

## *Up for the Challenge*

*June 4, 2005*

The chant on five recollections—reflecting on the aging, illness, death, separation, and the principle of karma—re-creates the dynamic that the Buddha himself went through, the chain of events that led up to his leaving the palace and going out to the wilderness. There are two versions of the story. One is simply that he reflected on the fact that he was subject to aging, illness and death and needed to find a way out. Looking for happiness in other things that were subject to aging illness and death was nothing noble. It was just a form of intoxication. The noble thing to look for was something that wasn't subject to those things. That was the one noble search in life, the question being: Can you, through your own efforts, go beyond aging, illness and death?

The more dramatic version of the story tells of how the young bodhisattva was prince who was sheltered from seeing anybody old, ill, or dead in his younger years, until one day he went into the city in his chariot. He had felt a need to leave the palace. He was sick and tired of being cooped up in the palace and he wanted to see what the world outside was like. In spite of all his father's efforts to prevent any untoward thing to happen to him, he saw an old person. He asked his charioteer, "What's wrong with that person over there?" And the charioteer said, "You know, that's an old person." "Is he the only one who gets old?" "No, of course not. We all become old. The prince went back to the palace and reflected on this. The next time he goes out, he see a sick person. The next time he goes out, he sees a dead person, and the answer is always the same. "What's wrong with that person? Is he the only one who has those problems?" "No, everybody's going to go through that." The prince went back and reflected on all the pleasures he had, all the people he loved. If he was going to die, he was sure to be separated from all these people. Then finally he saw a forest mendicant. He realized that if there's any way to find a way out of this problem, it's through that life, cutting down on your responsibilities and going off in the forest, and having a chance to really look into your mind, to see what the potential of human action is. Can it really overcome these problems?

Now, this version of the story may strain credulity in the sense that the prince lived to be twenty-something, and yet had never seen any of people of this sort. But it has a psychological reality, in the sense that we often go through life oblivious to the fact that aging, illness and death lie in wait for us. This is how life closes. And then one day it really hits us really hard. There's a certain period of life where everything seems to be developing and growing, getting better and better. We're getting more and more mature, we're getting more and more capable. But then we start seeing these things slipping away, and we realize that that's how it all ends, how it all goes. This starts calling into question all the accomplishments we've had in the course of our life: Is there is nothing that goes beyond aging, illness, and death? The next question is: Are we just going to stuff those thoughts back into a corner of the mind and pretend that we haven't realized them? Or we are going to take those realizations seriously and see what we can do about them? Do you have any fighting spirit in you? Would you like to try to fight and go beyond those things? That's the question the Buddha asked himself. The life of the forest mendicant was what opened the door.

So this is why that fifth reflection is on the principle of action. The Buddha found the most important thing you can explore is how far your own abilities can go in bringing about true happiness, a happiness that lies beyond the limitations of aging, illness, and death. That's a noble life, a life well spent. He told himself that even if he didn't attain that goal, the fact that he did strive in that direction would mean that his life was well spent—which is also why in the night of his awakening, most of his insights were insights into the nature of human action.

This life we're living right now is not the first one we've lived. We've had many before this. That was his first knowledge on that night. The whole course of our lives has been shaped by our actions. That was the second knowledge. In his final insight, he realized that it isn't just actions coming from the past that shape the present. Our present actions are shaping the present as well. These are the important ones, these are the ones that make all the difference between pleasure and pain, bondage and freedom.

This is why when we meditate, we're meditating on the present moment, because we're always acting, we're always making choices in the present moment, and for the most part, they're under the radar. We don't realize what we're doing, and because we don't realize what we're doing, we're not all that skillful at it. And because we're not skillful, we end up creating a lot of stress and suffering for ourselves.

This is why it's so important to take the time to really look into the present moment. What have you got here? What's going on here? How many things coming through the mind are simply waves of influence comes from the past, and how many of the things are happening because of the choices you're making right now? You can't do much about the past, the past is done, but you can do a lot about how you're reacting to the potentials the past provides you right now, right now, right now.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I asked him about the whole issue of past lives, because I had heard some people say that the Buddha never really taught about past lives, while other people said that he had. Ajaan Fuang's answer was: The important thing to believe in when you're practicing here is not that issue. The important issue is the principle of karma, that you shape your experience through your actions. How long you've been doing it is not the issue. The issue is that you're doing it right now. The meditation is an exploration of exactly how you shape it, and how much you shape it, and learning other ways to shape it skillfully. Otherwise your meditations simply become sitting here waiting for something to happen, to be enlightened from outside, or just have something accidentally fall into place. But if you realize you're doing an awful lot here in the present moment, and you're fully alert to it, you can see how you're shaping it and learn how to shape it into a path.

Psychologists have discovered that there's an awful lot going on all the time in the brain. Just in the way the mind keeps tabs on the body, there's a lot of information coming in, and the mind has to sort through which things are important to focus on, and which things are not. It has developed sort of a regime that goes on automatic pilot unless something really bad happens. Most of the time, our conscious awareness of the body just gets blocked out because we're more interested in other things. So those many levels of choices and intentions and decisions get blocked out of our awareness. Unless you take the time to drop your focus on things outside and turn your focus on things inside, you're never going to see any of this.

This is why it's important to take the time to do this, because this is a noble activity: seeing into your actions, understanding their potentials, understanding their power, seeing exactly what your choices are, what your intentions are, how many layers of intention are there in the

mind. It's noble because it enables you to find a happiness that's harmless, a happiness that doesn't die. The initial premise of the meditation is that our actions are important, and then the major discoveries in the course of the meditation are to see exactly how important they are. One way to do this is to try to make whatever intentions or choices you're conscious of, as skillful as you can, as skillful as they can be. See what that does to how you experience day-to-day reality, how you experience your inner reality.

The Buddha talked about the time his practice got on the right path—it was when he simply learned how to divide his thoughts into two sorts—skillful thoughts and unskillful ones—in terms of the states of mind they lead to. In other words, he started looking at his thoughts not in terms of their content, but in terms of their role in a chain of cause and effect. The questions he asked himself were these: “Where does this thought lead? What does it do to the mind to think a thought like this?” He found that thoughts that were imbued with sensual passion, ill will, and harmfulness really did harm the mind. Whereas thoughts more inclined toward renunciation, lack of ill will, lack of harmfulness were really good for the mind. So he learned how to keep the first sort in check.

As he said, it was like being a cowherd during the rainy season, when the rice is growing. Every time he saw the cows going into somebody else's rice fields, he would tap them, check them, and poke them, making sure they stayed where they belonged. As for skillful thoughts, he could let them roam around, like the cowherd after the rice has been harvested. In India, that was the time the cows had pretty much free range. The owners didn't have to worry about the cows eating or trampling on someone's crops. If you're a cowherd, you can simply keep in mind the fact that there are cows out there, but you don't have to ride herd on them that much—with one exception: when you realize that even skillful thinking, when there's a lot of it, it tires the mind.

The next skillful step was to incline the mind into right concentration, to bring it into states of solid absorption, real resting spots for the mind. The Buddha pursued these and found that they became more and more and more refined in stages, until he reached the point, focusing on the breath, where the breath stops throughout the body. His awareness filled the body. He described it as a bright awareness filling the body like a white cloth entirely enveloping the body. Then he inclined his mind to the issue: Exactly how can you put an end to suffering? He saw the mind clearly in the present moment, creating suffering for itself through its intentions. Every place he saw the mind creating suffering, he would let go. Stop that particular activity. Then he had himself cornered. He couldn't have any intention in any direction because he realized it was going to create some sort of suffering. Even the intention to stop creating suffering is going to be an intention. At that point his perception of stress was so subtle that he could sense that fact as well. That's when the mind totally stopped intention even without intending to. It just totally stopped right there, because it was in the right place to do it. That was when his mind tasted the deathless, total unbinding, total freedom. He'd found what he had been looking for.

It was on the basis of that experience of freedom that he was able to teach for another 45 years and help other people find the same freedom. Through exploring the processes of intention by questioning it: What does it mean to act? What is a person doing when he or she is acting? What is the act? The act is the intention. How many times do you act in the course of

a day? You're acting all the time. It's your mode of being. The way you act is how you define yourself.

So instead of carrying your notions of who you are, whether you've got to be this way, got to be that way, "I am this kind of person," "I am that kind of person," just look at how you act. Look at everything, even your sense of who you are, as types of action, and then look at whether they're skillful or not.

This is where that reflection on karma can take you. That fifth reflection may sound very simple, very basic—some people call it kindergarten Buddhism: You do good, you get good results; you do bad, you get bad results. But it's exploring that basic principle that can take you all the way.

This is why it's an important reflection. This is also why it's the way out. Those first four reflections are meant to give rise to *samvega*, which means a sense of dismay, a sense of urgency, a feeling that you're trapped and you've got to find some way out. You can't let the way things are continue. The fifth reflection on the principle of karma is meant to give rise to the sense of what's called *pasada*: the confidence that, yes, there is a way out, and it's through your actions.

So the question that faces all of us: Are you up for the challenge? There is a long line of people that goes back more than 2500 years that have been up for the challenge. Your question is: Are you going to join them?