Coronavirus and the Contemplation of Death

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18:19

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I was going to tackle this question of the precepts, which was — let me see if I can find the question. Are all stages of the Eightfold Path equally important? I might get around a little bit to that. But I came across a couple of interesting little articles here, letters actually, which you might be interested in.

So this one is written by a man called Darrell Davis from Denbighshire. And he says, "As well as being 66 and in poor health, I also have three sisters in the at-risk category for coronavirus. I therefore feel qualified to say this. We are demolishing our economy and small businesses and wasting many billions of pounds to protect an at-risk category comprising about 1% of the population. The science suggests that the rest of us may get a mild form of virus but will recover. The best estimate states that 250,000 people will lose their lives. This accounts for less than half of 1% of the population." You see where he's going?

"This is extremely sad and awful for those affected. But while governments should be caring, they must also be pragmatic. Many of these people, including myself, will succumb to something else in the next few years. How can we justify the impact of this path? We're spending effectively 1.2 million per expected death on people whose life will be taken soon anyway. Yet we cannot find the tens of thousands of pounds, only tens of thousands, for specialist cancer treatment for much younger people. It will take years to recover from this regression."

Just while you're thinking about that, there's somebody replied to an article that the journalist Matthew Parris had written. He appears to feel that younger citizens should be allowed to continue their lives almost as normal and that over-70s should be sacrificed. Say no. "I suggest he completely misses the point. If the over-70s contract the virus, they will obviously take up valuable capacity in the NHS. However, without some restrictions on the less vulnerable, the very nature of their lifestyles is likely to spread the disease, infecting a high percentage of the population, young and old. As a member of the over-70s group, I realise that we are more expendable. The facts, however, are that without restrictions on everyone, the consequences for the country could be catastrophic for us all." So you have an opposite view there.

Actually, when I looked at the death toll for coronavirus, most of them are over 75. So I'm all right. I'm only 73. It reminds me of Boris Johnson. Yes, that's right. That was the herd immunity business. Let everybody have it and then eventually everybody's OK. Young people are dying too, though. That's true. It's very occasional. It's not at the same rate as the old. People are living to 100 nowadays. That's true enough. That was the one young boy I read of, this young boy in Brixton who died yesterday. He was only

13.

Anyway, you can see there are varying views and opinions as to how the government ought to have reacted. But the more cynical reaction to this has been governments moving towards authoritarianism. Even in Europe there, this fellow in Hungary, Viktor Orbán, he's basically become a dictator. He can govern now without any restriction on his authority or, in fact, any criticism. You can get to jail for five years if you don't agree with what they're doing or write about it. And it's interesting because we thought the EU, Brussels, was all powerful. But actually, when it comes down to nation states, they eventually can do what they want. You can't do anything about it because it's a very small country, Hungary, and they're absolutely paranoid about being swamped by immigrants.

I did hear a funny story, though. There's a nun I know from the Czech Republic, and the Czechs also don't want any immigrants whatsoever. And this businessman actually set up a few jobs for the immigrants coming through Czechoslovakia. But nobody wants to stay. Everybody wants to go to Germany. So that was a bit of a downer.

A neighbour here celebrated a 102nd birthday. He was born in 1918 when the Spanish flu — we're reminded of the Spanish flu in 1918.

So anyway, I thought you'd be interested in that little article. Now, of course, what this brings up for us is this denial of death. And what do we mean by the denial of death? Everybody knows they're going to die one way or the other. It's not facing it. It's not turning round to find a relationship with death. And that brings about this fear, this running away from it.

You can see that constantly in the way that the society has become so risk averse. It's just become absolutely ridiculous. I came across this when we put the block up. All the windows that look out from a height, you can't open more than six or seven inches, just in case somebody jumps out of them. Well, I mean, that's all very fair. But it's like a meditation centre. And I was arguing to them that these rules and regulations are not statutory. They're advice. And you're supposed to safeguard a building according to the purpose of it. So obviously, if you had children, then you put up all sorts of necessary safeguards. But I told him that we were completely sane meditators, 100%. Not a single person comes here who's suicidal or anything like that, I said. Anyway, he was a young fellow and he wasn't going to take any chances.

But on that point and this inability of this fear of death, just to show you a difference in the way people have reacted way back — in the '80s, when I was at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara, we laid a new path from the door to the gate and very stupidly lay a pavement on top of another. So that was about a gap of a couple of inches, that's all. And one dark evening, you could never have seen it, one dark evening, a woman came, tripped over it and broke her nose. So, of course, when she told us that, we said, "Look, we've got public liability. Why don't you claim and we'd look after it?" And she wouldn't. She wouldn't claim at all.

Many years later, in the year 2001, something like that, I was asked to go to a group of depressives. It was a depressive support group. And there were about 30 people in the room. It's a bit of a downer because it seemed as though all they were doing was making each other more depressed by telling each other how depressed they were. And there was one guy there who wasn't. And he was full of life and full of vim. And you could see one or two people were snarling. I didn't think the atmosphere was very supportive.

Anyway, the man who was running it, he gave his life story for the day, how he'd been during the week. And he said he'd been walking on a pavement and he tripped up. And he'd hurt his knee or something, nothing particularly serious. So he decided to claim from the local government to sue them. And they said he didn't have grounds to sue them at all. And then he said, "I got very angry about that. And then I got depressed." So you see, there's various attitudes out there in society.

But this whole problem of denial of death. See, the Buddha gives us an exercise which you can try. It's extremely powerful, extremely powerful, because I've done it myself. I know what I'm talking about. And he's talking to certain monks who are practising contemplation of death. And as he goes through, I'm just paraphrasing now, one monk will say, "I have set myself up an imaginary point that when I finish this three-month retreat, three-month seclusion, I'm going to die. And I'm approaching it, I'm getting the feel of death." The Buddha says, "No, no, no. That's not how you practise the contemplation of death."

And then as he goes along to different monks, the time gets shorter and shorter until somebody says, "I'm sitting here contemplating that I might die during the night," something like that. And he says, "No, no, no, that's not the way to contemplate death." He says, you have to contemplate death by recognising as you breathe that every half breath you could die. You've got to bring it right up in front of your face. You've got to really recognise that we're on a tightrope and that you can fall off any moment, any time.

And if you really work on that for a few minutes, a few seconds, and really, really convince yourself how fragile life is, then you begin to get that contact with the fear of death. Now, this fear of death is a measure, of course, of our deluded self. I mean, that's what it is. The Buddha would not have had any fear of death. In fact, there are one or two tales of the Arahats who died. And they died quite peacefully.

Perhaps the most dramatic one was a man called Dabba. Dabba was a Malian local ethnic group just north of the Ganges Plain. And he had certain abilities. And one of them you'll all know from E.T. He had a control, it seems, over the fire element, over heat. And when he became liberated, he said to the Buddha, would he mind if he just took care of lodgings in the monastery? "That's fine," you see.

So it says that as the monks came in, he would ask them what they wanted to study or something like that, and he would put them in various sections. So the people who wanted to study the Vinaya, the rule, he'd put them with those people, the ones who studied Dhamma with those people, and the ones who meditated with those, and he would put the athletic ones on another side, which is just a nice way of saying that they're just messing about.

He could, if they came late at night, show them the way to their lodgings by the light at the end of his finger. Now, these days, we don't believe things like that, but you'd be surprised. And it seems as though when he died, he just rose up in the air and exploded into light. That's how it's described. So that's just a little story, just to keep you happy.

This fear of death, you see, is something that we can — because it's all around us at the moment, people are quite paranoid about it — is to recognise that it really drives us to paranoia, to unrealistic fears. I mean, here in Shropshire, there's only about, I think it was about 200 cases. In Powys, I think it's about the same. So although we have to be careful, it's really getting in touch with that sense of fear.

There's a really good time to do it, especially if you're living in places where there's quite a lot of cases like London, Birmingham, Manchester, places like that. And that's what you do. You just sit there and you breathe and you just keep saying in one way or the other, "Death can come now." Breathing out, "Death can come now." It's just getting used to the fear of death.

And now the problem isn't the fear of death itself. It's the fear of fear. That's what's causing the paranoia. It's what causes the panic. And it's a way of getting used to the feeling of fear. Whenever that comes up, the feeling of anxiety, of fear, is to sink into it. This business of — remember the Buddha in the *Satipaṭṭhān a* discourse is always saying to get feelings in feelings. You have difficulty getting people to get into a feeling. So you've got to sit in the midst of the bonfire and feel the fear. Feel the fear.

And what you're doing is you're accustoming yourself to the fear. And that means the reaction of fear of fear is disappearing, is going away. And when that comes, you can ask yourself, well, if I no longer fear fear, what's going to frighten me? And then eventually, of course, this is end game, that fear disappears entirely because the fear is based on the delusion of thinking that we actually are this psychophysical organism. We're just this organism, but the Buddha's quite clear that there's something in us which transcends it.

So have a go at that and see how you get on. You can drop me an email if you think it's been worthwhile. But I myself found it a very powerful meditation, contemplation.

Some little comments here. In the animal world, the weakest are left to die. Decisions during this extraordinary health crisis will reflect our humanity or compassion or our greed. The problem is we don't know what happens after death. No, you want to stay with that. I mean, of course, there is this teaching of rebirth, but you don't have to come to a conclusion. You can actually stay with that, with the thought that you will be utterly annihilated. That's where the fear is. That's where you'll contact the fear.

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