

01. Sickness, Ageing and Death

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 11:59

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I'm continuing these little evening talks using Bhikkhu Bodhi's book, *In the Buddha's Words*, an anthology. I thought to begin at the beginning, instead of going all over the place. It starts off with what he calls the human condition. When the Buddha came to his realisation, he saw an end to this suffering business.

If you can imagine a doctor, the awkwardness of having to tell somebody they have a terminal illness and that there's no chance of it being healed. They might say, "Well, you might last nine months, one year, two years," but the news is really bad. It must be difficult, even if they've done it many times, to actually have to say that to somebody, knowing the shock and the horror that it causes in people. It must be similar if somebody has a chronic illness, something like rheumatoid arthritis. They have to say to them, "We can't do anything about it, we can give you drugs, but you're stuck with it." Again, there's a despairing note about it and no help.

Very different, of course, if the illness is something they can cure. Then they're very happy to tell you that you'll be suffering miserably and terribly for a month, but at the end, you'll be all right. So when it comes to the harsh conditions of our life, the Buddha can be right in our face with it because he's got an answer. He says, "Well, there is an end to this suffering." So he can be fairly straight on the nose business. These passages just tell you how he doesn't pull his punches.

He's talking here to King Pasenadi. There were two areas where he wandered. He never really went over towards Bengal, towards Calcutta. He stayed within that area, Varanasi, Benares, present-day Benares, all the way up to where his people lived, the Sakyas. He seems to have moved right over towards modern Delhi. He wandered for quite a while. It was all over the place, really. He just kept walking.

There were two kings. One was Pasenadi, who was the ruler of the northern part of that area, the Gangetic plain. There was Bimbisara in the south, who ruled the kingdom of Magadha. Pasenadi, he must have known even as a child, because his people, the Sakyas, would have been under that kingship.

You often hear the tales of the Buddha being the prince of a great king and all that. But actually, it was a small tribe, the Sakyas, who lived on the borders of what is present-day Nepal. His father was the head man. He was the chief and elective. It would have been a more democratic thing – democratic only within that caste, the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, the rulers. They came under the king of Kosala. The king of

Kosala was their lord, you might say. Very feudal. There's no record as to whether they paid duty or anything like that. But anyway, he obviously knows him, and King Pasenadi became a great supporter of his.

He's at the capital, Savatthi, and King Pasenadi of Kosala said to the Blessed One: "Venerable Sir, is anyone who is born free from ageing and death?"

"Great King, no one who is born is free from ageing and death. Even those affluent Kshatriyas" – that's the ruling caste – "rich with great wealth and property, with abundant gold and silver, abundant treasures and commodities, abundant wealth and grain, because they've been born, are not free from ageing and death. Even those affluent brahmins and those affluent householders with abundant wealth and grain, because they've been born, they're not free from ageing and death. Even those monks who are arahats, fully liberated, whose taints are destroyed, who've lived the holy life, done what has to be done, laid down the burdens, reached their own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence and are completely liberated through final knowledge – even for them this body is subject to breaking up, subject to being laid down."

There's no escape. Even somebody who's fully liberated has to go through the horror. Now we know that, for instance, Moggallāna, who was one of his two main disciples and he was known for his powers, was seemingly murdered by bandits. His other great disciple, Sāriputta, seems to have died at home in peace, but it would have been a sad thing for him that both of them died before he went.

When I was in Burma, I saw a beautiful statue with the Buddha sitting and he had his hand pointing towards his heart like that. I'd never seen this mudra – what's the word for mudra? The position, like you get them, well, like this one here, that's the samadhi posture. They said to me it was a sadness he felt when he heard that the two teachers who had brought him so far were dead and he had wanted to pass on his message to them. So this tells us that sadness isn't beyond the Buddha. He's sad, but he's not overwhelmed by it. He's not grieving for it.

There's a little phrase, there's a little verse that he creates: "The beautiful chariots of kings wear out. This body too undergoes decay. But the *Dhamma* of the good does not decay. So the good proclaim along with the good." A little verse just to remind us that the Dhamma is beyond time. It's *akālika*. One of the qualities of the Dhamma is that it exists as a law no matter what time or space you happen to be in.

Then he goes on, and this is quite a long little passage but we'll get through it. At Sāvattḥī in the middle of the day, King Pasenadi of Kosala approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then asked him: "Now where have you come from, great king, in the middle of the day?"

"Just now, Venerable Sir, I've been engaged in those affairs of kingship typical for kings who are intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, who are obsessed by greed for sensual pleasures and

who've attained stable control of their country and who rule, having conquered a great sphere of territory on earth."

Intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty. "What do you think, great king? Suppose a man would come to you from the east, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and would tell you: 'For sure, great king, you should know this. I'm coming from the east and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.' Then a second man would come to you from the west, and a third from the north, and a fourth from the south, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and would tell you: 'For sure, great king, you should know this. I'm coming from the south and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.' If, great king, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what should be done?"

"Oh, if, Venerable Sir, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

"I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: ageing and death are rolling in on you. When ageing and death are rolling in on you, great king, what should be done?"

"As ageing and death are rolling in on me, Venerable Sir, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds? Venerable Sir, kings intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, obsessed by greed for sensual pleasures, who've attained stable control of their country and rule over a great sphere of territory, conquer by means of elephant battles, cavalry battles, chariot battles and infantry battles. But there is no hope of victory by such battles, no chance of success when ageing and death are rolling in.

"In this royal court, Venerable Sir, there are counsellors who, when the enemies arrive, are capable of dividing them by subterfuge. There is no hope of victory by subterfuge, no chance of success when ageing and death are rolling in. In this royal court, Venerable Sir, there exists abundant bullion and gold stored in vaults and lofts. With such wealth we are capable of mollifying the enemies when they come. But there is no hope of victory by wealth, no chance of success when ageing and death are rolling in. As ageing and death are rolling in on me, Venerable Sir, what else should I do but live by Dhamma, live righteously and do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

"So it is, great king, so it is, great king. As ageing and death are rolling in on you, what else should you do but live by Dhamma, live righteously and do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

This is what the Blessed One said. We can only hope that his words have some effect upon us and that we will live righteously and according to the Dhamma. May you be fully liberated from all suffering sooner

rather than later.

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