

02. Divine Messengers

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 14:53

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa (three times)

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I'm just giving these little evening talks around passages from *In the Buddha's Words* by Bhikkhu Bodhi. It's just a collection of the Buddha's main points from the scriptures. One thing that you come across when you read the scriptures is this repetitive nature. Remember, it was an oral tradition kept over 500 years before it was written down. The way you remembered things is by just repeating them in a sequence, in a formula. So it's very repetitious. But it drives the point home if you keep saying it often enough. It has a purpose to it.

What we've been doing is the human condition. We're starting rather gloomily that it is in fact misery. This one here is concerning the divine messengers. Those of you who know the Buddha's story, in the mythology that surrounds his awakening, there are these four messengers. This one's only about the three. What it's saying is that somewhere in his youth, late youth, he became aware of these three things: sickness, old age and death, sickness, ageing and death.

There was this other thing that he noticed was that an ascetic sitting under a tree which suggested that there was an escape. On these four journeys while he was out hunting he comes across a very sick person, a very old person, a corpse and this monk sitting under a tree. Each of these he asks himself what is it, because he's not supposed to know what it is. He's been brought up in a life of luxury. When he finds out he says well this will happen to me – will I get sick, will I age, will I die? That's a bit of a shock. You could look upon this as an existential crisis in his life which eventually drives him from home to seek an answer.

This uses the same imagery of these three divine messengers. There's only three here but it has a slightly different purpose. I'll read it and you'll get the flavour of the scriptures too.

"There are, monks, these three divine messengers." He translated as monks but really it's a word that I suppose better translated as listeners or those who are listening to what he's saying. "What three? There is a person of bad conduct in body, speech and mind, and on the dissolution of the body after death he's reborn in a plane of misery, in a bad destination, in a lower world, in hell.

"There the warders of hell seize him by both arms and take him before Yama, the lord of death, saying, 'This man, your majesty, had no respect for father and mother, nor for ascetics and Brahmins, nor did he honour the elders of the family. May your majesty inflict due punishment on him.'

"Then, monks, King Yama questions that man, examines him and addresses him concerning the first divine messenger. 'Didn't you ever see, my good man, the first divine messenger appearing among humankind?' And he replies, 'No, Lord, I didn't see him.'

"Then King Yama says to him, 'But my good man, didn't you ever see a woman or a man, 80, 90 or 100 years old, frail, bent like a roof bracket, crooked, leaning on a stick, shakily going along, ailing, youth bigger gone, with broken teeth, with grey and scanty hair, or bald, wrinkled, with blotched limbs?'"

That's a great old description, isn't it?

"And the man replies, 'Yes, Lord, I have seen him.' Then King Yama says to him, 'But my good man, didn't it ever occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, I too am subject to old age and cannot escape it. Let me now do noble deeds of body, speech and mind.' 'No, Lord, I could not do it. I was negligent.'

"King Yama says, 'Through negligence, my good man, you have failed to do noble deeds by body, speech and mind. Well, you'll be treated as befit your negligence. That evil action of yours was not done by mother or father, brothers, sisters, friends or companions, nor by relatives, *devas*, ascetics or Brahmins. But you alone have done that evil deed and you will have to experience the fruit.'

"Now, when, monks, King Yama has questioned, examined and addressed him thus concerning the first divine messenger, he again questions, examines and addresses the man about the second one, saying to him, 'Didn't you ever see, my good man, the second divine messenger appearing among mankind?' 'No, Lord, I didn't see him.'

"'But my good man, didn't you ever see a woman or a man who was sick and in pain, seriously ill, lying in his own filth, having to be lifted up by some and put to bed by others?' 'Yes, Lord, I have seen this.'

"'My good man, didn't it ever occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, I too am subject to illness and cannot escape it? Let me now do noble deeds by body, speech and mind.' 'No, Lord, I could not do it. I was negligent.'

"'Through negligence, my good man, you have failed to do noble deeds by body, speech and mind. Well, you'll be treated as befit your negligence. That evil action of yours was not done by mother or father, brothers, sisters, friends or companions, nor by relatives, *devas*, ascetics or Brahmins, but you alone have done that evil deed, and you will experience the fruit.'

"Now, when, monks, King Yama has questioned, examined and addressed him thus concerning the second divine messenger, he again questions and examines and addresses the man about the third one, saying, 'Didn't you ever see, my good man, the third divine messenger appearing among mankind?' 'No, Lord, I did not see him.'

"'But, my good man, didn't you ever see a woman or a man one or three days dead, the corpse swollen, discoloured and festering?' 'Yes, Lord, I have seen this.'

"Then, my good man, didn't it ever occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, I am also subject to death and cannot escape it? Let me now do noble deeds by body, speech and mind.' 'No, Lord, I could not do it. I was negligent.'

"Through negligence, my good man, you have failed to do noble deeds of body, speech and mind. Well, you'll be treated as befit your negligence. That evil action of yours was not done by mother or father, brothers, sisters, friends or companions, nor by relatives, *devas*, ascetics or Brahmins. You alone have done the evil deed, and you have to experience the fruit."

I have to take this apart a bit. We've discussed what these four messengers are. Obviously this is told in a mythological way, and the basic law of *kamma* is very simple: when you do something which is wholesome, wholesomeness arises from it. If you do something unwholesome, unskillful, unskillfulness arises from it. Remember that there are two waves of that action.

When you say something which is warm and kind and supportive, or when you say something which is cutting and horrible, it goes out into the world and it affects somebody. They will react to you in their own particular way. But that, in a sense, is not your *kamma*. Most people think of *kamma* as something that happens to them. The real *kamma* is internally, because the more you find yourself speaking kindly and gently the more good you feel inside, and the more you're being angry and making cutting remarks the more you feel unhappy inside.

Of course as we do this we build up a world around us. People begin to know us: well this person speaks kindly and is nice and gentle, and this person is horrible. You eventually find yourself being liked or disliked, and so the world out there begins to mirror what is in your own heart. Even if you don't know it – and here's a really subtle point – even if you think that you're being kind but actually there's something in your voice which is unkind or insincere, if you don't know that in yourself the other person does. Then although you're being kind you keep wondering, "I wonder why nobody likes me?"

When you're not aware of subtle movements in your own heart it acts out to the person as if it's fate, as if it's meant to happen to them from who knows where. But actually we're constantly creating this little world around us.

Here you see what he's saying is the deeper teaching about *kamma*. You notice that he's not talking about evil deeds. He's not talking about murdering and thieving and all that stuff. He's talking about ordinary social things, relationships. He's talking about no respect for mother or father, for ascetics or Brahmins, didn't honour the elders of the family. He's talking about things which normally we wouldn't consider to be so important from the point of view of the karmic doctrine about evil, but actually it's all important. If you take care of your relationships, if you take care of the small things in life, then the big things tend to take care of themselves. It's interesting that he should make such a big point of just this relationship in society.

For those of you who are new to Buddhism, the law of *kamma* – the Buddha did teach rebirth. There was a process whereby after death one carried on, driven by your ethical actions, different by your ethics. That was the important point. In the scriptures often he's using imagery and tales and the ways that it would be told in those days. In a sense it's a bit difficult for us to enter into that mythology, but there's a connection because as you know in Christianity one is judged at the pearly gates whether you get in or not, the day of judgment.

This day of judgment, really, spiritually speaking, is happening internally. We ourselves end up being our own judges. When you reflect upon your life, the Dalai Lama says that you live your life twice, if you live long enough: once as you live towards old age, and then in old age you live it again as memory. Hopefully when we get to advanced old age, our memories of our lives are full of beautiful memories because they're caused by past actions which have been beautiful.

You have to take certain scriptures within the mythology of the time, but the teaching is there really about making ourselves more and more aware of these three divine messengers, these three signs: sickness, old age and death. It's not something that we particularly like to think about. You don't have to get morose about it. You don't have to be on it all day and all night. But you might find it very useful just to bring those three to mind every morning, just as a reminder, so that when the body does get sick and as you do advance in age, and as death does come upon us, it doesn't come as this huge, enormous shock that I never thought it would happen to me.

There was this lovely cartoon I saw with a woman, she's dying in bed, and she has all her friends around her. She says, "Why me? Why not one of you?" We don't want to get into that position of terminal shock.

Just now a friend has phoned up and one of his close friends has been told he has a terminal illness. Well he's only 61, which is young these days, younger than me. It's a case of always just having that mindfulness. Of course the effect isn't to make us depressed – that's the point. The effect is to begin to see how precious life is. We begin to treasure it more. That's the joy of it. You begin to really open up to the joys of life. Taking nothing for granted. Because you might not be here tomorrow.

I hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your careful discernment between wholesome and unwholesome action, lead yourself to complete liberation of suffering.

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