took on new meaning that night. It applied to a specific person, a specific event that was still sending a shockwave through the community.

This is an important part of the teaching: It prepares you, gives you ways to think about events in life so that you can handle them when they suddenly occur, so that they don’t have to knock you off balance.

So an important part of the meditation is, on the one hand, gaining a solid center for the mind, as when you focus it on the breath. Another important part, though, consists of these reflections we have. They help you think your way through difficult emotions, difficult situations.

Which is why the reflections are an important part of the meditation, why we have the chants every night before we meditate. They help to put things into perspective, so that we’re not suddenly caught short or surprised or shocked. There may be the shock of an individual person’s passing, but you have to remember, if you’ve been reflecting long enough, “This is the way of the world.”

Some people say the Buddha’s pessimistic in talking about these things. But he’s actually preparing you. If we don’t talk about them, how are you going to handle these events when they come? How can you get a perspective so that you can still continue to do and say and think the skillful thing, given the situation?

So as you’re chanting these things, don’t just go through the motions. Remind yourself that this is important preparation for how to think about difficult things in life.

Like this reflection on aging, illness, and death: There are two ways of doing it. One is the chant just now: It’s about yourself. You reflect about where you’ve been, where you’re going.

The Buddha said that this is important because it helps develop a sense of heedfulness, that you’ve really got to be careful about what you do and say and think—because these are the things you carry with you, these habits.

If you learn to be careful, then the time comes, when suddenly you find yourself confronted with aging, illness, and death, you learn to do the careful thing, you learn to think the careful way, you learn to train your mind with the proper care. That way, you don't start focusing on harmful emotions, harmful behavior patterns.

You realize, "Okay, aging, illness, and death have come. What do I have left? I still have my actions. Make sure they're skillful."

Or if you find yourself suddenly too sick to do things: Don't focus on the things you can't do. Focus on what you can.

This applies in all these situations. As you get older, focus on what you still can do. When you're getting sick, focus on what you still can do. Even as you're dying, there are things that you can do.

This is what's special about the Buddha's teachings. They give you very clear guidelines on how to control your mind. The practice of concentration and developing concentration, developing discernment: These are precisely the skills you're going to need as death occurs.

So remind yourself that no matter what happens in life, no matter how bad things get, there's always a skillful response—and that you benefit and the people around you benefit as you try to find that response and act on it.

The second way of using these reflections is to remind yourself that it's not just you. Everybody is subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. Everybody is heir to their actions. As the Buddha said, when you reflect in this way it's not just a matter of becoming heedful. You develop a sense of samvega, that no matter where you might go in this universe, no matter what you do, no matter how good things can get in life, these things always lie in wait.

You can become a deva, you can become a Brahma, but devas and Brahmas are still subject to death, still subject to their actions. When you reflect in this way, it should motivate you to get out of the process altogether. In other words, start focusing on what they call, "the kamma that puts an end to kamma."

The Buddha didn't teach just about good or bad kamma. He said basically there are four kinds of kamma altogether: There's good kamma in the normal sense of the things you do and say and think that will lead to a good rebirth, and also to old happiness for the rest of this life. Then there's bad kamma, the things that are going to create misery within the process of samsara. And then there are mixed actions, which are a combination of skillful and unskillful intentions that will lead to mixed destinations in samsara.

But then there's the kamma that puts an end to kamma. That, he says, is the noble eightfold path, or in another explanation it's the seven factors for awakening; in other words, the actions you can do that lead to release.

This is one of the very special consequences of the Buddha's teachings on

causality. Some people say, “If you act and do conditioned things, you’re constantly going to be subject to conditions. You can never reach the unconditioned through your actions. The only way out would be not to act at all.”

But the Buddha pointed out that that’s not the case. There are actions you can do, things you can do, that take you to places where the whole system of samsara, the whole system of intentions, breaks down, where you get undefined in terms of those systems. You can do things that get you there.

So when you reflect on the universality of aging, illness, death, separation, and the principle of kamma, that should motivate you to try to get out of the whole system entirely.

In other words, these two types of reflection correspond to what’s called mundane right view and transcendent right view.

Mundane right view focuses on kamma and rebirth, and specifically on the value of generosity on the one hand, and gratitude on the other.

Most of us, when we first hear the teachings on kamma, tend to think about punishment. You hear that you’re going to suffer from the results of your past bad actions, and the first thing that comes to your mind is, “Oh my God! That thing I did in the past when I hurt that person or did this thing I know was wrong: It’s going to come back and get me!” That’s our normal first thought about the teaching on kamma.

But that’s not what the Buddha emphasizes when he teaches kamma. He emphasizes the positive side of karma: The fact that we can do a lot of good with our actions. He starts with reflecting on the gratitude we owe to people who’ve helped us—because they actually chose to do it. It wasn’t that they were acting under determined forces that forced them to help us. They chose to help us. We owe them gratitude—particularly, our parents. And that thought should warm our heart. Goodness really is goodness. It’s worth the effort it involves.

The same with the principle of generosity: The decision to give something is a genuine decision, it’s genuinely good.

These are the two principles the Buddha asks you to act on as you try to navigate your way in this world, so at the very least you can have a comfortable life this time around and can expect something comfortable the next time around. That’s mundane right view.

Transcendent right view focuses on the four noble truths, seeing how even a good rebirth and a good identity are still bound up in suffering. These truths teach you that, instead of thinking in terms of your identity—about who’s doing the action, who’s going to receive the results of the action—you just look purely at action in terms of cause and effect. What kinds of action lead to suffering? What kinds of actions are that fourth kind of kamma, the kamma

that leads to the end of kamma?

As we practice, we switch back and forth between these two modes of viewing the world. You need the first in order to get to the second. You work on making your actions more skillful, less harmful. You develop a good strong sense of your responsibility, what they call a good healthy self: a sense of being responsible, learning how to sacrifice immediate pleasures for long-term pleasures, developing a sense of what really is your duty and what are other people's duties that you don't have to get involved with.

In these areas, the sense of self is necessary. It's a useful strategy for focusing your attention on what really needs to be done.

But at the same time, the Buddha wants you to develop transcendent right view. Look at things simply in terms of cause and effect: skillful cause leading to the end of suffering, unskillful cause leading to suffering. This way of looking at things doesn't require a sense of self, just looking at actions and their results.

Over time you find yourself leaning more and more in the direction of that second level of right view, the transcendent level, because that's the kind of view that can liberate you from old patterns of action that are unskillful. It helps you deal with things coming up in the mind so that you don't have to identify with a particular feeling, a particular emotion, a particular way of doing things. You can evaluate it simply in terms of whether it's skillful or not.

If you're doing this with a mind that's well-concentrated and you have a sense of well-being that comes from staying consistently with the breath, it's a lot easier to let go of those old unskillful patterns with increasing levels of subtlety—until finally you get released from the whole thing.

So these are some reflections that help us get focused on the practice. They help us deal with events as they come up in our lives, but they also give us a strong sense of what we're doing and where we're going. That right there is an important part of keeping things in perspective. Otherwise, we get swamped by the events of the world, and we forget that there is a way out, that people have found the way out and have found true happiness in the course of taking that way out.

One other thing that's important to notice about these reflections is that the Buddha has you focus first on your own personal narrative. But then, before he has you sit down and meditate, he has you reflect on the universality of these principles.

If you're bound up in your own personal suffering, then when you reflect on the universality of the process—everybody's suffering from aging, illness, death, and separation—it takes a lot of that personal sting out of the problem. You don't feel that you're especially bad or especially being punished. This is just a universal principle throughout the universe. Everybody suffers these

things. Even in other galaxies the same process holds true.

When you think in this way, it gets a lot easier to come to the present moment with a healthy attitude.

This follows the pattern of the Buddha's awakening, those three knowledges on the night of his awakening.

The first knowledge was knowledge of his own past lives: tracing things back, back, back for countless eons.

The second knowledge was more universal: seeing how everybody dies and is reborn in line with their kamma. Seeing the universality, he also saw the principle of kamma. That became more and more prominent. And kamma basically comes down to the intentions that are shaped by your attention—in other words, your views, the way you look at things.

So it was with this more universal principle, this more universal perspective in mind that he then approached the present moment in the third knowledge of the night. He was able to look at the present moment simply in terms of the four noble truths. He followed the duties appropriate to each of the truths: comprehending suffering, letting go of the cause, realizing the cessation of suffering, and developing the path to the cessation of suffering. He was able to do this skillfully because he had seen the universal picture first.

So when the events of your life are weighing you down, try to look at that more universal principle. Get the right perspective on things. That makes it easier to bring transcendent right view to what you're doing right now.

As we chant these reflections, we do it many, many times, so there's the danger that it can become mechanical. The advantage, of course, though, is that these thoughts become familiar. So focus on the advantage. You've got a familiar way of thinking that can help you through all kinds of dangers.

So as you go through the chants, don't do it just mechanically. Try to reflect on them. The more wisely you can reflect, the more you'll be prepared for whatever comes up.