

Solving Real Problems

February 11, 2021

We know the story of the Buddha's leaving home: how he realized that he was subject to aging, illness, and death, and he didn't want to spend his life looking for things that would age, grow ill, and die. He wanted to look for something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die. He was looking for the deathless.

So how is it that he ended up teaching things like this/that conditionality, dependent co-arising, emptiness, breath meditation: things that seem to have very little to do with aging, illness, and death? The answer, of course, is that these things are actually intimately connected to his original purpose, his original search.

One of the things he had to learn was that once you're born, the body is going to have to age, grow ill, and die; so there was no way he was going to avoid that. If he was going to look for something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die, he would have to look in the mind. He would have to train the mind so that even with the death of the body, the mind wouldn't suffer.

That right there requires that we have choice in the present moment. And this is what this/that conditionality is all about. Some of the things you experience from the present moment do come from the past, but some come from your present decisions. The Buddha doesn't explain how we have this freedom in the present moment, but he does teach us how to take advantage of it, and that's the important part.

We can train our minds so that even though, as the chant says "Aging is unavoidable, illness and death are unavoidable," still the suffering around those *is* avoidable. It all depends on what we're doing right now.

And what are we doing right now? The Buddha pointed out there are three kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—and these lie very near the beginning of the processes that lead to aging, illness, and death. If they're done in ignorance, that's where they go, but if they're done with knowledge, they put you on the path away from aging, illness, and death.

This is why we're doing breath meditation, because the breath is bodily fabrication. We're training ourselves to see: What are the powers of the mind, right here right now, to shape its experience? The way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions and feelings that shape the mind: These are the bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications that you can change.

The Buddha's teachings are full of examples of skillful ways to shape these fabrications. His sixteen steps for breath meditation, of course, deal with bodily fabrication. You get sensitive to how long the breath is, how short the breath is, all the variations of the breath. Then you learn to breathe in and out aware of the whole body, so that you can see the breathing as a whole body process, because you're going to be trying to develop feelings of rapture, feelings of pleasure, and let them spread throughout the body.

They shape your state of mind, and the shape of your mind is going to have an influence on the breath. These things are all interconnected. You can use all these skills to calm the breath down. You do that partly because it's a very pleasant experience, and partly because once the breath has calmed down and is no longer filling up your awareness of the present moment, you can focus more in on the mind. Because that's where the real problem is—your perceptions, the way you talk to yourself.

Here again the Buddha gives examples of how to talk to yourself about things. He describes people who don't handle pain very well, don't handle separation, don't handle illness very well because they don't talk to themselves in the right way. They don't reflect on the fact that this is the nature of things. It's built in to the fact that you've got a body. You're not being singled out. *Everybody* experiences these things.

So when illness comes, keep talking to yourself in that way: Everybody experiences these things. Who are you to be special so that you don't experience illness? The same with death: It always comes too soon. Even for people who say they're longing to die, when it comes, they're taken aback, because it's so absolute. You can't come back to this body anymore to tie up any loose ends. But this is the way it is for everybody. This is the nature of having a body.

Then the Buddha teaches perceptions to hold in mind. One is the perception that death is not the end. Even though you can't come back to this body, you're going to find another one. Your craving and clinging will take you to another one. So what are your craving and clinging doing right now? What are they talking about? All kinds of verbalizations—"I'm a good person, I'm a bad person, I'm better than those people, I'm worse than those people, I want this, I want that." Be very careful about what you want.

Think of all those stories of people who meet up with a genie that gives them three wishes. They're not very careful about how they phrase their wishes, so the genie takes them literally, and they end up suffering. So ask yourself: What would you want? Think carefully. If you're practicing and you still haven't come to the end of the practice, what would you want? Where

would you like to go?

Part of the mind will say, “I want to stick with the practice,” but there are other parts of the mind that have other ideas about what would be a nice life. You’ve got to watch out for them. Learn how to reason with them, to see through them.

This is one of the reasons why we have that reflection on the body. It’s not only for dealing with lust. It’s also to get you to reflect that if you were to come back as a human being, you’d have to do this all over again: going through the period of being in a womb, coming out, and being totally defenseless; then gradually learning how to use this body and being subject to the illnesses that come with the body, and the aging, and the death that will come with the body. Do you want that again?

When the Buddha was asked to give some advice on how to counsel someone who was about to die, he basically said, “Set your mind higher than the human realm.” We’re told so many times that the human realm is the ideal place to practice because there’s such a mixture of pleasure and pain, but it’s also possible to practice in the deva realm. It’s a lot easier.

So you can reflect on the body and have that perception that the body is not something that you’d want to come back to. No matter how beautiful or handsome a body you could imagine, it still wouldn’t be worth coming back to. There are better things to come back to, if you have to come back.

So the Buddha’s teachings are all about how to fabricate the present moment—physically, verbally, mentally—so that at the very least you’re not suffering from things in the present moment, and ideally so that you begin to see that this is how you’ve been shaping things all along.

And no matter what you’re going to shape from this process of fabrication, it’s going to be inconstant, it’s going to be stressful, it’s going to eventually get out of your control. We get more and more sensitive to this as we do the breath meditation, because everything’s framed in terms of fabrication: calming fabrication, getting sensitive to fabrication, using the processes of fabrication to gladden the mind, concentrate the mind, and then finally release the mind.

Even though you’re going to be gaining release from fabrication, you have to use them as part of the path. You have to use perceptions—those three *characteristics* they call them: They’re actually three *perceptions*. You learn how to use these things as tools. When you use them properly, they take you to the deathless.

So this is why we study what the Buddha had to teach on topics like this/that

conditionality, dependent co-arising, emptiness. Emptiness for him, as he advises to do it in the meditation, is basically a process of learning how to strip away causes of disturbance in the mind. Again, that's a way of calming fabrication. We study these topics because they give us insight into that problem of aging, illness, and death.

We have this romantic view of the forest ajaans gaining ordination and going right out into the forest, confronting their defilements without any background in study, but that's not the case. When you read the teachings of say, Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Maha Boowa, or even Ajaan Chah in Thai, you're struck again, and again, and again by how much Pali they knew, and how they would use technical terms to explain their teachings. In each case, they studied for years prior to the practice.

And even though Ajaan Mun would often say, "Take what you've studied and put it in a chest"—in other words, put it in a box, don't let it get in the way of your meditation—still, you put it in a box while you meditate, but when you come out from meditation you've got to think about what you're doing, what you've been doing. And it's good to have the vocabulary, good to have the perspective that comes from these ways of thinking, these ways of looking at your experience, so that you can recognize where the problems are and gain a sense of how to solve them.

As the Buddha said, there's nothing in his teaching that's superfluous. It's all connected to that initial question—how to find something that doesn't die: what's needed to understand the mind, what's needed to understand the ins and outs of the mind that would get in the way, and the potentials in the mind that can act as a path.

When you see the connections like this, then it's a lot easier to practice. It gives direction to your practice, so you're not floundering around, having to re-invent the Dhamma wheel all the time. The Dhamma wheel was set in motion a long time ago and it's still in motion.

Study the Dhamma and then do the best thing you can with that study—i.e., put what you learn into practice. Use these concepts, use these ideas, use these practices to see how you're creating suffering in the present moment, to see how you're still looking for things that are subject to aging, illness, and death, and how you might change the direction of that quest. Seeing that will lead you to something a lot more solid and sure.