The Five Regular Contemplations

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:16

Namo tassa bhagavato arhato sammasambuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arhato sammasambuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arhato sammasambuddhasa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I've pre-recorded this talk because I'm on personal retreat at the moment, when you see it anyway. So last November, we dedicated this lugubrious month to that regular party topic, death. And we learned how powerful the Buddha thought the contemplation was leading to full liberation.

Now, this is actually one of a set of five. And in the numerical sayings, there's a discourse of the five constant or regular contemplations. For those of you who want to know, it's in the chapter 5, verse 57. So I'm going to read parts of the discourse and then we're going to look at the different contemplations.

So *bhikkhus* or listeners — the commentary always glosses *bhikkhus* to mean anybody who's reading the scriptures — there are five themes that should often be reflected upon by a woman or a man, by a householder or one gone forth. What five?

I am subject to aging, I am not exempt from aging. I am subject to illness, I am not exempt from illness. I am subject to death, I am not exempt from death. I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. I am the owner of my *kamma*, my actions of body, speech and mind. I'm heir to my *kamma*. I have *kamma* as my origin, *kamma* as my relative, *kamma* as my resort. I will be heir to whatever *kamma*, good or bad, that I do.

I'm going to leave *kamma* till next November because it's a big subject. Then he tells us what the benefits are. So what are the benefits to this sort of practice?

First of all, he points out, in a state of health, I am subject to illness. I'm not exempt from illness. In a state of health, beings are intoxicated with their health. And when intoxicated with their health, they engage in misconduct by body, speech and mind. We often take it for granted. Sometimes we don't eat properly. At other times we're a bit obsessed by what we eat, vitamins and so on.

I'm subject to aging. I'm not exempt from aging. In their youth, beings are intoxicated with youth. And when they're intoxicated in their youth, they engage in misconduct by body, speech and mind. Of course, we live in a very youthful culture, Botox and all that. And so we pretend to be youthful until the point where we kick the bucket. Sixty, as they say, is the new forty. Such is delusion.

I'm subject to death. I'm not exempt from death. During their life, beings are intoxicated with life. And

when they're intoxicated with life, they engage in misconduct of body, speech and mind. And of course, here we can quote the Buddha's understanding of this contemplation. "Monks, when mindfulness of death, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit, of great benefit, it gains a footing in Nibbāna, the deathless, has Nibbāna, the deathless, as its final end."

And then there's the renunciation. I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. And beings have desire and craving in regard to those people and things that are dear and agreeable. And excited by this craving, they engage in misconduct of my body, speech and mind.

One exercise there that you might take up is to create two lists — all the things you wouldn't want to lose or be robbed of, and all the people whom you would miss if they disappeared or died. So that's a nice little exercise. And then you'll see what to do with them as we go through the discourse.

I'm owner of my *kamma*, my actions of body, speech and mind. That's what *kamma* here means, not comeuppance. Heir to my *kamma*. I've *kamma* as my origin. *Kamma* is my relative. *Kamma* is my resort. I will be heir to whatever *kamma*, good or bad, that I do. People engage in misconduct by body, speech and mind. Now, when one often reflects on these themes, such misconduct is diminished or completely abandoned. And it is for the sake of this benefit that a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth often reflect thus.

So as you reflect, these themes lose their power over us. In the next section, he gives us some indication on how to reflect.

The noble disciple reflects thus, "I'm not the only one who is subject to illness, not exempt from illness. All beings that come and go and pass away and undergo rebirth are all subject to illness. None are exempt from illness." So this, in a sense, puts us into the big picture. So there's nothing special about me. I may be lucky and not suffer from severe illness, but illness will come my way. And if it is to be, well, I shall have to just accept it.

The noble disciple reflects thus, "I'm not the only one subject to ageing or exempt from ageing. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth are subject to ageing. None are exempt from ageing." So again, there's a strange comfort in knowing that all of us go through this process of aging. In fact, all beings go through this process of aging.

A noble disciple reflects thus, "I'm not the only one who's subject to death, not exempt from death. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth are subject to death. None are exempt from death." Now, that's interesting. When both my mother and father and all that generation had passed away some twenty-odd years ago, maybe thirty years, it's a strange comfort. These people that were so close to you, they've gone through that process. And so it makes it easier for us to do so. Can you imagine what it would be like if you were the first person to die? It reminds me of a cartoon I saw once where there's an elderly lady on her deathbed surrounded by her friends. And she says, "Why me? Why not one of you?"

"I'm not the only one who must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear to and pleasing to me. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and pleasing." So this is really about renunciation, about letting go before you have to let go.

Take an instance where a robber takes your mobile. You go around angry and moaning about the state of affairs and all that. "And this thief has got my mobile." But it's not my mobile anymore, is it? It belongs to the thief. So you're able to let that go and wish that the thief benefits from his theft in some positive way or at least puts it to good use.

And finally, "I'm not the only one who is owner of my *kamma*, heir to my *kamma*, who has *kamma* as one's origin, *kamma* as one's relative, *kamma* as one's resort, who will be heir to whatever *kamma* they do, bad or good. All beings that come and go, pass away and undergo rebirth are owners of their *kamma*." And as they often reflect on these themes, as they often reflect on these themes, they pursue the path, develop it and cultivate it. And as they do so, the fetters are entirely abandoned and the underlying tendencies are uprooted.

So this is also a path to liberation. Now, what are the fetters? The fetters or the chains, the manacles that keep us into this process of rebirth — the first three: the view of self, skeptical doubt and clinging to rites and rituals or just thinking that rites and rituals are enough. Light 100,000 candles to the Buddha and you're bound to be liberated — that sort of understanding. That goes when a person enters the first level of attainment, stream entry. But the other two don't go until you're at the third level, which is the non-returner, because they've lost any desire for this sort of dwelling. And that sensual craving and ill will have been done away with.

But the last five — craving for the joys of the lower five absorptions and of the upper four absorptions, those two, they go first. Not the *jhāna*, just a craving for it. Then there's the conceit, which is always about comparison — better than, worse than, equal to. Restlessness, which suggests that right to the point of liberation, there's always a bit of defilements there, the little end defilements which cause restlessness of one level or another. And, of course, ignorance.

The *anusaya* are the subconscious tendencies which come up whenever there's a when it's prompted by circumstance. So we don't actually know what's down there. This is very Freudian. But even all that is cleared so that there's no negativity, no defilement within the system.

So I'll just repeat that. If we continue this meditation, continue these contemplations — and we'll talk about that in a minute — we will pursue the path and cultivate it. And as we do so, the fetters are entirely abandoned and the underlying tendencies are uprooted. In other words, we'll be liberated from all suffering.

Now, at the end, we have a verse which is given to the Buddha. What I've done is I've retranslated it into

ordinary sentences, because the people who translate these verses try to keep it as a verse, and I just find it confusing. But if you put it into ordinary, straightforward language, it's very simple.

"It terrifies ordinary people to contemplate sickness, aging and death and that they are inescapable. That's true. If I find myself detesting such people, it would not be proper for me, for I have the same flaws. Contemplating this while knowing that there is no acquisition — you can't take anything with you to *Nibbā na* — I overcame these obsessions with health, youth and even life. I saw safety in renunciation. So I put effort into the practice and realized *nibbāna*. It is no longer possible for me to indulge in sensual pleasures. Now that I fulfill the spiritual path, I shall never come back."

So this does suggest that it's not only, of course, these practices. These practices lead you to develop the path. And part of that path is, of course, insight meditation.

So let's look at how we do this — this wise reflection, as the Buddha would put it. You always get this little phrase every so often.

Now, first of all, contemplation isn't thinking. There's a bit of thought involved, but what we're really doing is not an intellectual exercise, but opening up to our feelings about things, our relationship to these five contemplations. And we have to try and accept something that can be quite difficult for us. Sometimes it actually stings. And you choose a phrase or a passage and you just gently repeat it into the heart, just allowing the heart to accept it. Feel the resistance, keep saying it, keep saying it till you get a surrender. Then there comes this sense of relief and with it you get a smile. So you repeat it quietly into the heart, stay with the heart's reaction, wait for the resistance to disappear and wait for it to be digested.

So just to give some idea, you can make up your own phrases. So these are taken from the scriptures.

So sickness, of course, is sort of mini death or a preparation for death. The body manifests its vulnerability. There's discomfort and pain and always some disability, staying in bed or something. Sickness is unpreventable. This body is subject to disease. This body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness.

So now when you think about that, you think to yourself, "Subject to disease." So diseases come to mind. What am I afraid of? Is it cancer? Is it a wasting disease? Is it dementia? In one of those, somewhere along the line, there'll be something that you're really afraid of happening. And you stick with that. "I am subject to disease." That doesn't mean you'll wish yourself getting it. Don't frighten yourself out of your skin. It's just the case of facing these inner demons, these inner fears. And we've all, all of us suffer to some degree, a bit of hypochondria.

Aging — the contemplation of aging undermines this intoxication with youth, always wanting to be young. So aging is inevitable. The body is subject to aging. Body's not gone beyond aging. This body is now in a process of aging. So some phrase you personally make up, you just repeat it. "This body is now in a process of aging." What does that mean? "This process of aging." So I'm looking at my skin and my strength, how

my relationship changes.

Now, the big one, of course, is death. So life is uncertain. Death is certain. Sometimes saying the obvious hits the nail on the head. So this undermines clinging to life at all costs, barricading it with fame, riches and power, no matter how little we might have of them. So death is inescapable. Everyone must die. The remainder of my lifespan is decreasing continually. Death will come regardless of whether I have made time to practice the Dharma. That can be a bit terrifying, that one. We don't know when we're going to die.

Human life expectancy is uncertain. There are many causes for death. The human body is fragile. Only the practice of Dharma can help us at the time of our death. Now, there's a bit of comfort. Only the practice of Dharma can help us at the hour of our death. Our wealth cannot help us. Our loved ones cannot help us. Even our own body cannot help us.

So death is inescapable. This body is subject to death. This body is not gone beyond death. This body will die. So basically, it's like when you're trying to get to a situation where a doctor tells you you've got a very serious disease or it's a terminal illness, and you're just sitting there with that and you keep repeating it. Just keep repeating. You just feel how it is to say something like "This body will die." You get in touch with the body. You feel it. You see it in your mind's eye. "This body will die. This body, this body will go."

In the same way, I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. So this is, again, making those two lists and just recognizing the things you really don't want to let go of. But they're going to let go of you.

And then finally, something we won't go into this evening is *kamma*. I'm owner of my *kamma* actions. *Kam ma* here, remember, means actions, not comeuppance. I inherit the results of my actions. I'm born of my actions. I form relations through my actions. I live dependent on my actions. Whatever good or bad I do, I shall inherit those results.

Now, we can still contemplate that by just repeating a phrase which touches us. You're always looking for a phrase which touches you, which hits the button. But we'll go into that in more detail next November.

So what I've done is I put this up as a PDF, the actual original discourse with all these exercises, which you can download. The video won't go up, nor the actual spoken won't go up until I return in December. So in this case, it doesn't really matter because here you've got the exercises that you can do.

I can't think of any other way more skillful to spend this lugubrious November. I wish that your practice of these five reflections will lead you speedily along the path of liberation.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.