



2021-09-18 Aging, Illness, Death, & Separation - Morning Session

SPEAKER

Ajaan Thanissaro

Okay, let's start with some meditation. Find a comfortable position to get into. Close your eyes and I'll give you some brief instructions for the meditation to begin with and then ask that you meditate while I talk. First start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is your quest for true happiness. Your true happiness; the happiness of all other beings. Because true happiness comes from within there's no conflict there. So start with the thought "May I be truly happy. May I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." Then spread the same thought to others. Start with people who are close to your heart: your family, your very close friends, may they find true happiness too. Then spread those thoughts out in ever widening circles - to people you know well and like, to people you like even though you don't know them so well, to people you're more neutral about, and the people you don't like. Remember that the world would be a much better place if everyone could find true happiness within. Spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don't even know. Not just people, living beings of all kinds: east, west, north, south, above and below out to infinity. May we all find true happiness in our hearts.

Now bring your attention to the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep in and out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Settle your attention there and then ask yourself if it's comfortable. If long breathing is comfortable, keep it up. If it's not comfortable you can change. Try shorter breathing or in short, out long, in long out short, heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow- you can experiment for a while to see what rhythm and texture of breathing feels best for the body right now. Or you can simply post a thought in the mind each time you breathe in what kind of breathing would feel good now, and see how the body responds. If your mind wanders off, just drop whatever the thought is, and you'll be right back at the breath. If it wanders off 10 times, 100 times - you keep coming back 10 times, 100 times. Don't get discouraged, each time you come back, actually reward yourself with a really good breath. One that feels gratifying deep down inside then of course why stop with one. Now as the breath gets comfortable, the next step is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out to give yourself good solid foundation.

A good way to build up to that whole body awareness is to go through the body first section by section. A good place to start is down around the navel. Locate that part of the body in your awareness. Watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out to see what rhythm of breathing feels good there. If you notice any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax so that no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you don't hold on to any tension as you breathe out. Then move your attention to the solar plexus and follow the same steps there. One:



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

locate that part of the body in your awareness. Two: watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out to see what rhythm of breathing feels good there, and then three: if there's any tension or tightness in that part of the body allow it to relax. Now I'll let you continue going through the body at your own pace. Through the chest, throat into the head, down the shoulders to the arms down on the back, through the legs. Do that at your own pace. You can go through the body several times as you like. Until you're ready to settle down. Then choose any one spot in the body that's most congenial; focus your attention there, and then think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. If you can maintain that whole body awareness, fine. If it begins to blur out, go back to the survey of the body section by section again.

Meanwhile, I'll talk. Aging, illness, death: In Western Buddhism these are sometimes treated as peripheral issues of interest only to people who are already old, sick or dying. Modern Buddhism could be called the "cult of the present moment" or the "cult of the here and now" in that it focuses on the problem of finding happiness and ease in the present as an end in and of itself. In this context, issues of aging, illness and death are only tangential. When they are addressed you're told, "well, take the lessons you learned about being okay in the present moment and learn how to be okay about aging, okay about illness, okay about dying As for the question, 'What Happens After Death?' It's usually treated as something that's in bad taste. In fact, some people say the question 'What happens after death' is not even worth thinking about, it's best left as a mystery on the grounds that no one can really answer. That it's better to accept the mystery than to try to find answers to things you don't yet know. Now when you compare this to the Buddha's original teachings it's very ironic, because it has the priorities backwards. And it's worse than ironic. It's a mistake on two levels. The first level has to do with the role that aging, illness, and death played in the Bodhisattva's original motivation to find the Dhamma.

When we look at his life, we see the issues of aging, illness and death were central to his quest for awakening. It was because of these things that he looked for the Dhamma to begin with. He wasn't looking simply for peace in the present moment, even though when he was in his 20s he saw the fallacy in the sentiment that says, "I don't need to be taught how to die, I want to learn how to live." He realized that if you don't answer the question, "What happens at death?" "What happens after death?" It's hard to answer "What's a well spent life, what's a skillful use of your life?" He wanted to find answers to that. It was because of his desire not to suffer from aging, illness, and death that kept him on the path. It was because of his success that we have the dharma, in fact you can say we have the dhamma because of aging, illness and death, because one person's desire not to suffer from these things ever again.

The texts tell us that he saw that aging, illness and death must come from birth. But then the questions, "Is birth repeated, is it going to happen again? Is it something you have to prepare for again or not?" Once it's happening, do you have to suffer from it? These are the questions that remain unanswered until the night of his awakening. You'll find that the answers he gave after the night of his awakening can come into two sorts. One is how not to suffer even when aging, illness and death are still happening. The other is to find how to find a dimension where there is no aging, illness and death at all. That's what we'll be talking about today. On the night of his awakening when he got the mind into right concentration, and he realized he could use that concentrated mind in order to gain knowledge. First question he asked basically was, "Is there anything after death? And if so, what?" He saw that he had been reborn many, many



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

times. Many, many aeons of births and deaths. Seeing his name, his appearance, what clan or species he belonged to. His experience of pleasure and pain, the food that he ate and the way he died, again and again and again. Sometimes this knowledge is dismissed simply as being a hold over from his culture and that everybody in India at the time believed in rebirth. But that's not the case. It was really a hotly debated issue. Some people said death was followed by annihilation, others said that it was followed by rebirth, in which you stay the same as you were before. The Brahmins especially like this one. If you're brahmin, in this lifetime, you're guaranteed to be a brahmin in the next lifetime, people in other castes, were going to be in those other castes again, and have to serve the Brahmins. But the Buddha saw from his own knowledge, that was not the case. That he changed through many, many levels of the cosmos, from the very highest to the very lowest.

Instead of pursuing that knowledge any further, he came up with the question, "What is the factor that determines these changes?" Then came the second answer. And the answer was: his actions, his karma. Based on right views or wrong views. Here it's good to look at the way he responded to this particular sort of knowledge. He freely admitted that there are other people who had these kinds of knowledges in their meditation before him. But his knowledge differed in two respects, and also differed in terms of the questions he asked, and the differences had to do with the extent of his knowledge, he saw much further back so he could see larger patterns than they had. He also looked in more detail. And this relates directly to the issue of how he later came to teach the dharma. Because other people had this knowledge beforehand, in some cases, they would see someone who had done good in this lifetime, and then went to a good rebirth, done bad in this lifetime, gone to a bad rebirth, and they ended up teaching that action was deterministic. In other words, your actions in the past will totally determine where you're going to go at death. There were others though, who saw that there were cases where someone had done good in this lifetime, then went to a bad rebirth. Or done bad in this life and gone to a good rebirth. These are the ones who taught that your actions had no impact on your rebirth at all. That changes in rebirth are totally random. But his response was to look at the issue more carefully, and he noticed one thing that was very important: the cases where someone had done bad in this lifetime and gone to a good rebirth, the person had actually changed their views before they died. That at the moment of death, in some cases, they actually acted on right view. And in cases where people have done good in this lifetime, we go into bad rebirth is because at the moment of death they develop a wrong view and acted on wrong view. This suggested to him that actions in the present moment can have a huge impact on counteracting the impact of your past. (There is someone who is not muted. If you're not muted, please mute yourself.)

This suggestion that your present actions are very important - that they're going to actually counteract the effect of past actions, and not only present actions, present actions of the mind. So that's what inspired him in his third knowledge to look at actions in his mind to see what actions in the mind were actually leading to rebirth and was there a way that you could act that would lead beyond rebirth? It was here, he began to just look at the actions in and of themselves. This was the other part of the question that he asked, he didn't ask "who was doing this?" Or "who was going to be reaping the results of these things?" This is where other people have fallen astray, because they had noticed that there was rebirth. And the question was, "What is there in an individual that remains the same from one life to the next?" They got



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

waylaid from the issue of aging, illness and death and started focusing on issues of "Who am I? What am I? What will I be in the future? What do I have that's of a permanent essence?"

There were those who asked the question "Who am I? What am I? What is the permanent essence to me?" And they got waylaid from the issues - whereas the Buddha's stayed focused on the issue of "What actions will lead to rebirth and further death and can those actions be used to put an end to that?" So he traced through the all the actions that led up to death. This is where we get dependent co-arising. You have clinging, which is dependent on craving, which is dependent on feeling, dependent on contact, dependent on the six senses, dependent on name and form, dependent on consciousness, dependent on fabrication. And when he applied knowledge to fabrications, in terms of seeing their origin, their cessation and the path to their cessation: that allowed for the whole strain of actions to dissolve. It was this way that he was able to attain the deathless.

He learned two very important lessons here: One, it is possible to attain the deathless. That's the answer to his question, the big question of his quest. There is a dimension in which there is no aging, is no illness, is no death. It's done by looking at actions in and of themselves, rather than being concerned about who you are, or who's going to be receiving the actions. He also learned the causal principle that underlay all this, which as he said, was that some of the impact on your present moment experience is going to come from your past actions, and some of it's going to come from your present actions. That's it's a combination of the two that basically creates your experience of the present moment. Now, this is going to be very important as we face aging, face illness and death. Seeing what we're doing in the present moment that is contributing to any suffering that there may be around us and how we put an end to that suffering, by changing the way we act. So the principles of kārma are not totally deterministic, it's not the case that if you did something bad in the past lifetime, you're going to have to suffer. Now, there may be some physical manifestations that are going to come from that, but the mind doesn't have to suffer if it's skilled. This causal principle is what lies at the basis of all the Buddha's approaches to how you face aging, or you face illness, how you face death. It's also good to think about for a minute how much we owe the dhamma to the Buddha's staying on topic, all the way through his quest - this is what he wanted to see: what can be done so as not to suffer from aging, illness and death. It is the prime question of the dharma. We owe all our knowledge of the dhamma to the fact that he pursued that question all the way to the end.

When he taught aging and illness and death became primary topics. His big, basically two main teachings, the Four Noble Truths and Dependent Co-arising, are basically explanations of how suffering is brought into being and how suffering can be brought to an end. And in both cases, when the Buddha identifies suffering, or talks about what suffering is - he gives as his first examples: birth, aging, death. These are the big issues in life, and he's not going to shy away from them. He is going to take them on so to put an end to these things. That was the first mistake we see in modern Buddhism, which is not seeing the importance that the issues of aging, illness and death had in the Buddha's own quest for the dhamma. The second mistake is if we ignore the central role of aging, illness and death in the dhamma we miss out on many benefits to be gained from fully practicing what the dhamma has to teach. It's going to be more to the practice than just focusing on being okay in the present moment. You have to be heedful and preparing for the future. One: to provide yourself with a good range of opportunities to be



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

available at death, two: to master the skills that you're going to need in the present moment so that when aging, illness, or death become present moment experiences, those skills will be ready.

When the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, or being alert to the present moment, it's always in the context of mindfulness of death. In other words, there's work to be done here that you need to prepare. However, the focus is not so much on death in itself, it's there as a reminder. The you get focused on the work of mastering the skills that you're going to need in order to figure out how you can put an end to craving, how you can put an end to clinging, how you can put an end to the processes that lead to becoming - birth, aging, illness and death. Sometimes the question is asked, "Why bring in issues of death if you're going to be focused on the present moment anyhow?" It's largely because issues of death bring a greater sense of urgency to your practice, and it's necessary to set higher standards. You can make an analogy with learning a foreign language. If you're planning to go to Brazil, just for a vacation, you may learn a little Portuguese. Or if you're conducting Zoom meetings with people in Brazil, you would learn a little bit of Portuguese to entertain the Brazilians and the Spanish speakers. But if you're going to go live there, and if you know that someone's going to pick you up and take you there and force you to live there for the rest of your life - you're gonna learn the language, you're gonna put a lot more energy into learning the language and learning it well because you know that just survival depends on it.

It's the same as you're practicing meditation. If you're meditating simply to enjoy the present moment, okay, you'll have one level of standards as to what counts as an acceptable meditation. But if you realize: these are the skills I'm going to need when my body is beginning to fall apart, my relatives are crying, doctors are sticking things up in my nose, in my mouth, into my arms. I'm gonna have to maintain my mindfulness and alertness, and my concentration and discernment throughout the midst of that- it sets higher standards, of what's going to be acceptable. I'll give you an example. The issue of craving (which the Buddha said is the cause of suffering around all of these issues), in modern teachings that are focused exclusively on finding a pleasant abiding in the present moment- craving is defined as the desire for things in the world to be different from what they are. And so we are told that developing equanimity, patience, and contentment will be enough in order to not suffer from craving while we're here in the present moment. This relates to what one teacher once called the third and a half Noble Truth: suffering may not be able to be put an end to, but it can be managed. Well, the Buddha wanted to do more than just managing suffering, you want to put it into it, which you have to realize that at the moment of death, craving is going to come on really raw and really strong.

Those three types of craving that the Buddha identified as the causes of suffering, are going to be especially strong as you're dying. You're being evicted from the body and everything with which you've identified as you or yours. Your craving for sensual pleasure as an escape from the pain of all that will be strong. If there's physical pain, you're going to be that much more desperate to just get away from the pain- an opportunity to for pleasure shows up and you'll go for it - often without thinking about looking at the fine print, to see where is this going to take me? Because after all, the Buddha compares craving at the moment of death - it's like a fire, my house is on fire - and it's being blown by the wind to another house, and the wind is blind. So we can't let our cravings take over at that point, we have to be in charge. So we have to learn how



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

to overcome them and not been get pulled along with them. All too often as we go through life, as the Buddha said, we go with craving as our companion, we're used to going wherever it goes and believing whatever it says it would be a good thing to do. We have to learn how to step back from a second - even our craving for sensuality, has to be put away. As for craving for becoming (which is the desire - which is basically taking on identity in a particular world of experience) this again, will get very strong at the moment of death. You can't stay in this body any longer you can stay in this world, where are you going to go? As long as there's a sense of me and mine, of "What will happen to me?", you'll have a very strong desire to find a new identity and take on a new place where you can continue having an identity as a being. The idea of Annihilation is just too scary to contemplate.

In other cases there's the craving for non-becoming; you're sick and tired of life, you're sick and tired of the suffering of aging illness and death - you just want to be obliterated, annihilated. But that's not going to solve the problem as the Buddha said, once you think of yourself as having to be annihilated or wanting to be annihilated, that in itself creates a new becoming. You go to a becoming in which you're blotted out for a while. But that's not the end - you come back again. This requires that not only that you learn how to have some control over these cravings, but that you've got a real dilemma in this craving for becoming and non-becoming because each of them will lead to more becoming. The Buddha discovered that the way beyond that was what he had learned in his third knowledge in the night of his awakening, which is: you look not so much at trying to destroy becoming or try to maintain becoming but look at the processes - step out of the process a bit and look at the steps leading up to it, all the actions that lead to becoming simply as actions in and of themselves- to the point where you can develop dispassion for them. That dispassion is what frees you. This requires a lot of concentration and a lot of discernment. Simple equanimity, patience, contentment, tolerance will not cut it at that point. As the Buddha said, if you're simply equanimous you're not going to get the concentration you need in order to gain any really good discernment.

So keeping in mind the fact that you're practicing for how to die as you meditate, that will raise your standards as to One: what is an acceptable meditation, and Two: what you're looking for as you're trying to overcome the cravings that are getting in the way of your concentration, getting in the way of your discernment. In the reverse of the modern context you'd rather see preparing for death as a tangential application of teachings that were originally meant to be focused on the present moment. What happens is that the present moment is viewed in the context of preparing for death. When we meditate and focus on the present moment, we're learning to perform the duties of the Four Noble Truths- that are precisely the duties that we will need to master as we're facing death so that at the very least we don't suffer from it. If we're going to be reborn we can direct ourselves to a good rebirth, or ideally at that point the Buddha said it is possible, if your right view is strong enough, and your concentration and discernment are strong enough that you actually don't have to be reborn at all. You're released into the deathness, which he said is the highest happiness, the highest freedom, the ultimate truth. So those are the basic lessons that we can learn from the Buddha's awakening.

Looking at how we're going to approach these issues of aging, illness and death- today I thought I'd go about the ways in which we apply these teachings to the process of aging and illness this morning, and then this afternoon, we'll talk about death. Keeping these larger issues



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

in mind can help to encourage heedfulness, which the Buddha identified as a source for all skillful qualities. But this practice requires competence. I mean, it's one thing to say there was no such thing as a good meditation, whatever happens in your meditation is okay. But once you start realizing there are skills you're going to have to develop, it can get kind of daunting people can sometimes wonder, "Am I capable of doing this?" We have to keep remembering the Buddha's and Ananda's advice when you hear teachings like this. Ananda's advice is: Here someone has gained awakening, and the proper response should be "Why not me? They can do it, they're a human being, I'm a human being, if they can do it then why can't I?" You have to convince yourself that yes, you are capable of doing these things. It requires dedication, more dedication than you might initially expect. But if you tell yourself "I'm not capable of doing this", remember, if you stick with the path, the skills that you master on the path will make you a new person, you change as you get more and more skilled. You sitting here right now may not be able to gain awakening, but the You who will master these skills, bit by bit, will be able to at some point. In other words, trying to learn how to give yourself pep talks as you practice. And you look at the verbs that they use to describe the Buddha's giving dharma talks about monks and lay people and there are four verbs altogether that they use to describe his giving a dharma talk. Three of them are pep talks: he instructed, he urged them, he roused them, he encouraged them. Okay, the instructions are things you read about, but urging, arousing and encouraging - these are things you have to learn how to do for yourself. And it's an important part of the practice. Of course, there will be a sense of self that develops around that urging, etc. But that's a skillful sense of self. At the point where you don't need it anymore, you can put it aside meanwhile, make good use of it. So those are the general principles we'll be holding in mind as we discuss the topics of today.

The two topics for this morning- aging and illness. Aging is a foretaste of death without warning, it seems alien that your body you used to be able to control, is beginning to get out of control. The main themes that the Buddha talks about in terms of aging are loss of beauty and loss of strength. Now some of the lessons we learned from the Buddha's awakening that apply to aging: One is your consciousness is supported by the body, but it does not need to depend on the body. So given that when the energy of the body is down, the wisest ways to prioritize, is to work on qualities of mind that will carry over to the next lifetime. In other words, aging is no excuse simply to rest. There was a series of dharma talks that Ajaan Maha Bua gave to two women years back, one of the women had cancer. She had wanted to come to his monastery to learn how to meditate in order to deal with the difficulties of the disease. And he told her, Well, I can help you with issues in the mind, but I can't look after your body I know nothing about that kind of disease. If you're gonna bring a doctor or a nurse along with you, I'll be happy to have you come. So the woman had an older friend, an older woman, 80 years old, who was a doctor retired. And so she volunteered to come.

So the two of them listened the dharma talks for three months, and they recorded. he gave a talk every night and they ended up with eighty-some dhamma talks, and they ended up with a recording of each talk. After they returned to Bangkok, the woman with cancer died after six months. And then the old woman who was a doctor suddenly found herself with this big pile of tapes. And so she said, well, even though I'm old, maybe I can transcribe these tapes. So she consulted with Ajaan Maha Bua and he encouraged her. She said later, an important part of his encouragement was: as the body begins to weaken, focus on the goodness that you can still



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

squeeze out of it before you have to throw it all away. I've always liked that expression squeezing as much goodness out of your body as you can while you're while you still have some strength. So the old woman in spite of her failing eyesight, in spite of other weakness, was able to transcribe all 87 dharma talks, and as a result, we have these two huge files are among the best talks that Ajaan Maha Bua gave; the best dharma books. And so, the lesson to be learned here is that you want to develop strength of mind in order to squeeze as much goodness as you can the body as it weakens. So that you have the good qualities that will carry over. We'll talk about the good qualities when we talk about the section on death.

So given that your body is going to lose its beauty and lose its strength, the Buddha basically advises that you learn how to redefine your sense of what's beautiful at this age, as the body begins to get a bit decrepit, it's not simply a matter of getting old. I mean, some people are quite young, and they and their bodies get decrepit, and weakened. And so it's good to be able to know how to take advantage of that. In terms of beauty, as the texts say, beauty comes from beautiful will, beautiful intentions, honorable actions. They say virtue is beautiful, even to old age, your jewelry and your other things may not look good on you, when you're getting older, they may look out of place. But the fact that you're a virtuous person- that will always look beautiful. Always keep that in mind. That's the beauty of that's appropriate. And actually, it's the beauty that's appropriate in any age.

As for strength of mind that's emphasized to compensate for weakness in the body. The Buddha has two lists of strengths. Five in each, there's some overlap between the two, and combined they give you seven. The first one is conviction- conviction, again, in the Buddha's awakening. That what he awoke to really was true. And what that means for your life in terms of the power of action in order to find true happiness. When you believe in that, then it gives you more and more encouragement to keep on wanting to develop, more quality and more strengths of mind. The second one is shame- now the shame that the Buddha's recommending here is not the opposite of pride, it's the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. In other words, you see something that is dishonorable, you could do it, you might be able to get away with it- but you realize, I just wouldn't want to do that. Shame is often defined as how you want to look in the eyes of others, and it's a matter whose eyes you want to look good in. Here, the Buddha is recommending that you want to look good in the eyes of the noble ones. By the standards they have. That, he says, is a treasure, because it will prevent you from doing a lot of unskillful things that you would later regret. I've heard cases of veterans from various wars that have been going on for the past several decades, saying that as they get back home, they're haunted by visions of the children they killed and other atrocities that were done. They said they give a million dollars to be able to go back and undo that deed, well a million dollars can't do that. But, if you start out with a sense of shame to begin with, it's just- this kind of thing is dishonorable. You won't have that scar in your memory to begin with. In which case that sense of shame is more valuable than a million dollars.

The same with compunction, which is the next strength. Compunction here is realizing that your actions will have consequences. The idea of doing something that would lead to suffering just doesn't appeal to you. Otherwise, you do care about the long term consequences. Your actions are not apathetic, you're not devil may care. You think seriously about what's going to happen down the line and take that into consideration. Another strength is persistence. This is



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

motivating yourself to stick with the practices or thoughts of heedfulness, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of goodwill, for yourself and for others. These are important practices, how you motivate yourself to want to do what is skillful, and to abandon what is not. Another strength of mind is mindfulness. And this is not simply being okay with what's coming up in the present moment. Remember, mindfulness for the Buddha was a quality of memory. You remember what's skillful, you remember what's not. You remember what you've been able to do in the past that enabled you to do what is skillful, even when it's hard. You remember what has enabled you to abandon what is unskillful, even when it's hard to do that. And you learn to recognize what's skillful and unskillful in the mind as they come. This will be an important skill because many times things can come up in the mind and they look okay to begin with- but afterwards, as you get to know them, you realize this mind state has its problems. We want to be able to learn how to recognize that.

The final two strengths are concentration and discernment. We'll talk more about these this afternoon. But the important thing is that you learn how to maintain focus. Once you make up your mind to stay focused on an object, you can get a sense of well being there. This is good not only for just keeping your mind focused and under control, but also to compensate for the fact that when we're aging there is going to be a fair amount of pain, there's gonna be a fair amount of restriction on what you can do with your body. There's a beautiful passage, where Ananda's talking to the Buddha, who was now 80 years old. And he says, "Even Buddhas can get old, you know." The Buddha said "Yeah, it's nothing amazing at all. It's the way things are. He says, "The only sense of ease I have in my body right now is when I enter concentration." This is a theme we'll be getting to over and over again, as we go through the day that when the body gets sick, or when the body gets aged, or when you're dying, there's going to be a fair amount of pain.

For most people, their only thought of escape from pain is sensual pleasure. Whereas if you had the pleasure of concentration that gives you an alternative, a better place to go. And then finally, discernment allows you to separate the mind from the pain separate the mind from the fact that the body is aging, and you begin to realize, this body with which I've identified so long- however, you identify your gender, you begin to realize- it's going, it's going, it's going-, I can't identify with this any longer. And it's not a loss, when- if you see it that way- it's a lot easier to face these things. There are few comments on using the dharma as your age, we can talk about it more in the Q&A.

As for illness, this too, is a foretaste of death largely in the sense of not only that your strength is restricted, but also you have to deal a lot with pain. And remember, with illness, we have to face it in line with the Buddha's teachings on causality that he learned on the night of his awakening, that some of the things that are happening in the present moment are the result of past actions. And some of them are the result of what you're doing right now. So an illness comes-as the Buddha said- there are some illnesses that no matter how much medicine you give them, they're not going to go away. Other illnesses that- even without treatment, they will go away. But then there are those that will go away if there's treatment, and will not go away if there's no treatment. And it's for the sake of that third group that medicine is given to everybody. And it's the same with your mindfulness and your concentration. Sometimes it is possible through the power of mindfulness and concentration to make an illness go away, or at least



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

weaken. Other times, it's because if it's an illness that comes from strong past karma, the illness itself will not go away. But you can learn how to put the mind in a position where it doesn't have to suffer from it. My teacher had a student one time she had cancer, it was one of those cancers that just kept moving around the body, they would hit this organ, and they would cut out that organ, and it would move to another organ cut out that one, go to another one. This had been going on for about 10 years. And I happen to visit her one time right after she had a kidney removed. And she was sitting up in bed and she's looking perfectly perky and fine. And I asked her, "Is there any pain?" And she said, "Well, yes, there is, but I don't send my mind there." If she stayed with her meditation word "Buddho"- even though she still had the karma that she had to suffer from the cancer, or have cancer, the fact that she was able to train her mind, meant that she didn't have to suffer in the midst of the cancer. So we have to remember this, the Buddha will talk about- even when you're sick, even the body may be sick, but the mind doesn't have to be sick. And there's a parallel between mental illness and physical illness physical illness. The Buddha said the primary physical illness is something that happens to everybody every day i.e.: hunger. You don't have to be old to get hungry. And he said the primary mental illness is when you're clinging to the five aggregates. Now remember the word for clinging in Pali is the same word as for taking sustenance or for feeding. So there's a parallel between our illnesses that we're feeding on things. There's a constant lack in the body and there's felt lack in the mind, the practice is going to be aimed at getting rid of that sense of- maybe you can't get rid of physical hunger, but you can get rid of mental hunger and that's we're going to be focusing on

In dealing with pain, the trick is learning how not to cling to it. And a good pattern to follow there is to think about the four steps, and the tetrad on feelings in mindfulness of breathing. First step is to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture; breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure. This parallels a lot with Ajaan Lee's recommendations of when there's pain in the body, that you don't focus immediately on the pain itself. You focus on other parts of the body that you can make comfortable with the breathing, so you give the mind another place to stay. And then after the breath has gotten comfortable in that other part of the body, then you can think of that good breath energy spreading through the pain, and on out.

This moves on to the next two steps, which are to be sensitive to mental fabrication, and then to calm mental fabrication. The mental fabrication here- these are the factors with which you shape your state of mind in the present moment. And the Buddha identifies two: feeling and perception. And so first, you're using this comfortable feeling in one part of the body to deal with an uncomfortable feeling in the other part. In some cases, you can actually make it dissolve and go away. In other cases, you can't, but there's a greater sense of relief, and also a different perception of your relationship to the pain. You're not simply sitting there as a victim of the pain, you're taking a more proactive stance toward it. And when you're more proactive, it can't shoot you down. It's like someone's trying to shoot at you, and you're moving around all the time; it's much more difficult for them to shoot you. That's one perception you hold in mind. But you can also look at the actual perceptions that you apply to the pain. This is where Ajaan Maha Bua's instructions on dealing with pain are very useful. You ask questions about it: "Is the pain a solid block?" "Is the pain the same thing as the part of the body which you find it?" Part of you may say, "Well, of course not." But then there's a part of your mind that might say, "Well, yes, actually, that's how I perceive it." You have to remember that we started dealing with pain back



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

when we were children, before we even knew language. Our ways of understanding pain, our ways of dealing with pain often come from that period in life. So we have to understand the strange perceptions and assumptions that were developed at that time; you have to ask some strange questions. So one of them is: "Is the pain the same thing same as your knee?" (If there's a pain in the knee), is it the same thing as the hip? Can you see them as separate things? The image I like to use is a radio waves going into the room, you set up a radio one spot, and you tune it to one one frequency; here in San Diego, you might get San Diego, you might get Tijuana, you might get Los Angeles, you might get Phoenix. The radio doesn't move, it's there in one spot, but there are these different frequencies going through it at any one time. If you can learn how to see the pain as one frequency and the physical ailments in the body: earth, water, wind and fire as another frequency, that helps to weaken a lot of the sense of how the pain is impinging on you. As you see them separate, the pain becomes much less of a burden.

You can also ask yourself, "Is the pain a solid block?", or can you see it as individual moments of pain coming and going? When those individual moments come? Are they coming at you? Or are they going away from you as they appear? I found a useful perception to hold in mind is that they're actually going away. Years back, I was in Singapore, I was being treated with a traditional Chinese treatment for back ache, the doctor was rubbing oil into my back. And first it felt good and then it got more and more raw as he worked harder and harder. Then he took these bamboo whisks and started beating me. It didn't seem like seem like it was going to stop at anytime. So my first thought of course was- okay, what kind of bad karma do I have to have to go through this? And I said, "Well, it looks like he's not stopping, and I'm not gonna be a wimp and say stop." I said, "Well wait a minute- this a good opportunity to relate to the pain in the right way." And I began to see each time he hit me the pain was going away, it was not coming at me. And that way the pain didn't impinge on the mind at all. It's like sitting in the back of a station wagon facing backwards. As you're going down the road, as soon as something comes into the range of your vision it's going away. So look at the perceptions you have around the pain; see if you can replace them with better perceptions. This way, you're not just resisting the pain or gritting your teeth with force of will. But you're actually using your discernment to change your relationship to the pain. And that way, you don't have to suffer so much from it.

Remember, it's these two factors of feeling and perception that shape your mental state, and so you find some alternative pleasures to focus on and then you try alternative perceptions. You focus on those two issues around any pain in the body. You find that you live with it a lot more easily. Then watch out for any other perceptions that come in- especially the minds' conversation around the pain- about "How much longer is this gonna last? Is this is gonna kill me? Am I going to die from this pain?" Just say, "Well, this is not helping at all. How much longer will it be or how long has it been going on?" Don't think those things. This is where being in the present moment is a good thing. But you want to be in the present moment with a lot of discernment so that when pain comes up, you're not afflicted by it. So those are some of the lessons we can gain from what the Buddha has to say about aging and illness looking at it within the context of how he found awakening and the lessons he learned from his awakening. So if you can give me just five minutes, I will be back and we can have questions.

Okay, what's up first?



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Remember to raise your hands.

Yes, please raise your hands.

Questioner:

Hi, Taan Ajaan Geoff. I have a question related to... Oftentimes, I've heard during meditation practice you said something along the lines of just stay there, there's nothing else you have to do. There's nothing else you have to think about. But I think at some point, there is something you have to do. The Buddha had a question. And it seems that there must be certain questions you should maybe be turning to, at some point in order to make progress, not just... Exactly along the lines of what you said. Not being okay with the present moment... I mean just being okay with the present moment is not enough. How do you know which question you should be turning to? At what point? I don't know how to ask it better than that.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

The questions you're gonna want to ask have to do with the Four Noble Truths. Where is the suffering here, what am I doing that's contributing to it? The right time to ask those questions is when you're ready. Knowing when you're ready; you try asking the questions and see what happens. Is your mind gaining insight? Or is it just getting blurry? As you're asked those questions?

Questioner:

Do those questions raise spontaneously or not?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

In some cases, they will, in some cases they won't.

Questioner:

Okay. Thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

And if you find that they're not rising on their own, you can give them a push.

Questioner:

Okay, thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Ajaan Fuang once said that there are two kinds of meditators; people think too much and the people don't think enough. If you know you have a particular habit- if you think too much, if you don't think enough; try to compensate.

Questioner:

Good morning Taan Ajaan. I have a question about the reading. The first one on page 10. The faculty of conviction depends on the four factors for stream entry. Can you remind me what those are? I always think of stream entry as the seven factors for awakening.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Ajaan Thanissaro:

It starts out with finding people of integrity. Then listening to the true dharma. Applying appropriate attention, and then practicing the dharma in line with the dharma

Questioner:

Okay, now all of those sound very familiar. I just didn't make the connection. and then the faculty of persistence, what are the four right exertions?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Basically to abandon any unskillful qualities that have already arisen and to prevent them from arising again. And then to give rise to skillful qualities, and then to maintain them when they're there.

Questioner:

So those are pairs. It's the SN 35 145. Can you help me understand that the "I" is old kamma?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Because what you see is the result of old karma; what you hear is the result of old karma, everything that comes through the six senses is old karmic coming back at you.

Questioner:

I'm confused because we've been talking about what you see is already, I guess I'm just really confused. Because what you see is a result of what you're looking for.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

If you're looking for a bird, but there's no bird then you're not gonna find it. Right?

Questioner:

No, but if you're looking to get angry, you will get angry!

Ajaan Thanissaro:

But then you're going to focus on certain things. The things that are there available to you; that's the result of old karma. Now what you're going to focus on, what you're going to elaborate on, what you're going to create out of that- that's your new karma.

Questioner:

If I close my eyes and open them again, and will that there's nobody on the screen? It's not gonna happen. So old karma is just what is available to us...

Ajaan Thanissaro:

...available to us through the senses. Yes.

Questioner:

Okay...but, what we perceive is...



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Ajaan Thanissaro:

That's the new Karma. People who are chewing on foods: Remember that you're appearing in public!

Questioner:

Thank you. I wanted to ask you about the illness of the mind as in dementia, and how that relates to someone having concentration, or persistence, which seems to be going away with a friend of mine.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Someone's got dementia- the only thing that can help them at all is if you give them some mindfulness exercises to see if they can help stretch their mindfulness a little bit. Sometimes there are cases where the brain is not cooperating. Whatever talents they had in terms of concentration or discernment in the past are going to be leaving them- in which case they're going to be more and more subject to past kāma. As a caregiver or if you're helping them along, your job is to try to be their memory for them and help them remember good things that they've done.

Questioner:

...I am and when she's agitated or scared heard I can bring her back. But is that helpful?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Yes, yes.

Questioner:

So it may help to get her to concentrate- she knows she has Alzheimer's, she knows that she's losing her memory. So my bringing her to that awareness is helpful to her?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Yes. Bring her to the awareness of good things that she's done- anything that would lift her spirits she is going to need at that point.

Questioner:

Okay. Okay, thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

We had an old man who was dying at the monastery one time, and to make a very long story short, he had cancer in the jaw. And you could see that every now and then the pain would be getting to him, he'd start pushing his head back and forth, on the pillow. His daughter was there with him. And because he had been meditating on the Word Buddho, I told her every time she sees him, whisper the word buddho into his ear. And he would stop. Then he'd be okay for about two hours. And then he'd lose it again. Okay, put it back in- she was with him all the way until his death and so she kept his mind state in a good state all the way until he died.

Questioner:

This woman used to meditate and she can't remember that she used to meditate.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Okay, well, you don't have to talk about meditation, but just say "You may not remember, but you did a lot of good things in the past, and everybody loves you for all the good things you did."

Questioner:

Thank you.

Questioner:

Hi Taan Ajaan. In the talk you just gave you spoke a little bit briefly about people at the moment of their death will have right view or wrong view and then they will, you know, correspondingly be reborn in a good place or a bad place? Could you maybe expand a little bit on that? Like, how could you, at the moment of death... Like say, if you've been doing stuff that's been quite heedful? How do you then at the moment of death, just have right view? Or is it kinda saying, oh, shoot, I did something wrong. Maybe I can do something better next life?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

That's a good step. Yeah, I realized that that was a mistake. I recognize the mistake that I did. And I don't want to make that mistake ever again, that's right view. And then, an important part of right view, which is often missed is that you have goodwill. And this is going to be one of the themes that we're going to find this afternoon when you're talking about the various hindrances that could hit you as you're approaching death. And that the cure for a lot of the hindrances is goodwill, because goodwill is a type of right view that it's good that everybody be happy and truly inside. So like in the case of your father, see how to whatever extent can he develop Goodwill for all beings. And if he starts realizing, "Gee, there were those those beings that I hurt in the past" say: well, make sure you don't do it again. And then goodwill for himself.

Questioner:

Yeah. Just on that topic, we've found that coloring is really helpful to keep him focused. There's also adult coloring books that that are out there now. It's actually good for both of my parents. They color a lot these days. On a lockdown. I feel like I'm running a kindergarten. But yeah, I was just wondering do you think it actually increases mindfulness? I mean, it say so on Google but as you know....

Ajaan Thanissaro:

...it keeps him nicely occupied.

Questioner:

I'm sorry. I'm technologically challenged. I want to go back to the old and the new karma. It's very subtle. Old kārma isn't necessarily bad karma. Is it?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Oh, no. It can be good.

Questioner:



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Yeah, okay. But if What if one finds oneself- and I see this in my work as well as in myself- repeating thoughts or memories that are not skillful, or that are difficult, and I'm very aware of that. And being aware of it, I can put it aside. In other words, my mental actions can shift from- alright ,this is the past, this is the present. Now what I've discovered is that doesn't change the pattern once and for all. But it does bring me back to a whole different frame of reference. I have to keep doing it over and over and over again. And I'm wondering if that's the beginning of fresh karma I even like that better than good karma.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Yeah, it's fresh Kāma in the sense that you're developing a new habit.

Questioner:

A new habit, yes.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

And then the other. The other thing is when the worst is when you see these things arising, and you'll learn how to put them aside, then the next step is to know when they come back again, why do you go for them again, what's the allure?

Questioner:

But when I say- Alright, here it is, again- and I bring myself back to something else- I'm not going for the allure, am I? There's something programmed in there that brings it back.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

That's, what you want to look for. So that you can realize that whatever it is, is bringing it back: I want to I want to see that. I want to understand what that is.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

All right. Okay. Thank you.

Questioner:

I have to unmute myself. Have you got me? Yeah. Okay. Um, in the readings, Ratthapala taught the four dharma summaries to the king. And the thing that's interesting about Ratthapala are the four dhamma summaries being: the world is swept away, there is no refuge, my favorite one- there is no one in charge. The four dharma summaries- the king noted with interest that Ratthapala understood these things, not because he'd gone through any particular hardship, but because the Buddha taught them and he recognized them as true. Some of us know the four dharma summaries are true through direct personal experience, kind of raw and harrowing, direct personal experience. So some of us are practicing with post traumatic stress disorder. And I'd like to know if you have any particular considerations or cautions that you'd like to convey to us, I can tell you some of the things that I've done in my own practice that may have been unwise or things that I've tried to change it- but are you willing to address this issue?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

What you got to realize if the world is not providing these things for you, you've got to provide them for yourself. And that's the message that's why Ratthapala went forth was to say, 'Okay-



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

what what can I do- the world is swept away. Is there something in me that I can develop that's not swept away? There is no one in charge, offers no shelter? What kind of shelter can I provide for my own mind?" Because if you simply think about how the world is horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible, it's going to drive you crazy. The world isn't going to provide this. But the Buddha is telling me I have within me the resources that I can provide that for myself.

Questioner:

What I noticed, and it took me a long time to notice this because I've been doing it for years- I've been doing sitting meditation. And I would sit there always with the focus, always with the intention of returning to the breath. But with post traumatic stress disorder, there are alarm signals going off in the brain- the flashback Film Festival is rolling, your body is presenting all kinds of symptoms telling you you need to pay attention to this something dreadful is about to happen. But the thing is, I keep returning to the breath. And I sit there and let my mind beat up on me for a while I returned to the breath. And then -Ding-the session is over. Then I sort of pat myself on the back for just having endured a meditation session. But only recently I came to see that I don't get brownie points just for enduring a meditation session that's torturous. I mean, we don't have to repeat what the Buddha did. He already discovered that self torture doesn't work. So with reluctance- because, I've actually been kind of torturing myself with my sitting meditation practice, and I've actually made an enemy of myself, I wasn't taking any joy of it. With reluctance. I said, I need to try something different. So I started doing walking meditation in my house, I mean, my house is all on a single level. So I just pace the house to the living room, the dining room and then an L shaped hallway where the bedrooms and bathrooms are it's a different experience. I feel less threatened walking than I do sitting. I notice different things coming up in my mind. But the main thing is: I have a greater sense of ease and it's not quite the self torment that sitting was, but I have this nagging sense that it's somehow an inferior practice.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Ajaan Suwat is reputed to have gained awakening while he was walking, so it is possible.

Questioner:

Oh, it is possible? In any case, I don't see that I have an option if my practice is torture to me, and I'm not finding any joy in it, I have to find an ultimate way of practice. And so for now, I'm pacing the house and it's a little more easeful.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Can you'd meditate lying down? What's that, like?

Questioner:

Lying down, I fall asleep. Okay. I'm able to do sitting meditation. For example, if I bring up one of your dharma talks, and you're talking, I'm able to do a sitting meditation, if I'm guided, if I have something outside of myself to focus on, but if I'm just sitting by myself, I'm just going to get beat up on by my mind. What was interesting to me- what I noticed my mind doing when I'm doing walking meditation, my mind is doing a lot of planning. It's anticipating disaster, and trying to come up with scenarios. Okay, this terrible thing could happen. And here's how I'm going to respond. And I love the reading that was included today about the guy that with the fruit tree,



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

and he's like, Well, the fruits aren't falling to the ground, but I can climb the tree and grab some fruit and fill my clothing up with him. And then the second guy comes along with an axe. I love this image, because it's an image I bring to mind when I'm walking. And my mind goes into planning mode, and it starts forecasting disasters. And then I start saying, Okay, what am I going to do to meet that disaster? What am I going to do to meet this one, and I realized, there's always going to be some guy with an axe, or an atom bomb or something. I mean, there's, that's not that's not the way to do it. The way to do it is to return to your own breath, your own body, and to find some pleasure in your own being, I guess, and whatever way you can do it, whether it's walking, sitting, lying, I don't know how many different options there are. But thank you for letting me know that it is possible. Another person that inspires me is the case of Gotami, the woman who lost her entire family in a single day. Yeah. If that's not a traumatized person, I don't know who was yet in her own words that you beautifully translated, s`he realized unbinding herself and her heart was released. So walking meditation- I think this is a problem of right view, I mean, I didn't catch on that I was supposed to actually find the practice enjoyable, because that's my refuge. Is this correct?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Yes.

Questioner:

Yes. Okay. Well, thank you.

So before we go further, I just wanted to make one announcement clear to everyone. We are live streaming this on YouTube, as well. So please be cautious and not discuss or talk about personal matters. For your own privacy's sake, Thank you.

Questioner:

Hi, first of all, thank you for the explanation about the old karma with the senses. That was a bit confusing. One of the questions I had that's sort of basic about the idea of going on, you know, to a new life, or to a better or worse place based on what you're thinking or doing when you die is- people die unconsciously, like they die in the middle of sleep, or they get shot in the head or something happens, such that they're not really conscious at the time. So in that case, I'm kind of wondering is: where do they go dependent on the state of their mind the last time they were conscious or?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Okay, well, they may regain consciousness right after they're outside of the body.

Questioner:

So there's, there's a consciousness that could happen as they transition sort of...

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Right. One thing- in my own experience- I had a near death experience, one time I was electrocuted. And it happened in the snap of a finger. But for me, it was like five minutes. Everything slowed down. But I began to realize there are a lot of decisions that I was making as



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

I was as I was going through that period. But the people who watched it happen, so it was just a split second that I was electrocuted, and I was able to pull away. So I think when you realize when you're leaving the body or forced out of the body, the mind suddenly speeds up. And it's conscious of lots of things that they wouldn't ordinarily be conscious of- so someone who -say- dies in their sleep, they may wake up inside and say- this is it- I'm going. And so they're making decisions. The other alternative, of course, is that somebody was shot- my teacher had a student who was quite psychic. And her job was to drive around delivering oxygen canisters in Southeastern Thailand. And she drove past a lot of accident scenes, the police in Thailand are a little bit slower than they are in America to clean up after accidents. And so you tend to see more accidents on the side of the road. And she said she would drive past an accident, and she would not only see the bodies on the on the side of the road, but also the people corresponding to the bodies kind of milling around looking lost. So she would always stop and basically in her inner meditation, talk to them, and say, Okay, now it's time to go on, think of the good things you've done, move on. Which is why when someone's had a violent death, like that, it's always good to say good things to them.

Questioner:

Okay, that's helpful. Um, just one other question is, when I when I'm going outside, and this is partly, you know, a meditation thing, but it's also just if I'm walking around, or whatever, particularly walking, when I look at the world, I sometimes am very aware of- this is passing- or this will be gone. In the Bay Area, where we live used to be underwater 5000 years ago, and these houses and everything that people think are so permanent, will be gone. And sometimes I'm thinking well, that's a helpful view that's, awareness of the transience of life. And other times, I'm thinking- but it's so beautiful, it's here. Now, I'm lucky to live in a nice place where I'm not choking from smog or whatever. And so I'm wondering when is it better to be aware of the transience of it, and the fact that it will go away, versus just really enjoying and appreciating where I am.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

It depends on your state of mind. If you're feeling down, think about- this is a really nice place. Heaven on Earth, the Bay Area. At other times when you're getting careless and gotten complacent then it's good to remind yourself- hey, this stuff's gonna go some day. What do I have that's of permanent value that I can take with me when it goes, and you reflect back- well, it's my actions- the good things I do for myself, the good things I do for other people. Those are the things that are of real value.

Questioner:

So if I'm like, reflecting, as I'm walking around, and, suddenly, I pick up trash or think- gee, I could help people who are suffering who don't have a home, that's that's sort of a positive thing. Right? That's of more value than just sort of thinking about the world going away or not being permanent.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Yeah, cuz as I was telling Susan, just knowing when you realize, the world is swept away. What is not swept away? Let's focus on that. Yeah.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Questioner:

Hi Taan Ajaan, thank you very much for teaching us today. I have a question that is related to the meditation work Buddhho at the moment of death. Kind of a follow up to the story about the gentleman with the jaw cancer. And it seems like it's very common among some of the teachers in the Thai Forest Tradition to teach this word. It seems like when you teach, you've kind of more focus on making sure we're paying attention to the sensation of the breath and the body. And so, buddho seems like a very helpful, single word, snap you back into your practice as you're being pulled in all sorts of directions as you approach death. If we're if we're not using a meditation word in our meditation, do you have any other suggestions for something that can snap us back as we are facing death?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Well, breathe. If you've been focusing on your breath all this time then there should be some really good associations with your breath- where's your breath right now? That should be plenty.

Questioner:

You could just think Okay, remember my breath just remember my breath.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Breath right now. As you're dying, you're gonna have to leave the breath and you say "Where's the state of my mind right now? Where is my awareness right now?"

Questioner:

I see, so almost like kind of jumping through the tetrads a little bit like: Okay. Feelings, mind.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

We'll talk about this little bit more this afternoon. Okay.

Questioner:

Taan Ajaan, I have a question regarding the strategies in dealing with pain. So I've been mostly focusing on using the breath energy if I have a pain, using the breath energy to go for that area to ease the pain- to count, and usually it goes away. When do you recommend to use the other one- to use discernment to look into the pain? Like, how does it feel? is it I never had to use it so far.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

I can say you're lucky in one way, just sit for longer hours until there's pain, and then it doesn't go away as you breathe through it. Okay. Thank you. That's it.

Questioner:

Thank you

Questioner:

Hi, Taan Ajaan. So I was wondering, in your talk, you're talking about that we should teach ourselves urging rousing and encouraging. And to me these seem quite similar. So if you could



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

give an example of these three, how we can, in our own practice, use these three different strategies

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Encouraging is saying this is a good thing to do. You should do it. Rousing is saying, "Come on, you've got the energy, you can do this. You really just got to sit there and do nothing.?" And then encouraging is more- "you really can do this I really believe in you." Okay.

Questioner:

Thank you, Ajaan. In response to Lee's question I just wanted to talk about different kinds of thoughts and the gratification that might come along with them on, you know, when someone cuts me off in traffic, and I get riled up, you know, it's pretty obvious, kind of what the gratification that comes along with more simple thoughts like that- defending my territory and of those types of thoughts. But then, I'm a primary care clinician, and I treat folks with anxiety disorders, spectrum and OCD. And they often mention things like intrusive thoughts, or thoughts that kind of seemingly come up, that really don't seem to represent their inner desires, you know, just kind of come out of the blue, you know, maybe something really unpleasant. And it seems like understanding those types of thoughts and the gratification that might come along with those thoughts is a little bit harder, I wonder if you can just speak to that, and how to sort of deal with, you know, thoughts that come along, that aren't obvious what to do with them, or what the gratification is and how you can reflect on the gratification that might be coming there?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Well, this is where it's good to think of the mind as a committee. And that you got lots of different members in there that have some strange ideas about what they want to think about. And for people who feel intruded by those things, you have to remind them- this is normal that everybody has members like this. Because this is where people start getting schizoid, just they don't even want to admit that there's that side to their mind, and they block it off. And so as long as they keep it blocked off, they feel safe, and then when it intrudes that's basically when their defenses are down. And so the proper attitude, is that- 'okay, I must have picked up something from maybe from somebody else, it's just kind of hanging around in my mind right now.' Do you know Ajaan Lee's thing about the different consciousnesses in the body? `That's a good one. So there's one part of the mind and that you don't necessarily have to identify with, but it's there. This part of the mind likes this kind of thinking. You gotta ask- why does that part of the mind like that kind of thinking? Even though you in the moment don't particularly care for it, you feel threatened by it.

Questioner:

Both as a clinician and as a meditator, though, I've often found that the, you know, it's sort of on a spectrum where there are some thoughts that feel very volitional, other thoughts that feel kind of more like they come out at random, It just seems like a person with mental health issues yelling in the park to a certain extent, that's somebody that you don't want to engage with but yet, they're still there yelling. And so that idea of getting to the bottom of that, for those thoughts that really don't feel very volitional and seem to just kind of come from past karma. I mean, that idea of getting to the bottom and thinking about their gratification, I just haven't quite found a



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

great way to do that, or to recommend other people to do that. It just seems more like it's something to be ignored or undermined through other ways.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

At some point you're gonna have to engage them. And the question is, do you feel comfortable engaging with them yet or not, you have to have a safe space inside in these things. And this is one of the reasons why we work with the breath and get the body as comfortable as possible. So you feel secure in the present moment. So that you can take these things on- if you don't feel secure, you don't want to take them on yet. And the other thing is- just say- whoever that is, whatever bit of that personality is- just have lots of goodwill This is my teachers way of dealing with spirit possession. And it works well with with psychotic thoughts as well. Just lots of goodwill: What do you want? What's What's your problem? I could spend the next full afternoon talking about my teachers' dealing with spirits.

Questioner:

Hello Taan Ajaan. Can I please get the list of the qualities that you listed out that are that are useful to deal with Aging? I didn't quite get pen and paper and paper do note them down?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

you mean the strengths?

Questioner:

The strengths. Yeah.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Well, there's there it's listed in the readings. There are two lists of strengths there.

Questioner:

Which one of those? Is this...

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Under, under the topic of aging? In my readings is on page 11.

Questioner:

Okay. Okay.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

And then putting those two lists together, you got seven factors. All right.

Questioner:

The other question I had was- seems like the moment of death, you said that a change of right view or wrong view can actually guide exactly where you could be reborn or maybe at least direct you in a different direction in case you change it. How much of a change in right view would be required? It seems like it seems to me that it's rather extremely subtle, it seems almost like you could have gone all your life, committing murders, killing animals, all of that in the moment of death, you just say, Gee, that was that was terrible, that was bad for me to have



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

done that. And that immediately takes you somewhere else. That seems a little arbitrary. I'm not quite sure that...

Ajaan Thanissaro:

You might go to a good place, but there may be some bad things happening to you at that good place. Okay.

Questioner:

So, in other words, some of the kāma would have some effect at some point in time- it might shorten my lifestyle lifespan for some while Okay. The other thing that also was occurring to me was actions in the present moment. If those actions are done with the senses, like for example, we are using the senses and the senses are also from past karma. So, now, we have a point where we are basically using past karma and present karma together, and that seems to be happening all the time. Right. So in other words, we are using what came from the, from the past as a raw material, to fashion out what's going to happen, the future

Ajaan Thanissaro:

... and the present moment.

Questioner:

And so that's what we're trying to get training in during the meditation is just that, we're always doing it, it's just that we don't do it very well. That's the only reason.'

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Like being a good cook, if you're in a really good cook, you can take bad ingredients and make good food out of it.

Questioner:

Good morning, and thank you very much for the teachings and for the readings that you gave us. I really appreciate them. And I appreciate the story about the Buddha wanting to find the deathless so much. I told a few Buddhists that I know that I'm not interested in being reborn, I really don't see any realm that attracts me. And they said, Oh, you're just practicing aversion, and anyway, you're not a monastic. And I just didn't know what to make of that. But it didn't seem relevant to me. I mean, why? Why would that make any difference? Or does it? The problem I am having is that my job is so exhausting, that I can never reach concentration. But it seems like you were saying that concentration is necessary. So I guess I have to make a decision about my job. Is that where I need to go now?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Yeah, to ask yourself how much you want to continue working on your job and how much time you want to have to work on your mind? Yeah.

Questioner:

Okay, that's a tough choice. But thank you for that answer.

Questioner:



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Hello Taan Ajaan. There was something I want to ask about in the sutras. I don't know whether it was in the readings cuz I haven't read them. But in the Sutras, the Buddha becomes ill, and I think some of these senior disciples do as well. And one of the monks recite the bojjaṅgā, And then they're better. So I just wonder what your thoughts were about that. Is that something...?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Well, that's one of those cases where the illness had to do with his state of mind in the present moment. And as whatever past kāma there was involved in it was not all that strong, so that just strengthening his mind by remembering those factors for awakening was enough to get past the illness.

Questioner:

So was that? Was it a recollection practice?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

It's basically a recollection, because in those cases, they're all arhants.

Questioner:

So would that not be helpful for someone who wasn't?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Well give it a try. I mean, the whole thing is, you know, what, what qualities of mind would be skillful to induce in that person while they're sick? Some cases, as I said, have them think thoughts of goodwill. See if that helps, like Goodwill for all beings, rather than focusing on on their personal pains and illnesses. Thank you.

Ajaan. It's past noon, you want to take...

Why don't we just close the floor to questions and just take these remaining four?

Okay, that sounds good. Okay, so... Deborah.

Questioner:

Hi, thank you. Taan Geoff. Good to be here, I've been focusing on making my mind like Earth. And so I typed into dharma talks, and I listened to the first one, which was in 2019, about 20 times and I keep picking up more and more, at first, I thought that that idea was to make it so that things that happened to me, I could just be okay with, that I can try to keep myself really stable. But then I realize it's so that when things in my own mind become visible to me or apparent to me that I don't get upset. And so can you just relate that to this whole thing on aging, illness and death just talking about making your mind like Earth?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Okay, there's a lot of negative stuff is going to come up both outside in terms of what the body is going to be doing to you and then the thoughts that are generated within the mind. And if you're going to be dealing with them skillfully, you have to not be blown away by what is negative or even what is positive. Because you want to see very clearly, okay, this is something I don't want



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

to go with. And then you have the understanding- what if part of the mind wants to go with it? What is the allure, what is pulling it in? And can I counteract that?

Questioner:

Even if it's positive?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

If it's positive, then you ask yourself, "Is this gonna get me complacent?" If it's positive and giving you energy in the practice, go ahead and use it.

Questioner:

Some more skillful, I should look at it as skillful as opposed to positive and negative. Is it?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

You ever saw any of the Ice Age Movies?

Questioner:

I'm not sure.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

There were these animated films about animals from the Ice Age.

Questioner:

No.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

I was on a flight across the Pacific and the kid sitting in front of me had the whole set. I got to see the whole set. In Ice Age 2, there's this one scene where the characters are floating in his boat in a fog bank. And all of a sudden, these mermaids and mermen start appearing. And they're all very attractive. And the animals to kind of look kind of dreamy eyed at these, these beautiful creatures. And then as you look more closely at them, you realized that every now and then there's some sort of static in the picture. And inside the static, you begin to realize they are Pirhana fish and I said- great image- you know, things that look attractive Watch out. Okay Thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Taan Geoff, I want to go back to Eileen's question. Because for me, if I can't bring my meditation, and working with my mind, into my daily life- specifically my job, which is working with some very difficult people, and here's an example that will make you laugh: In my class that just screwed up the whole first assignment-so I'm really angry. But of course, I've been working with myself since Thursday- of course I'm not going to send them an email telling them how angry I am. So if I can't apply what I do in meditation to my life, it seems to me not too relevant. That's just where I am. And I just want to know, I would like you to comment on it.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Okay, well, you meditation has two functions. One is that you can live this life more wisely. Yes. And then secondly, that you really do have to prepare. What do I have to take with me when I go?

Questioner:

Right. Well, right now, to be really honest. Think I have to develop the wisdom to deal with 18 Difficult students. And if I don't do that, I don't think my my next life is going to be so good.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

No, you would have the wisdom to deal with your 18 difficult defilements, Yeah.

Questioner:

I just feel that it's very important, for me anyway, to bring the wisdom of the sitting in the meditation, and my study and reading to the details of my everyday life. Students and otherwise, for me, I just can't make that separation now, the time will come and I think about this all the time, when I won't have outer activity. But right now, for me, I have to bring the two together, because otherwise it's not skillful. And it's not creating good karma.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

For me, well, this is gonna be a decision everybody has to make on themselves how to balance these issues. Yeah. All right, thank you.

Questioner:

Dear Ajaan, in conditionality- the first one ignorance conditions, fabrications? What are those fabrications referred to there? Because there is no consciousness there. There is no name and form there.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Okay, well, it's basically another way of talking about name and form. Because you have that you have in and out breathing is bodily fabrication, you have directed thought and evaluation is verbal fabrication. And then you have feelings and perceptions are mental fabrication. If you look, you've take those and move them down to the the factor of name and form, you see them basically repackaged. So it's different ways of packaging that-what you are bringing to the present moment prior to sensory contact.

Questioner:

Thank you. Just another quick question. You said for calming the mental fabrications, keep different images in mind this water was sprouting and spreading all over the lake and this bath powder kneading.

Ajaan Thanissaro:

That's one way. Whatever way you find it, whatever perceptions you hold in mind that helps to calm the mind down. Those are the those are the perceptions you want to use. If you're working with breath meditation, then you use those images. Or you can have different images of how the breath energy is flowing in the body. In fact, some of them are more common...



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Questioner:

So that is where I'm a bit confused because when I'm following the body, the body is the perception of the entire body or the how the energy is spreading, then how to bring in another perception?

Ajaan Thanissaro:

Okay, well then you can have the perception of the breath energy originating in the body and spreading throughout the body. That's one another is that each cell is breathing and so there's no one spot in the body that has priority over the other spots. That's going to be even more calming. There's just like every cell is breathing, every cell is awake and aware. That's more calming. Or you can have the perception that that the outline of the body is gone and it's just space. These get more and more calming as you go down.

Questioner:

Okay, thank you.

Okay, fine. Well, thank you for your attention. And we'll be meeting back here at two o'clock my time- in two hours, whatever it is in your time where you are. And we'll talk about death! Thank you very much. Taan Ajaan Thank you, bhante. Thank you wonderful seeing you. Thank you all blessings Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you